

Rewiring the state for victims and survivors: Domestic abuse and the future of devolution

A discussion paper from the Domestic Abuse Commissioner

Section 1: Why domestic abuse must be considered within the context of devolution

Domestic abuse happens everywhere, affecting every community and every local area that will be considering its future under a more devolved model of government. In the year ending March 2025, an estimated 3.8 million adults experienced domestic abuse, while one in four adults have experienced abuse since the age of 16.

For this reason, domestic abuse cannot be treated as a peripheral consideration. It sits at the intersection of many of the services that devolution seeks to improve, including policing, housing, healthcare, children's services and wider community support. If devolution is to succeed, it must improve the safety, support and outcomes available to victims and survivors. Their access to timely, specialist and effective support will be one of the clearest indicators of whether devolution is working as intended. Domestic abuse should be viewed as a key test of whether the government's new devolved settlement is delivering safer, better integrated and more accountable public services.

Moreover, there is compelling evidence that tackling domestic abuse more effectively would deliver significant economic and social benefits. The Home Office estimates that domestic abuse costs society £89.3 billion every year. Domestic abuse pushes people out of work, damages productivity, undermines children's education and remains a leading cause of homelessness among women and families. It places enormous pressure on housing, policing, health and social care services, while too often leaving victims trapped in systems that fail to provide the safety and justice they deserve. If devolution is intended to create stronger local economies, then more effective response to domestic abuse must be considered key.

This Government has a significant and ambitious commitment to halving Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). Despite genuine ambition to drive change, progress has often been slower than intended. The challenge has not principally been a lack of political will, but the difficulty of translating national ambition into effective delivery through the machinery of government. There is an increasing recognition that many of the barriers to progress are structural: fragmented accountability, siloed budgets and a lack of coordination across public services. This is particularly important given the Government's increasing emphasis on prevention and early intervention, recognising that reducing VAWG requires action long before victims reach crisis point. Overcoming these barriers will be essential if the Government is to achieve its ambition of halving VAWG. The devolution agenda presents a real opportunity to do this, by bringing together services, funding and local leadership around a shared objective of preventing abuse, responding earlier and providing more joined-up support for victims and survivors.

However, despite domestic abuse cutting across so many of the issues that the Government is seeking to address through devolution, it has so far been largely absent from the debate.

Section 2: The current challenge

Funding and commissioning

Specialist domestic abuse services are under significant financial pressure. While the Ministry of Justice has announced £550 million over three years for services supporting victims and witnesses, funding is not keeping pace with rising costs. Annual uplifts of 2% are unlikely to match inflation, increases to the National Living Wage and rising Employer National Insurance Contributions. As a result, there are growing concerns that services will face a real-terms reduction in funding at precisely the point when the Government's commitment to halve VAWG is expected to increase demand for support.

Funding arrangements for domestic abuse services remain fragmented, short term and insecure. The Commissioner's 2022 report, *A Patchwork of Provision*, found that 80% of specialist domestic abuse services relied on statutory funding as their main source of income, primarily from local authorities and Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs). However, the short-term nature of much of this funding made it difficult for organisations to plan for the future, build capacity and retain staff. Seven in ten services relied on a primary funding stream lasting less than three years, while more than a quarter relied on funding secured for less than one year.

The current commissioning landscape is also highly fragmented. Domestic abuse and perpetrator services are funded through a range of different commissioning arrangements involving local authorities, Integrated Care Boards (ICBs), PCCs, and central government departments. As a result, funding is often administered through separate streams with different objectives, timescales and accountability structures. This can make it difficult to develop coherent local systems, align investment with need and provide victims with a genuinely joined-up service offer.

These challenges are particularly acute for specialist 'by and for' services. Because the communities they support are often smaller or more dispersed geographically, local commissioning arrangements do not always recognise sufficient demand to justify dedicated provision. The Commissioner's mapping report found that 'by and for' organisations were six times less likely to receive statutory funding than other specialist domestic abuse and VAWG services, and almost twice as likely to have had to cease services due to a lack of funding. This is despite consistent evidence that victims and survivors from marginalised communities often prefer support from specialist 'by and for' providers and achieve positive outcomes when such services are available.

As Government considers the next phase of devolution, there is an opportunity to rethink how domestic abuse services are funded and commissioned. Greater local flexibility and service integration could help create more coherent systems, but only if accompanied by sustainable funding arrangements, clear accountability and safeguards to ensure specialist services, particularly 'by and for' organisations, are not lost within wider place-based commissioning models.

Legal framework

The legislative framework underpinning domestic abuse services remains fragmented and incomplete. While a number of important statutory duties exist, they have developed incrementally and are spread across different pieces of legislation. The

Domestic Abuse Act 2021 introduced a duty on local authorities to assess need and commission both safe accommodation and support for victims and survivors residing within that accommodation, alongside the establishment of Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Boards. Other legislation provides important protections, including housing rights for those made homeless as a result of domestic abuse, the Serious Violence Duty, and the Duty to Collaborate provisions contained within the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024. However, these duties do not amount to a comprehensive statutory framework for the commissioning and funding of domestic abuse services.

Critically, while Parliament placed a legal duty on local authorities to commission safe accommodation and associated support, no parallel duty was created for the commissioning of community-based domestic abuse services, despite the majority of victims and survivors accessing support in the community. As a result, access to many specialist services is dependent on local commissioning decisions and funding priorities rather than statutory entitlement.

This creates a particular challenge in the context of devolution. As greater responsibility for public service delivery, commissioning and service integration shifts to local areas, variation in local priorities and resources could lead to increasing inconsistency in the support available to victims and survivors. While the Duty to Collaborate has the potential to improve local planning and coordination, it has not yet been commenced and does not require local areas to commission community-based domestic abuse services, nor does it place a duty on central government to provide sufficient funding to do so. Beyond established housing rights, victims and survivors also have limited legal recourse where community-based support is unavailable or insufficient to meet local need. As a result, devolution raises important questions about how national government will ensure consistent provision, clear accountability and enforceable rights for victims and survivors across England.

Section 3: Priorities/ principles for domestic abuse and devolution

At this stage, the Commissioner does not seek to set out detailed proposals. Rather, this paper aims to establish a set of principles and identify the key issues that should guide further discussion between national and local government, specialist domestic abuse services, and victims and survivors. Through those discussions, the Commissioner hopes to support the development of a detailed blueprint for domestic abuse policy and service delivery within a devolved system of government.

Principles for a Safe Devolution Settlement

The Commissioner does not seek to prescribe detailed solutions at this stage. However, any future devolution settlement should be underpinned by a clear set of principles to ensure that reforms improve outcomes for victims and survivors of domestic abuse, strengthen public services and support the Government's ambition to halve VAWG.

1. National Safeguards

Ensuring national ambition is translated into local delivery

- Devolution should strengthen, rather than dilute, the Government's commitment to halve VAWG. While local areas should have greater flexibility to design

services around local need, there must be clear mechanisms to ensure that national priorities are consistently reflected in local delivery. Government should be able to understand how local action is contributing to national objectives and identify where additional support or intervention is required.

A stronger role for national government in driving improvement

- A more devolved system should not mean national government stepping back from its responsibility to tackle domestic abuse. Government should play an active role in identifying, promoting and accelerating best practice across local areas, supporting innovation while ensuring victims and survivors can access high-quality support regardless of where they live.

A more coherent legislative and accountability framework

- The current legislative framework has developed incrementally and remains fragmented. Future reforms should seek to create a more coherent framework of rights, duties and accountability, ensuring victims and survivors receive consistent support and that there are clear mechanisms for holding local and national bodies to account where systems fail.

Sustainable funding and financial accountability

- National government should consider how specialist domestic abuse services can be sustainably funded within a devolved system, particularly specialist "by and for" services that are often most vulnerable to local funding pressures. Funding arrangements should be supported by robust needs assessments, strategic planning and transparent reporting on outcomes, ensuring local areas remain accountable for meeting the needs of victims and survivors.

A more joined-up approach across government

- Domestic abuse cuts across housing, health, policing, education, employment, social care and wider public services. Devolution should be accompanied by a more joined-up approach within central government, reducing siloed funding streams and creating a coherent national policy framework that enables integrated local delivery.

2. Local Flexibility and Service Integration

Strong local partnerships and place-based leadership

- Devolution provides an opportunity to bring together local authorities, policing, health services, housing providers, probation, education and specialist domestic abuse services around shared objectives. Strong local partnerships should sit at the heart of delivery, with clear accountability for improving outcomes for victims and survivors.

Supporting prevention and early intervention

- The Government's approach to VAWG rightly places increasing emphasis on prevention and early intervention. Devolution offers an opportunity to align local services around these objectives, enabling areas to intervene earlier, tackle risk factors more effectively and reduce demand on crisis services over the longer term.

3. Community Participation and Accountability

Embedding lived experience in local decision making

- Victims and survivors should play a meaningful role in the design, commissioning and evaluation of local services and strategies. Their experience should be treated as a vital source of expertise in understanding what works, where systems fail and how services can be improved.

Strengthening local engagement and democratic accountability

- As decision-making moves closer to communities, there is an opportunity to create stronger and more inclusive mechanisms for engaging victims, survivors and specialist organisations in local decision-making. This should include particular attention to ensuring the voices of marginalised communities and those supported by specialist "by and for" services are heard and acted upon.