

404 NOT FOUND
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NOWHERE TO TURN

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Findings from the first year of the
No Woman Turned Away project



Executive summary

The No Woman Turned Away (NWTa) project was commissioned by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) to provide additional support to women facing difficulties accessing a refuge space. The work was delivered by Women's Aid and comprised a team of specialist caseworkers supporting women into refuge alongside dedicated evaluation support to conduct detailed monitoring and analysis of a full year's worth of data collected on survivors' needs and system response.

This report outlines the findings from this project, using data collected from the National Domestic Violence Helpline (NDVH)¹ and specialist NWTa caseworkers between 19th January 2016 and 18th January 2017. During this time, there were 8,623 calls to the NDVH from survivors seeking a refuge space and 404 women were supported by the NWTa caseworkers. This report also uses data from Routes to Support (formerly UK Refuges Online)², the Women's Aid Annual Survey 2016, a survivor survey, and a series of interviews with survivors.

Accessing a refuge space can mark a key stepping stone in the journey away from abuse, but for many women the search for a space is long and difficult. The report highlights some of the dangerous circumstances that women and their children face when they are unable to access refuge, the inability of services to meet the increasingly complex needs of some of the most marginalised groups of women and an overall national shortfall of refuge spaces, unevenly distributed and facing an uncertain future.

The search for a refuge space

Out of the 404 women supported by the NWTa caseworkers, a quarter were accommodated in a suitable refuge space. The support of the NWTa caseworkers was critical in getting these 103 women into a safe refuge space. A further 20% stayed with friends and family, 8% stayed put as they did not live with the perpetrator, and 7% were in emergency accommodation. Whilst this meant that these women had accommodation, they did not have access to the support and safety offered by a refuge. 7% of survivors gave up their search for a refuge space and stayed put with the perpetrator.

Women supported by the NWTa caseworkers spent an average of between 1-2 weeks searching for a refuge space, however one woman spent six months searching for a refuge space before giving up and remaining with the perpetrator.

While searching for a refuge space, 17% of women had to call the police to respond to a further incident and 8% were physically injured by the perpetrator. 11% of women slept rough during this time, of which seven women had children with them and three were pregnant. 40% of women sofa surfed and one woman disclosed that she was sexually assaulted whilst sofa surfing at a family friend's house.

When asked about how they felt during their search for a refuge, women spoke about the fear they felt, *"it was the scariest most stressful time of my entire life"*; the emotional turmoil, *"I felt out of my mind honestly. I couldn't think straight at all"*; and the strain of battling the system; *"there was no one there*

1 Run in partnership between Women's Aid and Refuge.

2 Routes to Support is the UK wide database of domestic abuse services and refuge services, run in partnership with Women's Aid Federation of Northern Ireland, Scottish Women's Aid and Welsh Women's Aid.

for me to help me sort out what had happened, just a system that was processing something (me) as a problem." Many survivors told their caseworkers how grateful they were for their advocacy and support during such a turbulent period.

Challenges in securing support

The report identified a number of barriers faced by women based on refuges being unable to accommodate a range of support needs and circumstances. The report highlights how these barriers particularly affect women from some of the most marginalised social groups.

Outside of London, there is limited provision for Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) women with most regions limited to a handful of spaces, and with no refuges specifically for BME women across the entirety of the South West. Vacancy monitoring¹ found that the average number of vacancies for a woman and two children requiring a BME specialist refuge in the North West was 0.65.

One quarter of refuges have a worker who can speak another language and half of refuges have access to an interpreter. 14% of women supported by the NWTAs caseworkers experienced a language barrier. Out of these 57 women with support needs around language, only six (11%) were accommodated in a suitable refuge space.

No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) was a key barrier to accessing a refuge space. Vacancy monitoring for spaces accepting a woman with NRPF showed an average of one space per region in England. Over a quarter of women supported by the NWTAs caseworkers had NRPF, 67% of whom were not eligible to apply for the Destitute Domestic Violence Concession. Out of the 110 with NRPF

supported by the NWTAs caseworkers, only eight were accommodated in a suitable refuge space.

This report highlights the additional barriers for women with complex needs, particularly the difficulties women with mental health support needs face when attempting to access refuge and the lack of capacity and resources within refuges to provide this support. Less than one in four refuges are able to offer in-house specialist mental health support. Mental health support needs were common amongst the women supported by the NWTAs caseworkers: 106 of the women (26%) had mental health support needs. Of this group, 31% were refused from a refuge for this reason. 28% of the women with mental health support needs were safely accommodated in refuge.

Substance use support needs may present a barrier to accessing refuge, as some refuges may not be able to support a woman without a named alcohol/drugs worker, or who is not in treatment as their support needs will be too high for the refuge to deal with in isolation. Only 10% of refuges had a specialist alcohol worker, and 10% had a specialist drug worker. Out of the 23 women supported by the NWTAs caseworkers with drug or alcohol use support needs, 15 (65%) were refused an available space because of their needs. 39% spent time sleeping rough while waiting for a refuge space. Five of the 23 women (22%) with substance use support needs were accommodated in an appropriate refuge space.

Women often flee domestic abuse with their children, and must find a refuge with sufficient space to accommodate them. Over half of the women supported by the NWTAs caseworkers were fleeing with children. 13% of women had four or more children, one in five required

¹ See methodology in Appendix One for an explanation of vacancy monitoring.

a refuge with a cot for their young child and 6% were fleeing with an older male child. 173 women (80%) with children were able to have her child/children accommodated with her. 24% of women with children, 20% of women with four or more children and 8% of women with an older male child were accommodated in a suitable refuge space.

Vacancy monitoring of spaces suitable for a woman with three children and requiring an accessible space in the East Midlands showed a suitable refuge on just four occasions, reflecting the need for accessible refuge spaces. Disabled women also faced particular difficulties in accessing a refuge space and 27% of the women supported by the NWTAs caseworkers had one or more disability.

Out of the 404 survivors supported by the NWTAs caseworkers, 200 (50%) were tied to their local area for one or more reasons and therefore found it more difficult to find a space far enough to be safe, but close enough to be within reach of support networks.

System failure

Many women, supported by the NWTAs caseworkers, faced structural barriers to accessing safety due to inadequate responses from statutory agencies. The experiences of these women highlight both the difficulties faced by women in seeking help, and the lack of awareness and resource dedicated to domestic abuse within statutory agencies.

Social services failed to meet their duty of care towards 37 of the 115 survivors they supported (32%), 30 of whom were fleeing with children (26%). Several women who were refused help by social services were told that they were not experiencing domestic abuse or that they did not meet the risk threshold for intervention.

Local housing teams prevented 78 (19%) survivors from making a valid homeless application. 14 women were told to call the NDVH instead of making a homeless application and 11 cases did not consider the domestic abuse to be a significant risk factor to merit a domestic abuse application, with eight women being told to return to the perpetrator and three women told to come back when the situation got worse.

The national picture of provision and how it is changing

Across England, a national network of refuges has been established over the past forty years, building on decades of knowledge and experience. These refuges form part of a wider network of domestic abuse services, including community based services.

Currently, provision at a national level falls short of recommended levels stated by the Council of Europe. To meet the minimum requirements, a further 1,793 refuge spaces are required.

The provision of adequate refuge spaces at a national level does not in itself mean that a space is always available for a woman in need. In order for a woman to go to a refuge space it must be available at the time she needs it, in the location she needs. It must also match her requirements, such as having space for her children, a cot for a young child and the appropriate professional support to meet her needs.

All of the 404 survivors had at least one occasion when there were no available refuge spaces. For almost half (45%) of survivors, there were no available spaces three or more times. For some survivors, the number of searches where there was no refuge space reaches double figures. The NWTAs

caseworkers searched 24 times for one woman they supported, with no success.

The high demand for refuge space means that advertising on Routes to Support (RTS) often leads to a number of enquiries and referral for each space in a short period of time, meaning that by the time a woman contacts a refuge space, it may have already been taken. 146 women (36%) supported by the NWTAs caseworkers were refused as the space was no longer available.

Specialist refuge providers are facing many challenges impacting their ability to deliver a quality service for all women and their children who require it. 9% of refuge services responding to the Women's Aid Annual Survey 2016 (13 services) were running their refuge without any dedicated funding, a situation which puts significant pressure on a service and is likely to result in closure in the near future. Respondents commented on the strain cuts to funding have had on their service in *"maintaining an effective quality support*

service in the face of significant funding cuts." Widespread budget cuts to other statutory services have led to an increase in the level and complexity of support needs of the women searching for a refuge.

Commissioning processes increasingly require services to compete for funding contracts, favouring larger generic services, a point repeatedly referred to in the Woman's Aid Annual Survey 2016. In addition, commissioning decisions that place restrictions on the women who can be accommodated in a refuge exclude women from accessing a refuge space. 28 women were refused because they did not meet the risk threshold for access to the service, which is likely to be a result of services being commissioned to provide time-limited support for "high-risk" survivors, rather than recognising fluidity of risk and the importance of long-term support provided by specialist domestic abuse services.

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