

10 Years of the London Refuges Data Collection Project

1. Introduction

The Women's Aid London Refuges Data Collection project is funded by London Councils as part of their continued commitment to improving resources for London Boroughs. The project aims to help inform stakeholders about domestic abuse provision and support the commissioning of services by providing an evidence base from Routes to Support¹ on the availability and use of domestic abuse refuge provision in London.

The project was set up in 2013, which means we are now celebrating ten years of the evidence base being available. This milestone presents an opportunity to explore what the data tell us about changes in London over the last decade. This report presents key findings from a longitudinal analysis of information from the project on service provision in London and women using London refuges, along with a discussion of the trends illustrated by the data.

2. Discussion of key findings

The data shows that over the ten-year period since the project began in 2013/14, 11,471 women have been placed in London refuges². There were however 16,148 recorded instances of a woman being turned away during the same period, a figure which is likely to considerably underestimate the actual numbers of women seeking refuge (see Section 4.1). The data shows that women with no recourse to public funds (NRPF), women aged under 18 and women with substance use support needs were more likely to be turned away, demonstrating that more needs to be done to understand and address the barriers that these groups face when attempting to seek safety in refuge services. Although the number of vacancies which could consider referrals from women with NRPF has increased slightly over the course of the data collection project, numbers

¹ Routes to Support is the UK violence against women and girls service directory, run in partnership by Women's Aid Federation of England, Women's Aid Federation of Northern Ireland, Scottish Women's Aid and Welsh Women's Aid. <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/i-work-with-survivors/routes-to-support/>

² This is the recorded number of women placed between 1st October 2013 and 31st March 2024.

of these vacancies are still very low and barriers to refuge for women with NRPF remains to be a critical issue. Concerningly, the availability of vacancies suitable for women requiring a wheelchair accessible space have fallen in London since this data was first available in 2016. Numbers of wheelchair accessible vacancies are shockingly low – just 0.4% of all vacancies in London refuge services in 2022-23. Accessibility for women with disabilities more broadly remains a significant and concerning issue, with much more work required to ensure services are sufficiently resourced and equipped to meet a range of accessibility needs.

The data does show a positive increase in the overall number of refuge bedspaces in London over the period since the data collection project began in 2013, with the provision of spaces at May 2023 slightly exceeding the number recommended by the Council of Europe. It is important that at minimum this level of spaces in London is sustained because refuge services operate as a national network and England still has a 22.2% shortfall of spaces overall (see Section 3.2). Refuge services in London are a key part of this national network because there are a higher number of specialist services run ‘by and for’ Black and minoritised women³.

We saw a notable increase in the number of spaces in London in 2020-21 due to additional funding being made available to address the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. This funding was temporary however and the numbers of spaces have now fallen to lower than levels before the pandemic. The project provides vital information on what provision is available in London, however it does not capture detail on the experiences of service providers and the challenges they face, for example, funding or staffing issues. We know however from our wider work that the changes following the pandemic continue to impact survivors and domestic abuse services, along with significant challenges presented by the ongoing cost of living crisis (Women’s Aid, 2024). The full impact of changes introduced through the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 are also yet to be seen.

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 means that children experiencing domestic abuse are now recognised in law as victims in their own right. It is particularly concerning then to see a decrease in the numbers of children placed with women in refuge in recent years,

³ “Specialist ‘by and for’ services are run by and for the communities they serve, such as for Black and minoritised women, Deaf and disabled women and LGBT+ survivors. In doing so they offer a uniquely empowering experience to the communities they support, as the client group is reflected in staffing, management, and governance structures of these organisations.” Women’s Aid, *The Domestic Abuse Report 2024: The Annual Audit*. See Appendix D (page 96) for a full definition: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Annual-Audit-2024.pdf>

and that London consistently has fewer vacancies available which are suitable for women fleeing with children compared to England overall.

Domestic abuse services in London provide a range of service types. Although there have been slight increases in some service types (for example, helpline and IDVA services) over the course of the data collection project, most other service types have seen little change. Survivors have diverse needs and experiences and should be able to access the right type of support for them at the time they need it, so the availability of holistic community-based support services alongside refuge provision is essential. This should include the full range of advocacy, outreach services, support for children and young people, counselling and therapeutic support for survivors in the community. A report by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner found that just 32% of survivors in London reported that it was easy to access the help they wanted (Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 2022). Whilst London does relatively well in terms of service provision compared to other areas in England, the data suggests that there is still much more work to be done to ensure that all survivors can access support.

3. Service provision in London

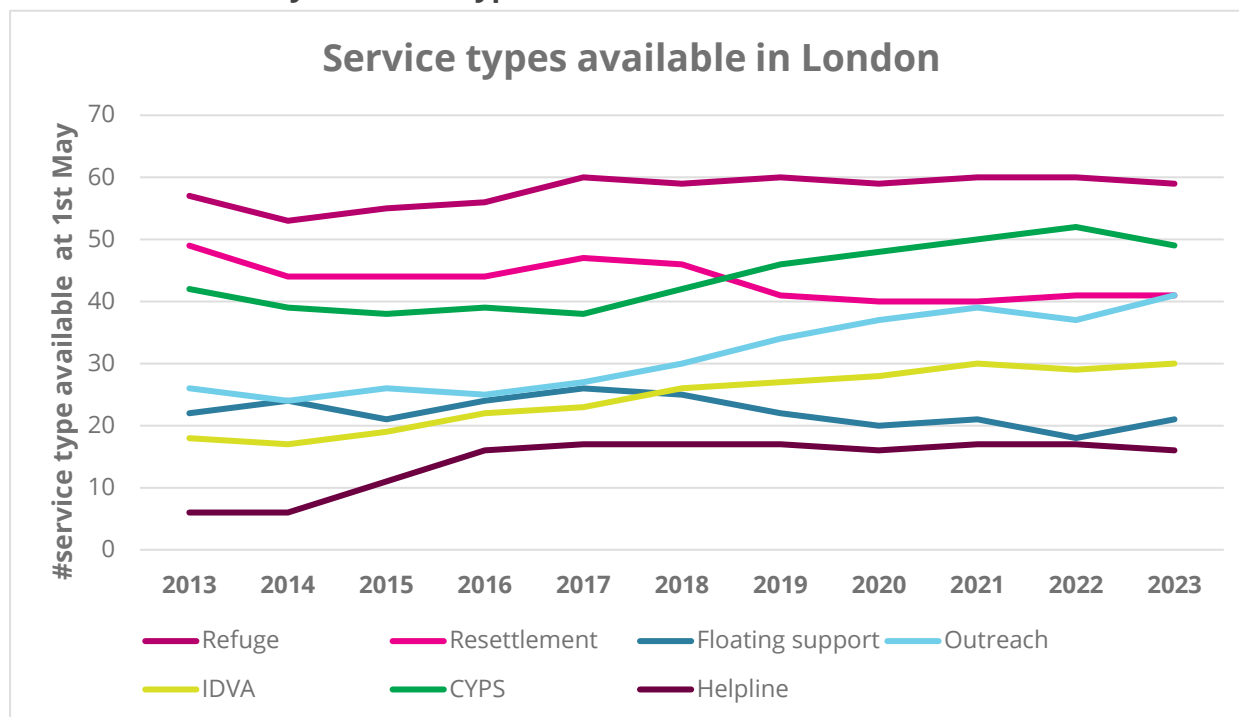
This section of the report explores changes in the availability and types of domestic abuse service provision from 2013 to 2023.

3.1 Service types

Chart 1 below shows the numbers and range of domestic abuse service types available in London from 2013 to 2023 at 1st May each year⁴. There has been little change in the number of refuge services overall during this period, although there has been a considerable increase in the number of spaces offered by refuge services since 2013 (see Section 3.2). The service types which have seen the biggest net increase over the course of the data collection project are IDVA services, outreach services and helplines.

⁴ The full data for Chart 1 are available in the Appendix.

Chart 1 - Availability of service types



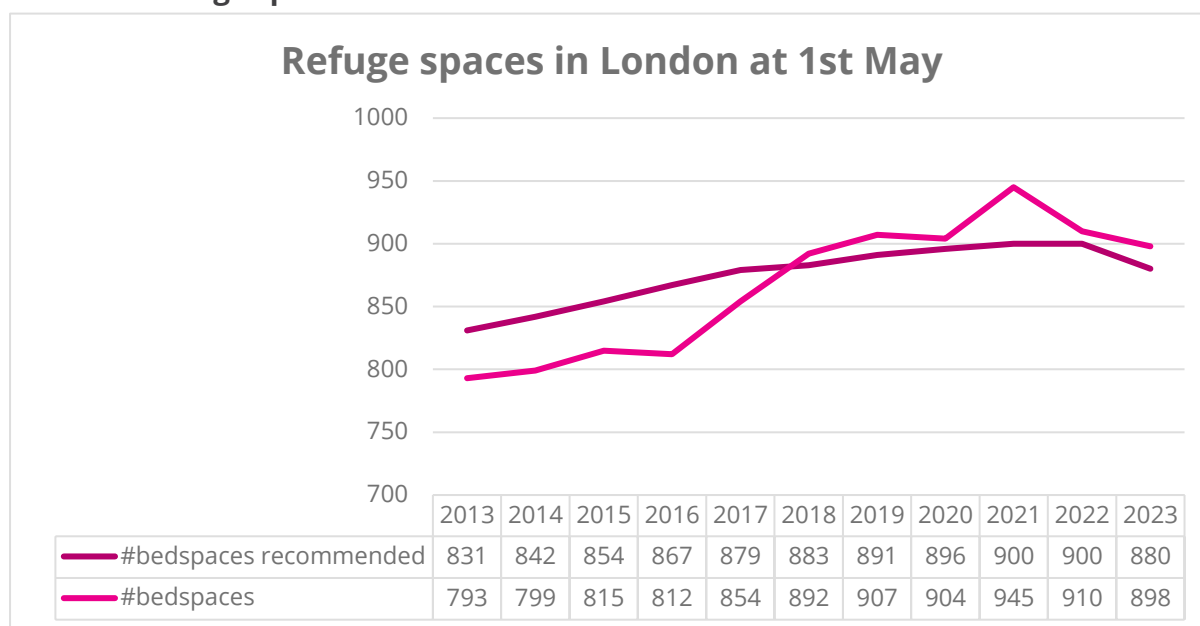
3.2 Refuge spaces and shortfall

The number of bedspaces in London has fluctuated over the course of the data collection project, most notably in 2021 when additional funding to support with the impact of Covid-19 led to a temporary increase in spaces (see Chart 2). The number of bedspaces at May 2023 had fallen to slightly below the number running before the Covid-19 pandemic. Overall however, the number of bedspaces has increased considerably over the course of the project, from 793 bedspaces at May 2013 to 898 bedspaces at May 2023⁵. It should be noted that 2013 when the data collection project begun was likely to be a low point for funding of refuge service provision in England, as the Supporting People programme which previously provided a key funding stream for domestic abuse services was coming to an end (House of Commons Library, 2012). London now does relatively well in terms of bedspaces compared to England overall. There is a shortfall of 1,257 bedspaces in England compared to the number of spaces recommended by the Council of Europe, which represents a 22.2% shortfall (Women’s Aid, 2024). London is one of only two regions in England which had more than the number of recommended spaces at May 2023. London also has a higher number of specialist ‘by and for’ services compared other regions in England, for example, just under half of all refuge bedspaces in dedicated services run exclusively for Black and

⁵ A bedspace is defined as a one unit of accommodation for an adult woman, plus any children she has.

minoritised women in England are located in London (Women’s Aid, 2024). This is unsurprising given London’s diverse population; however, it is important to note that refuge services operate as a national network and these key specialist services will cater to women across the country who require their expert support.

Chart 2 – Refuge spaces



3.3 Availability of vacancies

Data on the availability of vacancies to some groups of women is available from 1st April 2016 to 31st March 2023. Due to the size of rooms in London, the proportion of vacancies available to women with two and three children has been consistently lower in London compared to the rest of the country over this period (see Chart 3 and Chart 4⁶).

The proportion of vacancies which can accommodate a woman requiring a wheelchair accessible space is generally very low, meaning that these women face considerable barriers to accessing safety in refuge. The availability of wheelchair accessible vacancies has fallen across England overall between 2016 and 2023 (see Chart 5). In London, the proportion of vacancies available to a woman requiring a wheelchair accessible space fell from 1.1% of all London vacancies posted to Routes to Support in 2016-17 to just 0.4% of all vacancies posted in 2022-23.

⁶ The full data for Charts 3–6 are available in the Appendix.

Positive changes can be seen in the proportion of vacancies which could consider women with NRPF for the space, which has risen across England overall since 2016-17 (see Chart 6). In London specifically, just 3.2% of all vacancies posted in 2016-17 could consider a woman with NRPF however this rose to 9.0% of all vacancies posted in 2022-23. While it is positive to see this increase, it should be noted that the numbers overall are still very low and there remains a critical shortage of provision for women with insecure immigration status and NRPF (Women's Aid, 2023).

Chart 3 – Vacancies for women with two children

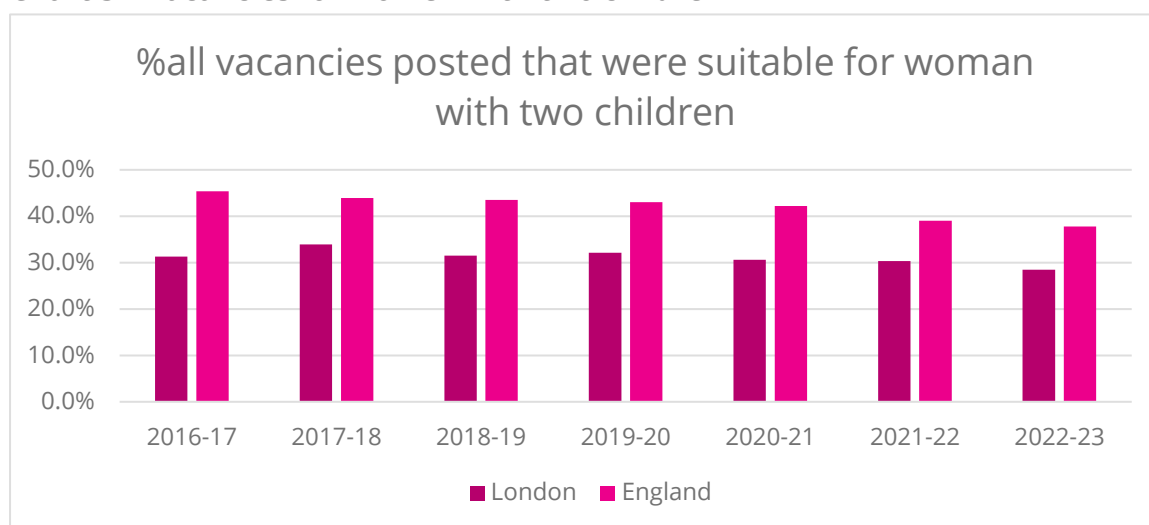


Chart 4 – Vacancies for women with three children

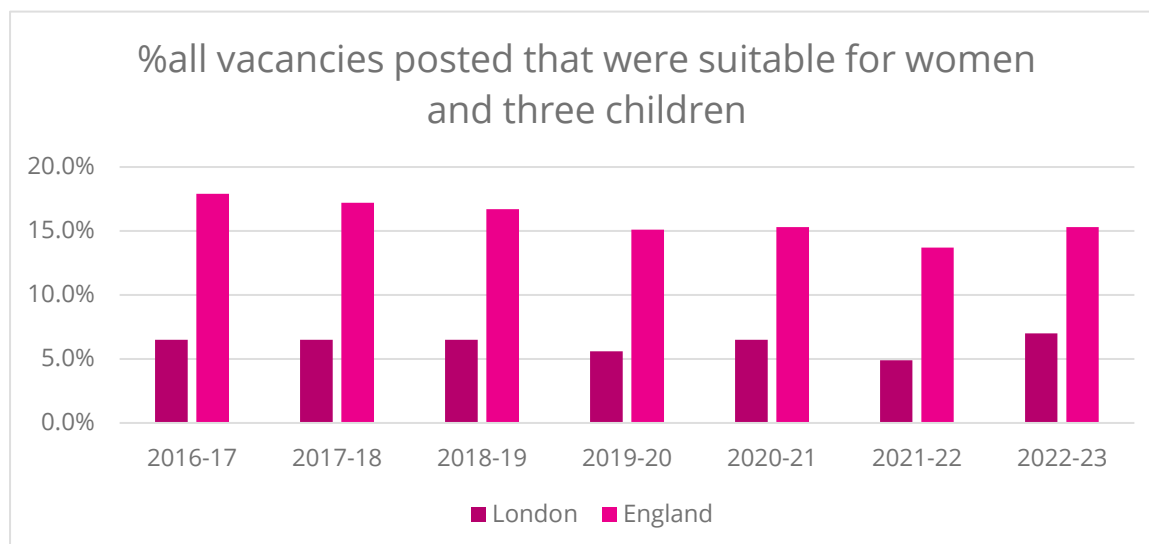


Chart 5 – Wheelchair accessible vacancies

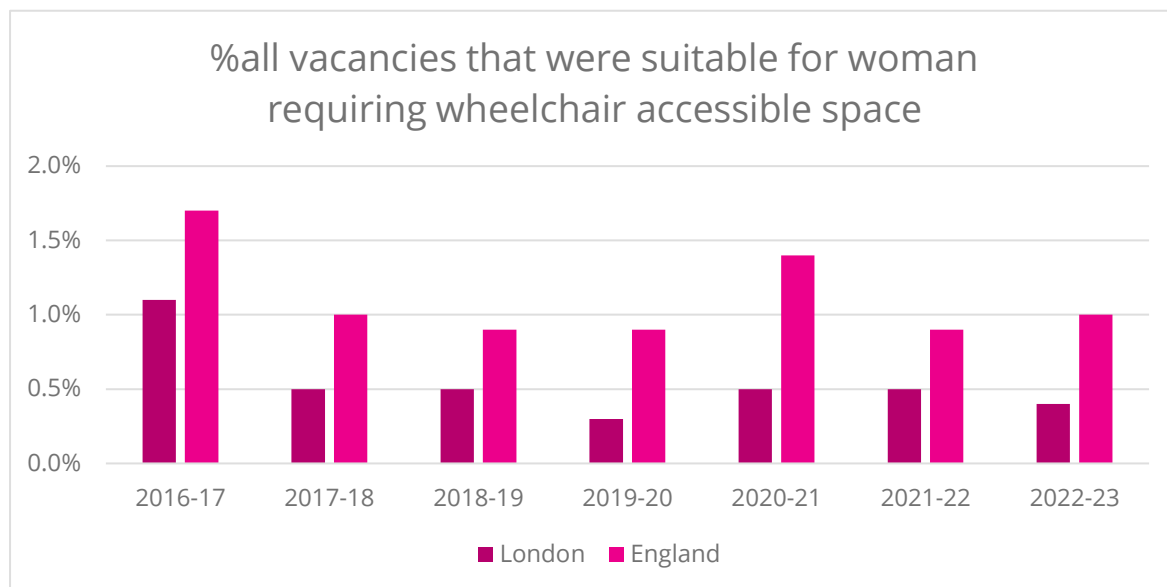
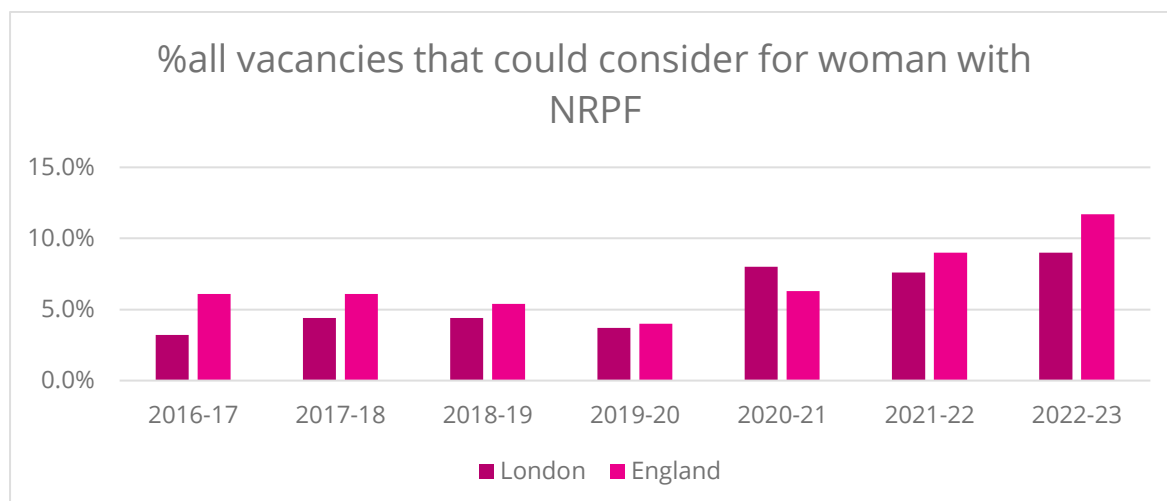


Chart 6 – Vacancies for women with NRPF



4. Women using refuge services in London

This section of the report presents data available from the London Refuges Data Collection Project on the women placed in London refuges, women making unsuccessful referrals and women moving on from refuge. The data collection mechanisms were developed in the first half of 2013/14. Since data collection began in Q3 of that year, the project has provided the following information on women moving into refuge services in London:

1. The numbers of women placed in refuge.
2. Numbers of unsuccessful referrals received for vacancies.

3. Protected characteristics/additional support needs of those making referrals.
4. The borough of origin of women moving into refuge.
5. The previous housing statuses of women moving into refuge.

It has also provided the following information on women moving on from refuge services in London:

1. Numbers of women moving on
2. Protected characteristics
3. Borough women moved to
4. Outcome (reason for leaving)

The data collection methods were further developed in Quarter 3 2017/18 to also collect information on the numbers of children placed in refuge, length of stay in refuge and to introduce new fields for additional support needs and housing/outcome categories. These changes to data collection categories mean that some elements of the dataset are not comparable over the full course of the project. All the findings discussed below state which period of data collection they relate to.

4.1 Women making referrals to refuge

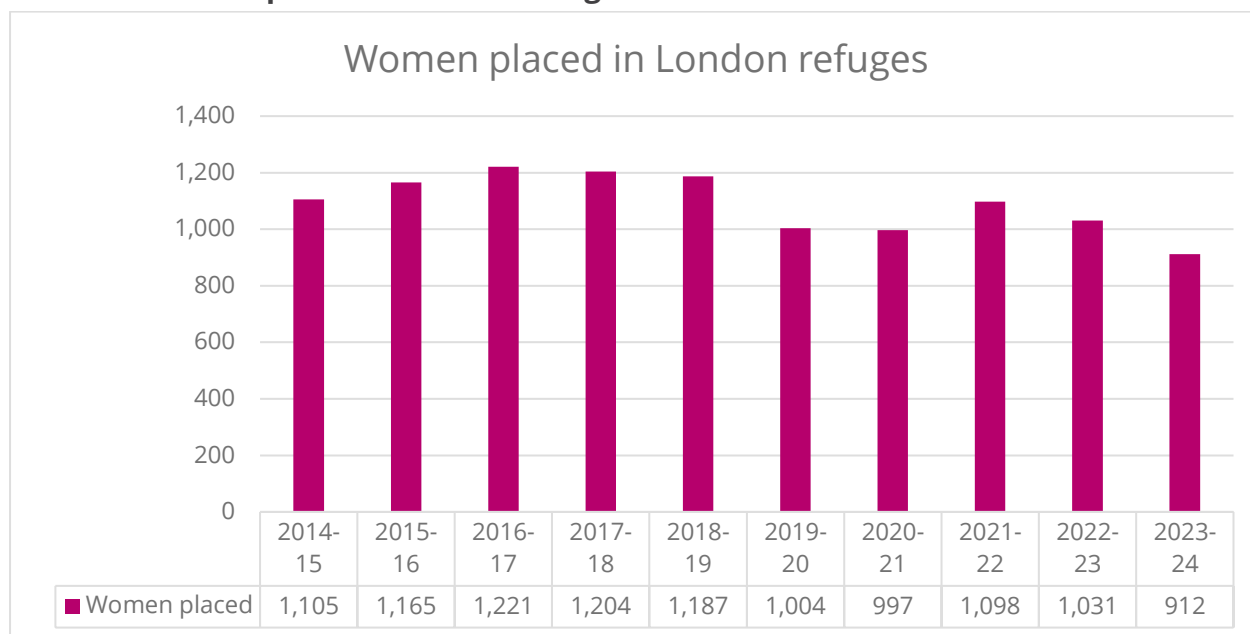
The London Refuges Data Collection project shows that over the ten-year period since the project began in 2013/14, 11,471 women have been placed in London refuges⁷. However, 16,148 refuge referrals were declined during the same period. There are some limitations which should be considered when using this data on referrals, so we could caution against using the figures above to estimate demand for refuge services overall. Women may be included in these figures multiple times if they accessed refuge more than once or if they made multiple refuge referrals. Refuge staff who enter vacancy data on Routes to Support are asked complex questions about unsuccessful referrals and they may not have the information to hand, so it's likely that the actual numbers of unsuccessful referrals will be higher than those recorded.

Analysis of referrals over the ten-year period shows there was a slight drop in the number of women placed during 2020-21 compared to previous years (see Chart 7). This is likely due to Covid-19 pandemic restrictions which had a significant impact on the capacity of domestic abuse services (Women's Aid, 2020). Numbers of women placed in 2023-24 are still lower compared to the period before the Covid-19 pandemic, which is

⁷ This is the recorded number of women placed between 1st October 2013 and 31st March 2024.

in line the wider picture of lower numbers of vacancies being made available in England overall in recent years (Women’s Aid, 2024).

Chart 7 – Women placed in London refuges⁸



We can cross-reference the numbers of women placed in refuge and numbers of unsuccessful referrals with information on whether the women were known to have any protected characteristics or additional support needs. This allows us to identify trends around whether women with certain protected characteristics/additional support needs may face additional barriers in accessing refuge.

The proportions of women placed in refuge who have protected characteristics or additional support needs has not changed significantly over the course of the project. The only notable change is in the proportion of women placed in refuge which were recorded as having NRPF. The proportion of women with NRPF has steadily increased over the course of the project, however a higher proportion of unsuccessful referrals were made by women with NRPF (see Chart 8). The starkest comparisons are in referrals made by women aged under 18 and women with substance use support needs, where we see considerable higher numbers of unsuccessful referrals compared the women placed in refuge (see Chart 9 and Chart 10). The dataset does not explain

⁸ Chart 7 shows the full years for which we have data. There were an additional 547 women placed between 1st October 2013 and 31st March 2014 that are not included in Chart 7.

the reasons why high numbers of referrals from these groups of women are unsuccessful but it does highlight that these areas require further investigation.

Chart 8 - Comparison of %women placed in refuge with NRPF and %women making unsuccessful referrals who had NRPF

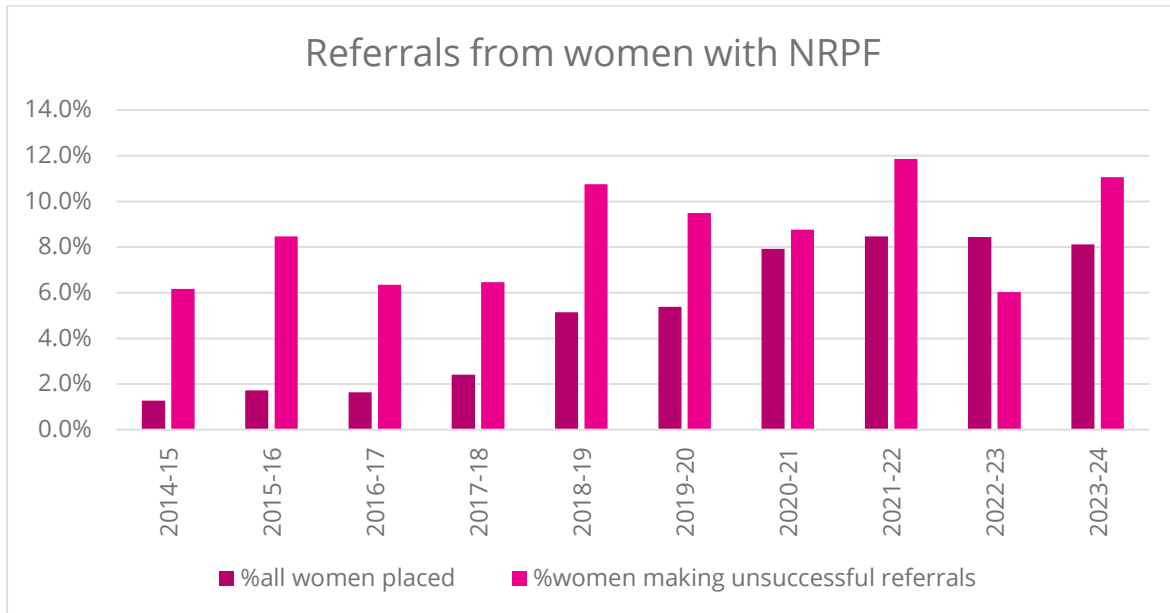


Chart 9 - Comparison of %women aged under 18 placed in refuge and %women making unsuccessful referrals aged under 18 years old

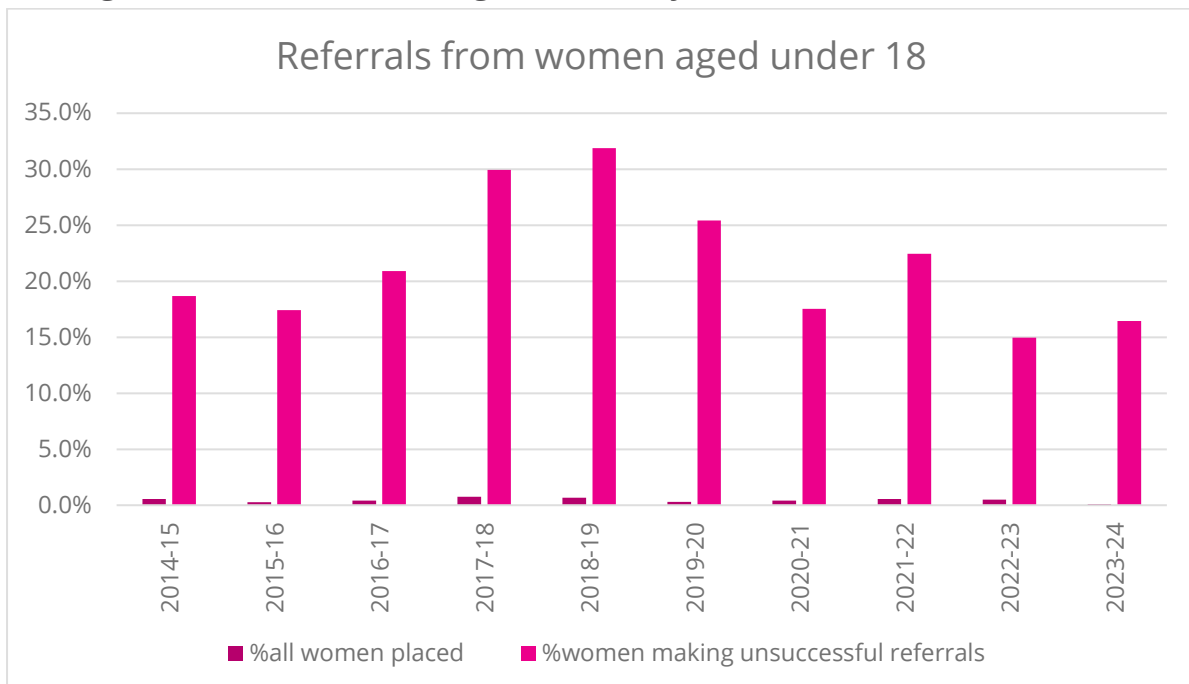
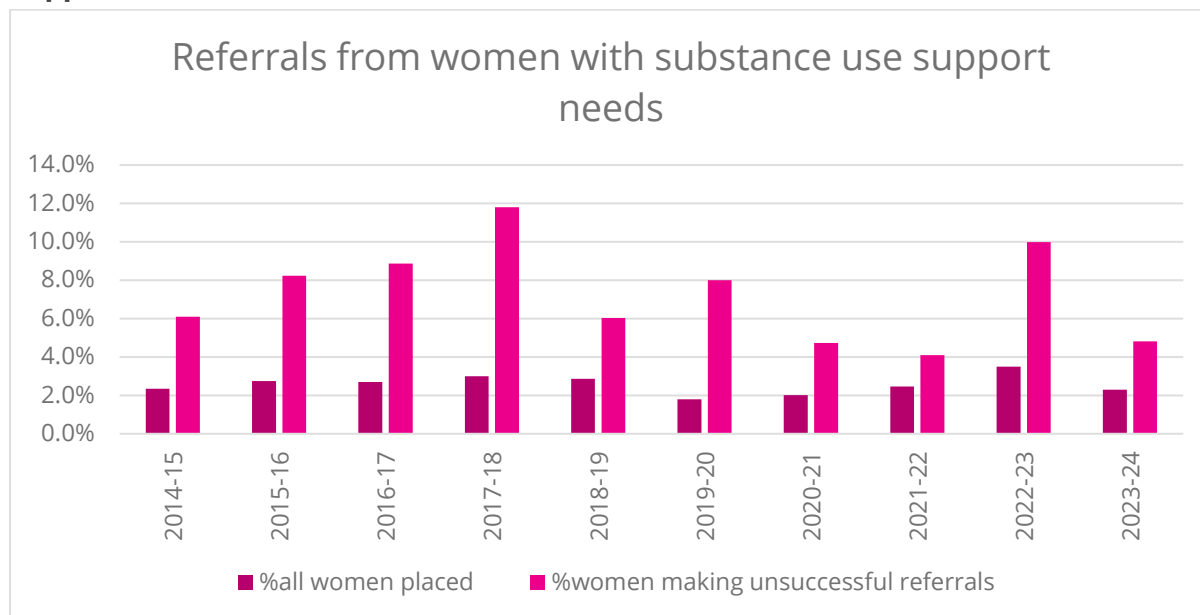


Chart 10 – Comparison of %women placed in refuge who had substance use support needs and %women making unsuccessful referrals with substance use support needs



4.2 Numbers of children placed in refuge

As shown in Table A, the average number of children placed per woman has decreased over the period that data on children has been collected (from Q1 2018-19). As noted in Section 3.3, we see fewer vacancies in London that are suitable for women with two or three children compared to England overall.

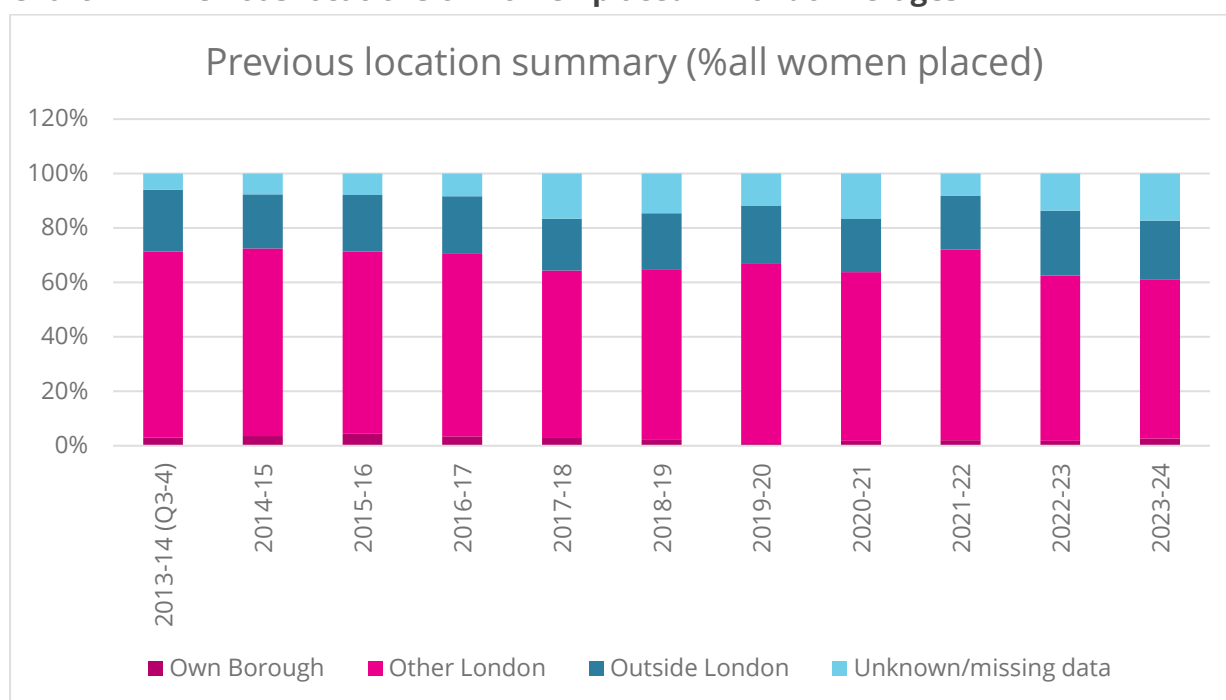
Table A – Women and children placed in London refuges

Year	Women placed	Children	Single women (fleeing without children)	Average #children per woman placed
2018-19	1,187	1,011	262	0.9
2019-20	1,004	894	234	0.9
2020-21	997	771	218	0.8
2021-22	1,098	868	298	0.8
2022-23	1,031	719	258	0.7
2023-24	912	634	387	0.7

4.3 Previous locations of women placed in refuges

The project collects information on the types of accommodation women were leaving in prior to being placed in refuge. Data fields have changed multiple times over the course of the project, so these categories are not comparable. The project also collects data on where women were living, which is analysed to determine how many women were previously living within the same borough as the refuge they moved to, another London borough, outside of London, or if their previous location was unknown. The data consistently shows that the majority of women were previously living in another London borough and there have not been any notable changes in previous locations categories of women placed in London since data collection began (see Chart 11). The national picture across England shows that the vast majority of women travel to another local authority area in order to access safety in refuge (Women’s Aid, 2024).

Chart 11 – Previous locations of women placed in London refuges

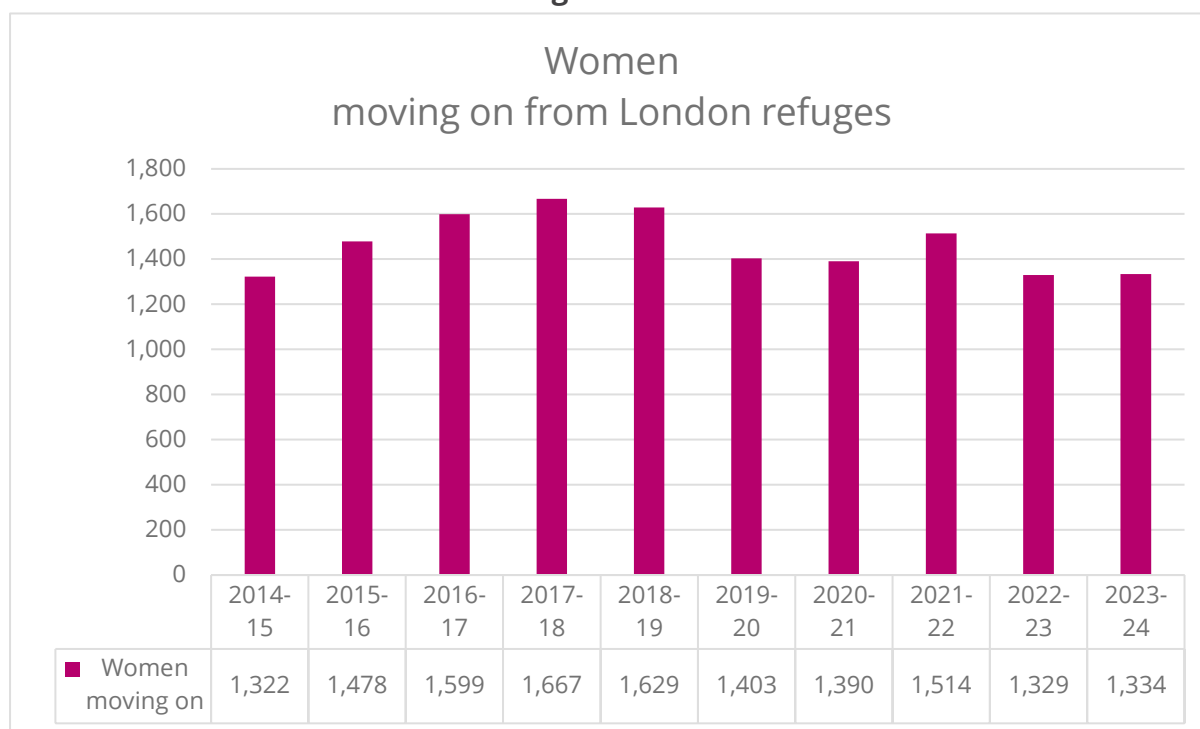


4.4 Numbers of women moving on from refuge in London

The dataset contains information about 15,330 women moving on from London refuges between 1st October 2013 and 31st March 2023. As shown in Chart 12, we saw a drop in the numbers of women moving on from London refuges in 2020-21, as discussed in Section 4.1 this is likely due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Numbers of women moving on for 2023-24 are still lower compared to the period before the Covid-19 pandemic, which again is in line with the wider picture lower numbers of vacancies in

England overall (Women’s Aid, 2024). There is a housing crisis in London; chronic housing shortages and the impact of welfare reforms, such as the benefit cap, mean that finding affordable housing is incredibly challenging (Centre for London, 2023). This creates barriers for women who are ready to move on from refuge but have restricted access to appropriate housing. Women with NRPF face significant barriers to moving on as they may be ineligible for further support with housing.

Chart 12 – Numbers of women moving on⁹



4.5 Move-on locations of women leaving refuge

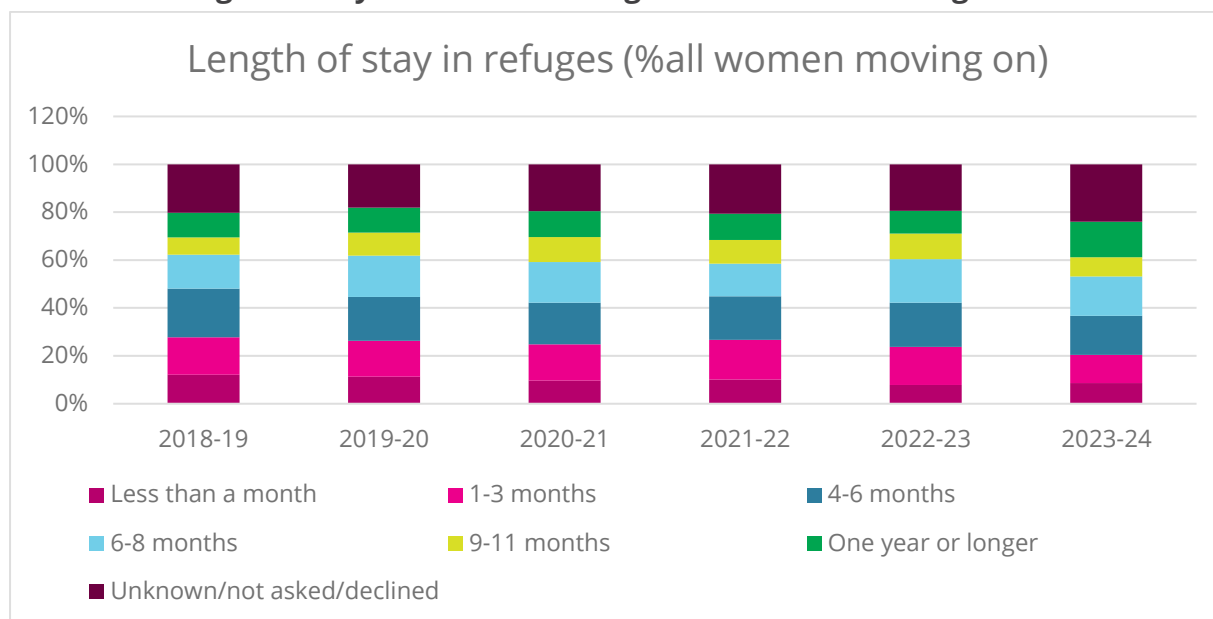
The dataset includes information on the types of accommodation women leaving refuges move on to. These data fields have changed multiple times over the course of the project, so categories are not comparable over the ten-year period. The project also collects data on the locations that women move on to, which is analysed to determine how many women stay living within the same borough as the refuge they moved to, another London borough, outside of London, or if their move-on location was unknown. There have not been any notable changes in the move on locations categories of women leaving London refuges since data collection began.

⁹ Chart 12 shows the full years for which we have data. There were an additional 665 women moving on between 1st October 2013 and 31st March 2014 that are not included in Chart 12.

4.6 Length of stay of women leaving refuge

Data on the length of stay for women moving on from London refuges has been collected since Q1 2018-19. The data does not show any strong patterns of changes in length of stay in refuge, however the data for women moving on in 2023-24 does show a slight increase in women staying in refuge for over a year.

Chart 13 – Length of stay of women moving on from London refuges



Conclusion

The data collected through the London Councils Data Collection Project shows that over a ten-year period, 11,471 women were supported in London refuges. There has been an increase in bedspaces since the project began in 2013, including the availability of spaces for women with NRPF, yet much more needs to be done to ensure that all survivors are able to escape and recover from abuse. Over a ten-year period 16,148 referrals were declined and many more were likely to have been unsuccessful in accessing a refuge. There has been a concerning decline in average number of children placed in refuge and in the availability of wheelchair accessible spaces. Women with NRPF continue to face significant barriers in accessing refuge. Further investigation is needed to understand the support available for particular groups and the barriers they face, including women aged under 18 and women with substance use support needs. The long-term impacts of recent developments including the Covid-19 pandemic, the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and the rise in cost-of-living remain to be seen. Although there have been slight net increases in some service types (for example, helpline and

IDVA services) over the course of the data collection project, most other service types have seen little change. More needs to be done to ensure survivors in London have access to the full range of domestic abuse support including refuge services and community-based services.

References

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Appendix

Table i - Numbers of service types in London at 1st May 2013-2023

Year	Refuge	Resettlement	Floating support	Outreach	IDVA	CYPS	Helpline
2013	57	49	22	26	18	42	6
2014	53	44	24	24	17	39	6
2015	55	44	21	26	19	38	11
2016	56	44	24	25	22	39	16
2017	60	47	26	27	23	38	17
2018	59	46	25	30	26	42	17
2019	60	41	22	34	27	46	17
2020	59	40	20	37	28	48	16
2021	60	40	21	39	30	50	17
2022	60	41	18	37	29	52	17
2023	59	41	21	41	30	49	16

Table ii - Vacancies in London available to specific groups

Year	Total London vacancies	Woman +2 children	Woman +3 children	Wheelchair access	Limited mobility	NRPF
2016-17	1,868	584 (31.3%)	122 (6.5%)	21 (1.1%)	31 (1.7%)	60 (3.2%)
2017-18	1,762	598 (33.9%)	115 (6.5%)	9 (0.5%)	10 (0.6%)	71 (4.0%)
2018-19	1,700	535 (31.5%)	111 (6.5%)	8 (0.5%)	25 (1.5%)	74 (4.4%)
2019-20	1,485	476 (32.1%)	83 (5.6%)	4 (0.3%)	32 (2.2%)	55 (3.7%)
2020-21	1,479	452 (30.6%)	96 (6.5%)	8 (0.5%)	33 (2.2%)	118 (8.0%)
2021-22	1,609	487 (30.3%)	79 (4.9%)	8 (0.5%)	25 (1.6%)	123 (7.6%)
2022-23	1,396	398 (28.5%)	98 (7.0%)	5 (0.4%)	22 (1.6%)	126 (9.0%)

Table iii - Vacancies in England available to specific groups

Year	Total London vacancies	women +2 children	women +3 children	Wheelchair access	Limited mobility	NRPF
2016-17	11,187	5,075 (45.4%)	2,001 (17.9%)	195 (1.7%)	150 (1.3%)	685 (6.1%)
2017-18	10,405	4,566 (43.9%)	1,789 (17.2%)	102 (1.0%)	120 (1.2%)	606 (5.8%)
2018-19	10,777	4,684 (43.5%)	1,803 (16.7%)	95 (0.9%)	105 (1.0%)	586 (5.4%)
2019-20	10,340	4,447 (43.0%)	1,562 (15.1%)	89 (0.9%)	128 (1.2%)	411 (4.0%)
2020-21	8,280	3,491 (42.2%)	1,265 (15.3%)	114 (1.4%)	100 (1.2%)	518 (6.3%)
2021-22	8,051	3,138 (39.0%)	1,104 (13.7%)	72 (0.9%)	91 (1.1%)	725 (9.0%)
2022-23	7,600	2,876 (37.8%)	1,161 (15.3%)	76 (1.0%)	108 (1.4%)	890 (11.7%)