

Unsuccessful referrals into refuge

Women's Aid On Track data briefing

July 2024

We want to thank the *Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government* for funding this research. We also want to thank On Track user organisations, their key workers, and their clients for their immense contribution to our national dataset, enabling us to put the lived experiences of survivors at the heart of our work.

Introduction

In this briefing we share new analysis of On Track national data exploring the reasons why referrals into refuge services are unsuccessful.

Since 2016 we have used On Track data to report on the national demand for refuge services in our Annual Audit reports¹ which have consistently shown that over 60.0% of referrals into refuge services are unsuccessful in each financial year². To investigate why this figure is so high, we conducted in-depth research using On Track referrals data from 62 refuges across England in the financial year 2022-23. We found three main reasons³ why referrals were unsuccessful:

- Lack of capacity to support the client / survivor (**40.6%** of unsuccessful referrals).
 - Lack of capacity was not just about not having an available bedspace. Refuges were also affected by not having sufficient resources to meet the support needs of the women attempting to access the service. Included in this, **17.5% of unsuccessful referrals were rejected because the refuge was unable to meet the specific support need(s) of the survivor.**
- Client / survivor did not accept the refuge space (**35.4%** unsuccessful referrals).
- An inappropriate referral was made on behalf of a client / survivor (**18.0%** unsuccessful referrals).

These reasons are discussed in more detail below and from this analysis we explore solutions to the barriers faced by women when accessing refuge services. In the next section of the briefing, we present On Track and Routes to Support data evidencing that women with additional support needs are particularly affected by refuge services not having enough capacity to meet the demand for the services.

On Track data is able to provide a comprehensive overview of the reasons why referrals into refuge are unsuccessful and what this shows about the barriers

¹ Access to our Annual Audits can be found here: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/research/research-and-reports/>.

² More information on this can be viewed on our data dashboards: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/research/research-and-reports/domestic-abuse-provision-referrals/>.

³ The reason for 6.0% of the unsuccessful referrals was recorded as 'Other' or missing.

women face when accessing safety and the issues refuge services face. However, the data is limited in that it can only report on the number of unsuccessful referrals which are recorded by each refuge service. There is a huge administrative burden of recording all unsuccessful referrals, particularly when the service is not going on to support the client. It can also be unethical to ask a survivor potentially sensitive questions for data collection when they have been unsuccessful in accessing the service. Additionally, the referrals dataset cannot capture referrals which were not recorded in the first place due to the referral agency knowing that the refuge is already over-subscribed and does not have the space or resources to support the client.

As such, unsuccessful referrals which were not recorded, which were recorded with limited data, or where not submitted to the service in the first place are not available in the referrals dataset and therefore not analysed in this briefing. This is important to consider as if these referrals were able to be incorporated in the analysis, the proportions for the reasons discussed throughout may be different. For example, due to limited capacity, referral agencies may know that their local refuge service cannot accept referrals for multiple women who require wheelchair access and so will not make the referral. We can therefore expect that the proportion of unsuccessful referrals due to the service being unable to meet the support needs of the woman being referred is underestimated in this sample.

About the On Track dataset

On Track is Women's Aid's bespoke case management and outcomes monitoring system¹ and is currently used by over 100 local domestic services. On Track records client information such as demographics, referral patterns, experiences of abuse, and outcomes of support. Where organisations and service users' consent, this data contributes to a national dataset held by the research team at Women's Aid. The dataset contains information on over 200,000 survivors, making it the largest dataset in the country on the experiences of survivors accessing domestic abuse services. This dataset is crucial in informing Women's Aid's research, campaigning, and policy work.

When someone is experiencing domestic abuse and needs to access a refuge, they are often referred to a refuge by a professional or service (for example, a GP, social worker, Women's Aid's Live Chat) or through a self-referral. A refuge service will then decide whether a refuge is suitable for that person and/or whether they have the resources/capacity to adequately support them. Refuge services using On Track can record these referrals on their case management system and collect data on the outcome of the referral and the reason why the referral was rejected if it was unsuccessful.

For more information about On Track, please visit our website:

<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/ontrack/>

If you need support for domestic abuse, please visit our *I need support* page on our website for further resources: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/>

Reasons for unsuccessful referrals into refuge

Lack of capacity

The most cited reason for referrals into refuge being unsuccessful was that the refuge did not have the capacity to accept the survivor into the service. This reason accounted for 40.6% of all unsuccessful referrals, meaning that **when a survivor was referred into a refuge service, there was almost a 1 in 4 chance⁴ that the service did not have the capacity to support her**. We know that current levels of service provision are not meeting demand. Compared to the Council of Europe's recommendation, there is a 22.2% shortfall in the number of bedspaces across the country (Women's Aid 2024).

Survivor did not accept refuge space

The next most reported reason for unsuccessful referrals into refuges was that the survivor did not accept the refuge space. This reason made up 35.4% of unsuccessful referrals. The decision to enter a refuge is complicated and dangerous, especially when someone is still experiencing controlling and coercive behaviour. This often leads to situations where survivors cannot respond to communication with the support service and where survivors will change their mind and decline the offer of support. In other cases, the survivor's personal circumstances contributes to them declining a bedspace. For example, the location of the refuge may be too close to the perpetrator's place of residence or too far away from where the survivor is located and cause disruption to her caring responsibilities. In some cases, particularly when a woman has no recourse to public funds, she may be unable to afford the refuge space. These reasons will often lead to referrals being made into multiple refuges and other housing services across different locations to find a service appropriate for the survivors' circumstances.

Inappropriate referral made on behalf of survivor

The third reason why referrals were unsuccessful was that the referral was inappropriate. This accounted for 18.0% of unsuccessful referrals. This covers circumstances when a referral was made on behalf of someone who was not experiencing domestic abuse or who was ineligible for support under the service criteria. Other examples of inappropriate referrals include when the refuge did

⁴ 22.7%

not hear back from the referral agency so the referral could not be properly processed.

Inappropriate referrals highlight a lack of awareness of the role of refuges and domestic abuse more widely across statutory and other services. For example, 24.8% of the inappropriate referrals submitted by housing services were unsuccessful because the client being referred was not experiencing domestic abuse. We also saw that the most common reason for inappropriate unsuccessful referrals submitted by the police was due to the client already being supported by the refuge services (30.4%). This could be caused by police being late to refer clients into refuge services or do not enquire about the support that a client already has in place. From all referral agencies, a high level of inappropriate referrals were unsuccessful because the needs of the client were better met elsewhere so were referred onto a partner agency. Improving understandings of domestic abuse and domestic abuse support services in other agencies through training will contribute to reducing the number of unsuccessful referrals into refuge services and ensuring that survivors are appropriately supported when accessing all statutory and refuge services.

By examining the reasons why referrals are unsuccessful, we can see that the main reason why referrals are unsuccessful is because the refuge does not have the capacity to support the survivor. In the next section, we examine this in more detail, particularly how it affects women with additional support needs.

Capacity is not just about the number of beds

When a refuge does not have the capacity to accept a referral, this can be caused by the service not having an available bedspace or by the service not having the resources to meet the support needs of the survivor. Included in the 40.6% of unsuccessful referrals which were rejected due to the service lacking in capacity, **17.5% of unsuccessful referrals were rejected because the refuge was unable to meet the specific support need(s) of the survivor.** Mental health and drug and/or alcohol use were the most cited support needs which services could not accommodate. Other support needs which could not be accommodated included disability, housing large families and survivors having no recourse to public funds.

Routes to Support (RtS) is the UK violence against women and girls directory of services and refuge vacancies⁵. Data from RtS shows us there is limited availability of refuge vacancies which can accommodate women with these support needs. For example, in the financial year 2022-23, only 1.0% of refuge vacancies could accommodate a woman in a wheelchair and only 1.4% were suitable for women with limited mobility. There was also a limited availability of specialist service provision for other types of support needs. For example, only 17.7% of refuges had specialist mental health support workers and only 11.7% of refuge vacancies could consider a referral for someone who had no recourse to public funds. This data shows that refuges are often unable to provide the specialist service provision needed to accommodate women with additional support needs.

We know, however, that there is a high level of demand for refuge services by survivors requiring this support. The Annual Audit 2024 shows that of the women who successfully accessed a refuge service, 50.6% had a mental health support need, 15.4% had a drug and/or alcohol support need. We also saw, 18.2% had a physical health support need and 9.2% had a physical disability (Women's Aid, 2024). Women's Aid's No Woman Turned Away (NWTa) project exists to support women with these and other support needs and the professionals supporting them find safe accommodation, recognising the barriers they often face. In the financial year 2022-23, the most common support needs survivors supported by the NWTa project had were: having no recourse to public funds (36.6%), mental health (32.3%), and substance misuse (17.7%), noting that many survivors had multiple support needs (Women's Aid, 2023).

Despite a significant number of survivors accessing refuge requiring specialist service provision, we can see that refuge services often don't have the capacity or resources to meet their needs. This is a significant reason why referrals into refuges are unsuccessful, showing that women with additional support needs still face significant barriers to accessing safety.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Refuge services and staff do lifesaving and holistic work, keeping women safe from abuse and providing support around all aspects of their life such as

⁵ More information can be found at our website: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/i-work-with-survivors/routes-to-support/>

improving their financial situation, accessing appropriate physical and mental health treatment, and accessing immigration advice. We have evidenced throughout this briefing that when refuge services are underfunded and under-resourced, they have to reject referrals even when the survivor requires a bedspace to reach safety. In this environment, it is often the survivors who have multiple and intersecting support needs who face the most barriers to accessing refuge.

On Track data has shown that the main reason for the high levels of unsuccessful referrals is because the service does not have the capacity to support the survivor. This includes services not having enough available bedspaces as well as not having the resources to provide specialist service provision to those with additional support needs. This situation has left many women without access to the lifesaving support they need to flee domestic abuse.

Our recommendations are:

1. We are calling on the government to increase long-term and sustainable funding for specialist refuge services by investing £427 million per year, as a minimum, to fund specialist women-led and 'by and for' domestic abuse services in England⁶.
2. Local Authorities need to ensure they are commissioning the right provision within their local area. In accordance with Part 4 of the 2021 Domestic Abuse Act local authorities are required to conduct local needs assessments to determine level of need within their area. It is evident from this briefing that provision is not currently meeting need. Local authorities need to regularly conduct needs assessments, listen to the insights provide by the needs assessment and from specialist domestic abuse services to ensure they are commissioning the correct provision to support the survivors in their local area.
3. Agencies such as the police and local authority housing and safeguarding teams are given training by specialist training providers in the sector, about domestic abuse, and the role of domestic abuse

⁶ This figure is based on Women's Aid's *Investing to save* research which would that for every pound invested in domestic abuse support services we will see a saving to the public purse of at least £9. The full report can be read on our website: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/investing-to-save-report/>

services. Increasing awareness of the role of refuge services within other agencies will help prevent inappropriate referrals being made into refuge services and reduce the number of unsuccessful referrals into refuges. It will also aid other agencies to better support survivors in their day-to-day work.

A fully funded whole-system approach will contribute to more efficient referral pathways by increasing the number of bedspaces available to help services keep up with demand for their support. It will also allow services to increase their specialist service provision for survivors with additional support needs, particularly for those with mental health, physical health, and alcohol/drug use support needs.

References

Women's Aid. (2024) *The Domestic Abuse Report 2024: The Annual Audit*. Bristol: Women's Aid.

Women's Aid. (2023) *Nowhere To Turn, 2023: Findings from the seventh year of the No Woman Turned Away project*. Bristol: Women's Aid.