



Suffolk Safe Accommodation Strategy 2025 – 2028

**Providing accessible, safe and secure
accommodation for those fleeing domestic abuse**



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Introduction

This strategy details the Suffolk County Council response to the statutory duty pursuant to Part 4 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, [Section 57](#).

The Suffolk system is committed to ensuring there is appropriate space for everyone to flee domestic abuse, regardless of gender, age, cultural practice or ability, because we know that abuse does not discriminate. This commitment is reflected in our *Ending Violence Against Women & Girls+ in Suffolk A Strategy for Suffolk 2025-2028*, of which this document will work alongside.

The Duty:

[Delivery of support to victims of domestic abuse in domestic abuse safe accommodation services - GOV.UK](#)

For full definitions of the accommodation and support types please see appendix A.

To inform the Safe Accommodation Strategy, a local needs assessment has been undertaken, covering data sources from key statutory services in the county for the period of October 2023 to September 2024, including health, police, housing, local authority commissioned services as well as national comparison and importantly the experiences of those currently using services in Suffolk by way of case studies. A consultation was also held with the current Safe Accommodation providers who work alongside our victim-survivors daily.

Our Vision:

To ensure access to safe, secure, and supportive accommodation for all victims (adults and children, of all gender identifies) who are fleeing domestic abuse from and to Suffolk, enabling their safety and well-being, and supporting their journey to an independent life, free from abuse.

The following describes the key principles that will be recognised in all processes for providing safe accommodation;

Core Principles:

- **Safety First:** Prioritising physical and psychological safety above all else.
- **Accessibility:** Ensuring accommodations and services are available all who need them and that those spaces are alive to and will foster an environment of equality, diversity and inclusion.
- **Person-Centred:** Tailoring specialist support where possible to meet individual needs, choices, and aspirations. Empowering victim-survivors, removing barriers and providing the right tools and opportunities towards independence.
- **Trauma-Informed:** Recognising and appropriately responding to the impact of trauma on individuals.

- **Collaboration:** Working effectively with partner organisations to deliver the best service we can, informed by the feedback from victim-survivors.

What have we already delivered?

Suffolk County Council, working alongside commissioned partners, is already delivering the following quality services that are currently working well for Suffolk:

- ✓ Communal refuge accommodation (single gendered)
- ✓ Dispersed safe accommodation (all genders and complex need)
- ✓ Sanctuary / Target Hardening scheme (improving security measures, based on risk, for those that cannot leave their own home). At the last procurement 24/7 Locks Ltd, a nationally recognised specialised service were successful in their bid and are working with the Suffolk IDVA service to ensure that all high-risk victims remaining in their own home receive increased security measures and peace of mind when it comes to their physical and perceived safety, something which we know is vital to the health and wellbeing of our victim survivors.

Feedback from the IDVA service: *Our client was extremely pleased with 24/7 locks and the engineer who came out to install everything. He was on time, friendly and very thorough with what he was able to install. She told me that now she has had this done she no longer feels like she has to move in order to feel safe which is really good for her as she loves the home she lives in.*

- ✓ Established a triage service into accommodation so professionals can make one referral for whom they are supporting, and the triage service matches them with the best suited and available accommodation
- ✓ Procured a pathway to specialised mental health support
- ✓ Coordinated face to face regular accommodation provider meetings to foster collaborative working, problem solving, sharing of good practice and provide consistency across the locations. These meetings also include collaboration with DA Link Workers who work within the housing sector across the county
- ✓ Conducted quality visits to all accommodations and worked with providers to be the best they can be. This includes achieving and maintaining professional accreditation status for all providers such as Leading Lights, DAHA, Women's Aid, sharing best practice and facilitating peer support opportunities
- ✓ Established quick access pathways to both routine and emergency dental care for all victim-survivors within Safe Accommodation

However, whilst current provisions are having a positive impact, there is always more we can do. As part of our commitment to continuous improvement, since the last procurement of services, and in preparation for this strategy we have:

- ✓ Conducted a refreshed needs assessment of relevant data
- ✓ Collated feedback from accommodation providers during a dedicated session
- ✓ Considered the feedback from victim-survivors who have accessed service and shared their experiences

The following sections outline key findings from the local needs assessment split into two sections; the people & the accommodation

In the year ending September 2024 Suffolk recorded approximately 14,000 reports of domestic abuse. This equates to roughly 20% of all crime in Suffolk, which is on par with national averages. We must approach these figures with caution due to the natural ebb and flow of reporting rates, which are influenced by many factors including, changes in police recording practices, local and national campaigns, social media and national cases for example.

The People

- **Representation:** Although Suffolk is statistically a predominantly white British county (87.3%) it is experiencing gradual increase in ethnic diversity. This demographic shift reflects broader national trends of increased migration and cultural exchange. As Suffolk becomes more diverse it is crucial to understand the specific needs of its communities, including those who may face additional barriers, inequalities and vulnerabilities. Suffolk Safe accommodation demographic data shows an overwhelming majority of white British residents using the service. It is acknowledged that this is not representative of our community, and we recognise that who is not accessing service is just as important as those that are. There is more to do to ensure our services meet the needs of all our communities and seek to adapt our own ways of ensuring those from global majority and minoritised/marginalised groups know that there is a culturally competent service for them in Suffolk.
- **Household Structure:** Data collected on families residing within Suffolk safe accommodations reveals a diverse range of family structures. Over half (52%) of all families in safe accommodation had one or more children. Looking at referral data we can also see that family size can also be a barrier to accessing suitable accommodation. This highlights the need for flexibility in the size and adaptability of rooms and bed spaces available to ensure we can meet the needs of all family sizes. The largest proportion of children in safe accommodation were in the 0-5 age group, a crucial time for a child's development, reinforcing that the time spent in safe accommodation is highly influential and that the need for specialist support tailored for children, who are classified as victims in law, meets their developmental needs.

- **Mental Health:** A significant proportion of those in accommodation were identified as having mental ill-health – with 42% being undiagnosed at the time of coming to service. In many cases these responses were directly related to the experience of trauma and abuse, highlighting the profound psychological impact. It was also observed that a substantial number of victim-survivors were dealing with multiple co-occurring mental ill-health conditions, indicating the complex and compound nature of their needs. Whilst we have already implemented a pathway to accessing a mental health clinician, there is always more to do. We fully recognise that one size does not fit all and that the need for a trauma informed approach is paramount.

The Accommodation

In Suffolk we currently have 3 refuge (single gendered) sites, and 3 sites of dispersed accommodation (any gender/complex need). Occupancy for safe accommodation averages around the 75% mark with variance each quarter due to time of year, as well as suitability /desirability of location. The most common reasons for not housing a victim-survivor are due to not meeting criteria (i.e. not fleeing domestic abuse) or no suitable room for family size or safety (ie complex mental ill health -actively suicidal).

There are currently 34 bed spaces across Suffolk across both refuge and dispersed accommodation. Whilst we continue to consider the need for increased provision there are several influencing factors:

- Not all victim-survivors in Suffolk will flee to accommodation in Suffolk. Risk assessments will consider the safety and risk factors on a case-by-case basis but an example would be that it is likely a perpetrator would be able to locate the high-risk victim within the same geographical area.
- Despite population growth between the 2011 and 2021 Census, it is important to note that the County's population density remains significantly below the national average for England and Wales. Furthermore, a key characteristic of Suffolk's population breakdown is its age profile, which tends to be older than the national average. Suffolk has a higher proportion of aged 65 and over compared to the national demographic data, indicating a larger population of retirees and older individuals who are less likely statistically to come forward to seek support and use service.
- Our current safe accommodation offer is never at full capacity. However, we do recognise that domestic abuse is significantly underreported (nationally) and as there is ongoing passion and effort to raise awareness and improve the system we are keen to be able to respond to any increase in victim-survivors coming forward and needing to access safe accommodation.

Observations from current accommodation providers

The current accommodation providers agreed that flexibility in option of both refuge and self-contained is still needed. The group discussed how, even though there are challenges to communal living, there is benefit to the traditional communal refuge model, although this is not always recognised by victims at the time. Examples given included that the communal aspect

can promote a sense of relief – there are other people to talk to, there are support staff to play with their children etc.

Focus for moving forward

Given the findings from the previous sections, we will focus on the following ambitions over the next twelve months:

- 1. Scale up and adapt existing provision, providing choice where possible**
- 2. Address need and diversity, creating flexibility to meet individual needs**
- 3. Build in more focus on the experience of the child through safe accommodation**

Further detail can be found below in the following breakdown:

1. Upscale and adapt physical accommodation provision

Objective: Offer a range of safe accommodation options to meet diverse needs and ensure there is flexibility where possible to support victim-survivor choice.

Actions:

- Re look at accessibility and convert more rooms for physical accessibility needs.
- Ensure there is access to communal space so VS can engage in group offerings, external agency courses and peer support.
- Ensure there are a range of room sizes to support different family sizes.
- Upscale dispersed accommodation to support the above where possible and to ensure locations remain varied, supporting anonymity for victim-survivors.
- Increase funding to the Target Hardening / Sanctuary Scheme contract to ensure everyone who needs to use the service can benefit from it and in future commissioning take into consideration accommodation tenancy arrangements.
- Ensure availability of culturally appropriate safe spaces and support i.e. providing additional food preparation space for those cooking halal and a quiet space for prayer.
- Where possible ensure that victims have access to safe outside space and promote its use and benefits, for example: Forest Schools, outside yoga.

2. Address Need and Diversity

Objective: Remove barriers to accessing safe accommodation

Actions:

- Ensure all victims, specifically those within the dispersed accommodations know how to access the associated support they are entitled too
- Ensure support continues within the mental health pathway, expanding where possible
- Provide intersectionality, cultural competency and specific focused sessions on anti-racism, LGBTQ+ community, older community, training for accommodation staff and the wider system

- Look closely at data of which community groups are not accessing accommodation and adapt advertising materials accordingly
- Continue with support provided by the accommodation staff including but not limited to: housing, health, legal, financial, emotional, educational, employment, benefits, housing applications, legal aid, immigration, Access to counselling, therapy, peer/local support groups, workshops on budgeting, cooking, parenting, healthy relationships, employment skills, and digital literacy, support to build social networks, access community resources, and reduce isolation.
- Adopt a consistent trauma informed lens to all that we do through a well trained workforce.

3. Experience of the child

Objective: Greater focus on the experience of children through safe accommodation, who are recognised as victims in their own right within the DA Act 2021 , and whose lives are shaped and impacted by their stay.

Actions:

- Continue and expand where able, dedicated support for children in safe accommodation, including education, play therapy, and emotional support.
- Re-look at the outside space available to children and how this can be used
- Gather specific case studies on children's experience (with parental consent and in a trauma informed, safe way where appropriate) and dedicate time for this discussion at contract meetings and within the quarterly providers meetings
- Explore commissioning specific training on how to best support children in safe accommodation
- Seek new and foster existing relationships with specialists in supporting children who are victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence

Support for victims with no recourse to public funds

We appreciate that the funding received from national government for safe accommodation cannot provide specific provision in this instance, as a system we are collectively committed to exploring all other options available to support victims that need to flee who have NRPF. Avenues to explore may include working with refugee / asylum support teams, utilising financial and legal support / products, grant funded projects and support services, utilising national initiatives that may be available i.e. the flee fund and support of wider VCSFE charities when applicable.

Success Metrics

This comprehensive strategy and action plan provides a robust framework for developing and implementing safe accommodation services that truly meet the needs of vulnerable individuals and contribute to safer, more supportive communities.

All aims are subject to continuous review, adaptation, and improvement based on data and feedback.

What will success look like:

- Professionals in the Suffolk System know who to contact and how to make a referral for a victim to access safe accommodation
- Increase in safe accommodation occupancy rates / referral acceptance
- Improved service user satisfaction and positive outcomes (e.g., securing independent housing, employment, improved mental health)
- Increased diverse population into service by the next needs assessment
- Increased choice for victim-survivors
- Increased offer for supporting children

How could we achieve this:

- **Outcome-Based Monitoring:** Track key outcomes collated by the accommodation providers such as improved well-being and increased independence.
- **Feedback Mechanisms:** Implement robust systems for service user feedback (surveys, focus groups, suggestion boxes) and act on the insights gained
- **Quality Visits:** Continue assessing the quality of accommodation at regular intervals to ensure compliance with safeguarding standards, regulatory requirements, and best practice.
- **Service User Involvement:** Actively involve individuals with lived experience in service design, delivery, and evaluation
- **Research, Innovation and Training:** Stay abreast of new research and best practices encouraging providers to adopt new and innovative approaches where appropriate.

Governance

Suffolk has an established governance and accountability structure through the Safer Stronger Communities Board, with commitment from senior leaders and officers across several organisations in Suffolk.

- Functions of the new Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board (part 4, Sec 58 of the DA Act 2021) will be undertaken by the existing: Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Steering Group who monitor the development and strategic oversight of the *Ending Violence Against Women and Girls+ A Strategy for Suffolk 2025-2028* and its associated /action plan. Membership includes senior decision makers/commissioners from statutory service in Suffolk including Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner, Suffolk Constabulary, Local Authority; Community Safety, Adult Services, Children Services, His Majesty's Probation Service, Health, and two representatives from the VCSE sector, one for Domestic Abuse Services in the county and one for Sexual Violence services. These representatives provide an important channel of communication between the VCSE sector group, the Suffolk Violence and Abuse Partnership and the VAWG Steering Group.
- The Suffolk Violence and Abuse Partnership (SVAP) is an information sharing network established to strengthen collaboration and encourage innovation. There is a membership of 180+ interested individuals with a personal/organisational interest in Violence Against Women and Girls, including: victim/survivors; voluntary and

community sector providers; academics; military; volunteers; By and For services; and elected members.

Review

This strategy will be subject to an annual review and will be updated where and if necessary following a new national VAWG Strategy (expected autumn 2025) and will be frequently discussed at Suffolk Safe Accommodation provider quarterly meetings.

For more information on Safe accommodation in Suffolk or any of the contents of this strategy, please contact community.safety@suffolk.gov.uk

Other relevant strategies for this document to be considered alongside:

- [Ending Violence Against Women & Girls+ A Strategy for Suffolk 2025-2028](#)
- Suffolk VAWG Victim-Survivor Consultation Report [*Lisa Ward & Deb Puleston December 2024*]
- Sexual Violence Mapping in Suffolk Link: Trauma-informed Practice Provision and Training in Suffolk
- National VAWG Strategy - *Expected Autumn 2025*

Appendix A - Home Office Definitions of Safe Accommodation types

[Support in Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation - GOV.UK](#)

Domestic abuse safe accommodation: This refers to specific types of housing and support structures designed to address the needs of victims facing domestic abuse. Accommodation such as bed and breakfasts are not considered relevant safe accommodation and are excluded in the regulations. Therefore, local authorities should refrain from commissioning support within these types of accommodation under the duty.

Refuge accommodation: A refuge offers single gender or single sex accommodation and domestic abuse support which is tied to that accommodation. The address will not be publicly available. Victims, including their children, will have access to a planned programme of therapeutic and practical support from staff. Accommodation may be in shared or self-contained housing, but in both cases the service will enable peer support from other refuge residents.

Dispersed accommodation: i. Safe (secure and dedicated to supporting victims of domestic abuse), self-contained accommodation with a similar level of specialist domestic abuse support as provided within a refuge but which may be more suitable for victims who are unable to stay in a refuge with communal spaces, and/or where peer support from other residents may not be appropriate, due to complex support needs, or where older teenage sons cannot be accommodated in a women only refuge, for example. Where two or more units share any part of the accommodation, including shared hallways or access routes, provision should be single gender or single sex.

ii. Safe (secure and dedicated to supporting victims of domestic abuse), self-contained 'semi-independent' accommodation which is not within a refuge but with support for victims who may not require the intensive support offered through refuge, but are still at risk of abuse from their perpetrator/s. Where two or more units share any part of the accommodation, including shared hallways or access routes, provision should be single gender or single sex.

Sanctuary schemes: A Sanctuary scheme enables victims of domestic abuse to remain in their own homes, where it is safe for them to do so, where it is their choice, and where the perpetrator does not live in the accommodation, by providing additional security measures. Crucially here we are interested in victims who receive on-going support in a sanctuary scheme. The end of a sanctuary scheme bedspace is considered when support ends, not when the installation is removed.

Specialist safe accommodation: Specialist safe accommodation offering dedicated domestic abuse support which is specifically to support those who share one or more particular protected characteristic(s) and / or who share one or more vulnerabilities requiring additional support. Accommodation may be in shared or self-contained housing, and the address will not be publicly available. An example of 'Specialist Accommodation' is 'by and for' services where

victims are able to see themselves reflected in the staffing, management and governance structures.

Second stage accommodation: Accommodation temporarily provided to victims, including their children, who are moving on from other forms of safe accommodation, but would still benefit from a lower level of domestic abuse specific support for a period before they move to fully independent and settled accommodation. Where second stage accommodation is in shared housing it should be single gender or single sex.

‘Other’ safe accommodation: Any other commissioned safe accommodation (single gendered or single sex, secure and dedicated to supporting victims of domestic abuse) with domestic abuse support tied to the accommodation to enable victims to make informed decisions when leaving a perpetrator and seeking safe accommodation.

Types of domestic abuse services

Specialist services: Domestic abuse services designed specifically for victims with relevant specialist characteristics, for example: providing dedicated support to black and minoritised victims/survivors.

‘By and for’ services: ‘By and for’ services are specialist services that are designed and delivered by and for the users and communities they aim to serve such as ethnic minority victims, migrant victims, LGBTQ+ victims or disabled victims. For example, a specialist domestic abuse organisation that is led by black and minoritised women for black and minoritised women and children.

Types of domestic abuse support

Advocacy support: Development of personal safety plans, liaison with other services (for example, GPs and social workers, welfare benefit providers).

Domestic abuse prevention advice: Support to assist victims to recognise the signs of abusive relationships, to help them remain safe (including online), and to prevent re-victimisation.

Specialist support for victims: (i) Designed specifically for victims with relevant protected characteristics (including ‘by and for’), such as faith services, translators and interpreters, immigration advice, interpreters for victims identifying as deaf and / or hard of hearing, and dedicated support for LGBTQ+ victims (not limited to).

(ii) Designed specifically for victims with additional and / or complex needs such as, mental health advice and support, drug and alcohol advice and support (not limited to), including sign posting accordingly.

Children's support: Play therapy, child advocacy or a specialist children worker (for example, a young people's violence advisor, independent domestic abuse advisor or outreach worker specialised in working with children).

Housing-related support: Providing housing-related advice and support, for example, securing a permanent home, rights to existing accommodation and advice on how to live safely and independently.

Advice service: Including financial and legal support, including accessing benefits, support into work and establishing independent financial arrangements.

Counselling and therapy: Counselling and therapy (including group support) for both adults and children, including emotional support.

No Recourse to Public Funds: Not entitled to claim the majority of benefits including housing benefit.

Appendix B - Local Needs Assessment Document

Suffolk Domestic Abuse Accommodation

Needs Assessment

2023-2024

Introduction

As part of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 there is an expectation that all county areas in England and Wales produce an assessment of accommodation need for their county. Suffolk County Council commissioned this needs assessment to inform the safe accommodation commissioning processes.

The needs assessment is based on national and local data and information from October 2023 to September 2024 and compared against previous needs assessment data to analyse longer term trends.

There are several key data sources including commissioned services, health, police, housing and others. This gives a more holistic picture of the nature and scale of need for the people of Suffolk.

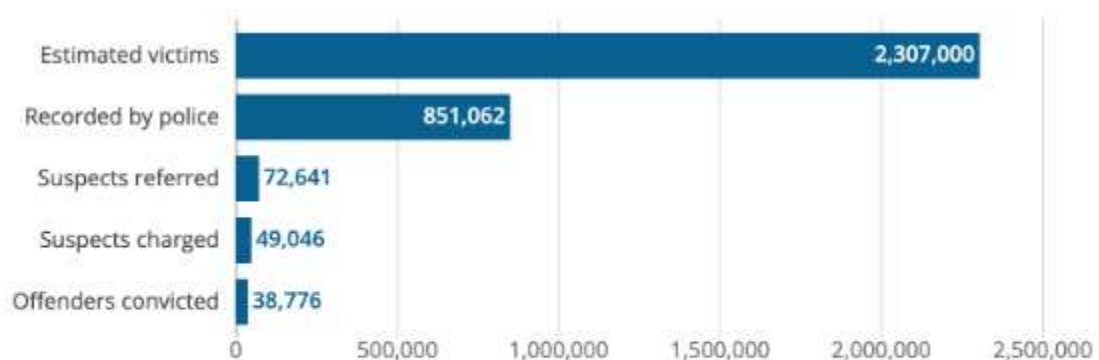
National Overview

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) create an overview of national data and information every six months, the most recent release at the time of writing was to the end of March 2024, covering 12 months of data.

Key Information

- The Crime Survey for England and Wales estimated that 2.3 million people aged 16 years and over (1.6 million women and 712,000 men) experienced domestic abuse in year ending (YE) March 2024.
- There was no statistically significant change in the prevalence of domestic abuse experienced in the last year, compared with the previous year.
- The police recorded 851,062 domestic abuse-related crimes in England and Wales in YE March 2024; a decrease compared with the previous year (911,248), which, in part, reflects recent changes in police recording practices.
- There were 51,183 domestic abuse-related prosecutions in England and Wales in YE March 2024, compared with 51,288 in YE March 2023.

The chart below shows the number of events recorded by all police forces across England and Wales but also shows the estimated levels of Domestic Abuse victims. The chart also shows the number of victims, recorded incidents and the overall number of perpetrators convicted. The chart shows that 4.5% of recorded domestic abuse crimes results in a perpetrator being convicted.



Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales from the Office for National Statistics, Police recorded crime data from the Home Office, and Crown Prosecution Service (CPS)

Demographics

Rural Landscape and Coastal Influence: Suffolk is characterised by its predominantly rural nature, with 40% of its population residing in areas classified as rural rather than urban. This strong rural identity is further enhanced by Suffolk's extensive coastline, stretching over 50 miles and dotted with a mix of large and small coastal towns. These coastal communities contribute to the county's unique character.

Population Growth and Density: According to the most recent census in 2021, Suffolk's population reached approximately 760,000 residents. This figure represents a notable increase of just over 32,000 people (equivalent to a 4.5% rise) since the previous census in 2011. While Suffolk has experienced population growth and a corresponding increase in population density across all its districts and boroughs, it's important to note that the county's population density remains significantly below the national average for England and Wales. Suffolk has approximately 200 residents per square kilometer, while the national average is around 395 residents per square kilometer. This lower population density contributes to Suffolk's rural feel and provides residents with a greater sense of space and openness compared to more densely populated areas.

Geographical Location

Suffolk's diverse geography, encompassing both coastal and rural areas, gives rise to distinct socioeconomic profiles. Coastal communities in Suffolk often experience higher levels of deprivation compared to their inland counterparts. This deprivation can manifest in various ways, including lower average incomes, limited employment opportunities, and poorer health outcomes. While these coastal areas face significant challenges, the picture in Suffolk's rural towns is more nuanced. Generally, rural towns perform relatively well compared to national averages in terms of income, employment, and health, suggesting a degree of affluence and well-being in these areas. However, two critical areas where rural towns fall short of national averages are education and housing. Educational attainment may be lower, potentially due to factors like access to quality schooling or limited opportunities for further education. Housing affordability and availability can also be problematic, with rising house prices potentially outpacing local incomes and a lack of affordable housing options for younger generations or those on lower incomes.

Deprivation as a Risk Factor for Violent Crime: Deprivation, particularly in coastal communities, is a well-established risk factor for young people becoming both victims and perpetrators of violent crime. The strategic needs assessment for Suffolk has identified this link between deprivation and violent crime as a key area requiring focused attention. Several factors associated with deprivation can contribute to this increased risk, including limited opportunities, social inequalities, and exposure to environments where violence is more prevalent. For example, a lack of youth focused clubs and activities or community spaces can contribute to social isolation and a sense of disconnection, potentially increasing the likelihood of involvement in crime.

Furthermore, economic hardship can lead to increased stress within families, which can sometimes manifest in violent behaviour. Addressing the root causes of deprivation, therefore, is crucial in preventing and reducing violent crime among young people in Suffolk's coastal communities. Interventions aimed at improving educational outcomes, increasing employment opportunities, and providing affordable housing are essential components of a comprehensive strategy to tackle this issue.

Sex and Age

Suffolk, according to the mid-2022 population estimate, is home to approximately 768,555 residents. The gender distribution comprises of 51% of the population as females and males making up the remaining 49%. This slight female majority is a common demographic trend in many developed nations. A key characteristic of Suffolk's population is its age profile, which tends to be older than the national average. Suffolk has a higher proportion of residents aged 65 and over compared to the national demographics, indicating a potentially larger population of retirees and older individuals. This aging population has implications for service provision, particularly in areas like healthcare and social care. For example, the demand for services catering to older individuals, such as assisted living facilities and home healthcare, may be higher in Suffolk than in areas with a younger population profile.

Age Distribution within Domestic Abuse Accommodation:

Within domestic abuse (DA) accommodation in Suffolk, a different age distribution emerges. The majority of adults seeking refuge fall within the 26-35 age bracket, followed closely by those aged 36-45. This suggests that individuals in their late 20s to mid-40s are disproportionately affected by domestic abuse, however it could also suggest that older people may be less likely to report abuse. This age range often coincides with family formation and early career stages, highlighting the significant disruption that domestic abuse can cause to individuals' lives during these crucial periods. Furthermore, a large proportion of children residing in DA accommodation are aged between 0 and 5 years old. This significant presence of very young children emphasises the devastating impact of domestic abuse on families and the vulnerability of young children who are exposed to such environments.

The presence of young children in refuge settings necessitates specialised support services tailored to their developmental needs and the trauma they may have

experienced. For instance, access to early childhood education, play therapy, and support for mothers with young children are crucial considerations in these settings.

Ethnicity

A Predominantly White British County with Growing Diversity: Suffolk, while predominantly White British (approximately 87.3%), is experiencing a gradual increase in ethnic diversity, particularly within its urban centres. This demographic shift reflects broader national trends of increased migration and cultural exchange. As Suffolk becomes more diverse, it's crucial to understand the specific needs of its various communities, including those who may face additional vulnerabilities.

Ethnic Representation in Domestic Abuse Accommodation: Data from Suffolk's accommodation and support services shows that the overwhelming majority of adult residents identify as English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British. This finding highlights the fact that domestic abuse affects individuals across all ethnic backgrounds, including those from the majority ethnic group within Suffolk. However, it's essential to acknowledge that this data may not fully capture the experiences of individuals from minority ethnic groups due to potential barriers to accessing services, such as language difficulties, cultural stigma, or a lack of culturally sensitive support options.

Addressing the Needs of All Survivors: While the data highlights the prevalence of domestic abuse within the majority ethnic group, it's crucial to recognise that domestic abuse does not discriminate. Individuals from all ethnic and cultural backgrounds can experience this form of abuse, and their experiences can be shaped by unique factors related to their cultural context and experiences of discrimination. Therefore, it's imperative that services within Suffolk are inclusive and culturally sensitive to ensure that all survivors, regardless of their ethnicity, have access to appropriate support and resources. This includes providing language support, culturally competent staff training, and outreach to underrepresented communities. Further research and data collection are needed to better understand the specific needs and experiences of survivors from diverse ethnic backgrounds within Suffolk to ensure equitable access to support and resources.

Household Structure

Families with Children: Data collected on families residing within domestic abuse (DA) accommodation reveals a diverse range of family structures. A notable 38% of

families in DA accommodation did not have any children, highlighting that domestic abuse affects individuals and couples without children as well. Among families with children, 40% of those within refuge had one child, suggesting that single-child families are a significant demographic seeking refuge. Overall, a clear majority (52%) of families in Suffolk refuges consisted of at least one or more children, emphasising the considerable impact of domestic abuse on families with children.

Separation Status and Housing Background: A significant proportion of individuals seeking refuge, specifically 53% (36 out of 67 individuals), were separated from their partners. This high percentage underscores the fact that many individuals in refuge are actively navigating the complexities of separation alongside the trauma of abuse. Regarding prior housing situations, the data reveals a relatively even split between private renters and those in social housing. Approximately 31% of individuals in DA accommodation were previously private renters, while another 31% had been living in social housing. A smaller proportion, approximately 17%, were private occupiers or homeowners, indicating that domestic abuse can affect individuals across various housing tenures. This data emphasises the diverse backgrounds of those seeking refuge and the need for tailored support to address their specific housing needs and circumstances.

Employment Status

The Economic Vulnerability of Refuge Residents:

The high rate of unemployment among refuge residents paints a stark picture of the economic challenges faced by survivors of domestic abuse. Out of the 67 residents in the refuge, a mere 10 individuals (approximately 15%) were employed, leaving a substantial 57 individuals (approximately 85%) without employment. This significant disparity underscores the profound economic vulnerability that many survivors experience. Several factors may contribute to this high unemployment rate. Leaving an abusive relationship often necessitates a sudden disruption of life, which can include leaving a job due to safety concerns or the need to relocate. Furthermore, the emotional and psychological trauma associated with domestic abuse can make it difficult for individuals to maintain employment or actively seek new opportunities. The abuser may have also exerted control over the survivor's finances and employment, further hindering their economic independence.

This lack of employment creates a significant barrier to leaving abusive situations and rebuilding independent lives. Financial instability can make survivors feel trapped, as

they may lack the resources to secure housing, childcare, or other essential needs. This economic dependence can make returning to an abusive partner seem like the only viable option, even if it poses a significant risk to their safety and well-being.

The road to recovery and independence for survivors often requires not only emotional and practical support but also targeted interventions to address their economic needs. This may include assistance with job searching, resume writing, interview skills, and access to vocational training programs. Addressing the economic vulnerability of refuge residents is crucial for empowering them to break free from the cycle of abuse and build a secure and independent future. It also highlights the need for comprehensive support services that address the multifaceted challenges faced by survivors, including their economic, emotional, and social needs.

Health Needs

Mental Health: A significant proportion of those in accommodation, approximately 42%, were identified as having undiagnosed mental health conditions. In many cases, these conditions were directly related to experiences of trauma, highlighting the profound psychological impact of domestic abuse. It was also observed that a substantial number of individuals were dealing with multiple co-occurring mental health conditions, indicating the complex and compound nature of their needs.

Types of Abuse: The prevalence of various forms of abuse among residents was alarming. A striking 75% of individuals in accommodation had experienced coercive and controlling behaviour, demonstrating the pervasive nature of this type of abuse. In addition, 58% of residents reported experiencing violence, while another 58% had been subjected to psychological abuse. It is crucial to emphasise that the majority of residents had endured more than one type of abuse, highlighting the compounded trauma and challenges they faced.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM): In the year leading up to September 2024, there were no recorded instances where individuals seeking accommodation support specifically requested assistance related to female genital mutilation (FGM).

Conclusion: This data paints a picture of the complex needs of individuals utilising Suffolk DA accommodation services. The high prevalence of undiagnosed mental

health conditions, often linked to trauma, coupled with the widespread experience of multiple forms of abuse, highlights the need for specialist DA services and accommodation support.

Crimes and Incidents

Domestic Abuse Reporting Trends in Suffolk and Nationally:

Suffolk's Reporting Figures: Suffolk experienced approximately 14,000 reports of domestic abuse during the year ending September 2024. This figure represents a 10% decrease compared to the number of reports made in the previous year. While this decline in reported cases might appear positive, it's crucial to interpret such statistics with caution. Fluctuations in reporting levels are common and can be influenced by various factors, including changes in police recording practices, public awareness campaigns, and even external events that might temporarily divert attention from domestic abuse. Therefore, it's essential to consider longer-term trends to gain a more accurate understanding of the situation. Looking at these extended trends, data suggests that the levels of domestic abuse reported to the police in Suffolk have generally been falling for several years.

The Issue of Underreporting: A critical consideration when analysing domestic abuse statistics is the widely acknowledged issue of underreporting. Incidents of domestic abuse are often significantly underreported to the police and other organisations. Many survivors are hesitant to come forward for various reasons, including fear of retaliation from the abuser, feelings of shame or embarrassment, lack of trust in the system, or concerns about the impact on their children. This underreporting means that official statistics likely represent only a fraction of the actual domestic abuse occurring within communities. The true prevalence of domestic abuse is likely much higher than the reported figures suggest.

National Trends: Nationally, data indicates that there was no statistically significant change in the prevalence of domestic abuse experienced in the last year, compared with the previous year (year ending March 2024). This suggests that while reporting levels might fluctuate, the underlying issue of domestic abuse remains a persistent societal problem. The national picture mirrors the challenges faced in interpreting local data, highlighting the importance of recognising the limitations of relying solely on reported figures and the need for ongoing efforts to encourage reporting and support survivors. A comprehensive approach to addressing domestic abuse requires not only responding to reported cases but also working to create a culture where survivors feel safe and empowered to seek help.

Sexual Offenses in Suffolk and Nationally: Reporting Trends and Challenges

Suffolk saw 2,469 reports of sexual offenses in the year ending September 2024, a 7% decrease from the previous year. Similar to domestic abuse reporting, fluctuations are common, but longer-term trends indicate a decline in reported sexual offenses in Suffolk. However, it's crucial to acknowledge the significant issue of underreporting in these crimes. Official statistics likely represent only a fraction of the actual occurrences due to various barriers faced by survivors, including fear, shame, and lack of trust in the system. Of the reported sexual offenses in Suffolk, approximately 19% are linked to domestic abuse, highlighting the intersection of these two forms of violence. A concerning 28% of reported sexual offenses involve the sexual assault of children, emphasising the vulnerability of this group and the devastating impact of such crimes.

Nationally, between October 2023 and September 2024, there were 69,958 reported rapes across England and Wales. A stark reality is the low charge rate for these crimes, with only approximately 2.7% of reported rapes resulting in a perpetrator being charged. This low conviction rate can be attributed to various factors, including the complexities of investigating sexual offenses, evidential challenges, and the length of time it takes for cases to progress through the justice system. On average, rape cases take two years to complete in court, and many cases experience even longer delays, further impacting survivors and potentially obstructing their recovery.

Interestingly, within the population of individuals supported by DA accommodation services, a higher proportion (68%) reported their abuse to the police upon entering refuge, while only 30% explicitly refused to report. This contrasts with the general underreporting trend and suggests that the act of seeking refuge may be a catalyst for some survivors to disclose their experiences to law enforcement. This higher reporting rate within the refuge context could be due to several factors, such as the safe and supportive environment, access to advocacy services, and increased awareness of reporting options. However, it's important to note that this data reflects the experiences of those specifically accessing DA accommodation and may not be representative of all survivors of domestic abuse.

While reported figures for both domestic abuse and sexual offenses in Suffolk have shown some decreases, underreporting remains a significant challenge. The low charge rate for rape cases nationally and the lengthy court process further underscore the complexities of addressing sexual violence. The relatively higher reporting rate

among those in DA accommodation highlights the potential impact of safe and supportive environments on disclosure. A multifaceted approach is needed to address these issues, including efforts to encourage reporting, improve investigation and prosecution processes, and provide comprehensive support to survivors.

Types of Support in Accommodation

Various support is provided to all residents within accommodation in Suffolk during their stay however, the main types of support given:

- Advice and support
- Housing related support and advice
- Referrals being made to other agencies
- Advocacy
- Health
- Programmes and courses
- Financial
- Legal and support at court

The length of stay within Suffolk refuges varies significantly for individuals which have been supported. The most common length of stay for individuals is between 3 – 6 months, closely followed by 12+ months and up to a week.

Domestic Abuse Refuge

A domestic abuse refuge is a safe, temporary, and confidential place for individuals and their children fleeing domestic abuse. It provides emergency accommodation and support services to help survivors escape abusive relationships and rebuild their lives. Here's a breakdown of the key aspects:

- **Safety:** Immediate shelter in a confidential location.
- **Accommodation:** Short-term housing while residents work towards independence.
- **Support:** Tailored services, including emotional support (counseling, therapy), practical support (housing, benefits, legal matters), advocacy, safety planning, and children's services.
- **Confidentiality:** Protecting residents' safety and privacy.
- **Non-judgmental environment:** A supportive space where survivors feel safe and empowered.
- **Empowerment:** Helping survivors regain control of their lives.
- **Referral:** Self-referrals and referrals from agencies are accepted.
- **Staffing:** Trained professionals specialising in domestic abuse.

In essence, a domestic abuse refuge is more than just a place to stay; it's a lifeline for survivors, offering them a pathway to safety, healing, and independence.

Case Study: From Long-Term Abuse to a Brighter Future

Client Background: M, a 53-year-old woman, fled to our refuge in March 2024 from London, escaping a 38-year relationship characterised by financial and emotional abuse. She maintained a close relationship with her two adult daughters. The abuse, which had significantly impacted her mental health, culminated in a physical assault at Christmas 2023, prompting her to seek refuge initially with a relative in Belgium. M had worked at a retail DIY shop, but her income was controlled by her abuser.

Challenges and Initial Support: While in Belgium, M felt overwhelmed and unsure of her next steps. The long-term nature of the abusive relationship and the physical violence she experienced were catalysts for her decision to seek refuge. She was reluctant to leave her familiar area and be separated from her daughters. The prospect of starting over was daunting, and she had resigned from her job, anticipating the move to refuge. M recognised the emotional toll of the abuse, which she had previously normalised, and had increased her anti-depressant medication. She presented with low self-esteem stemming from the prolonged abuse.

The abuse impacted M in several ways: feelings of being overwhelmed by the prospect of starting over, reluctance to leave her established community, concern for her relationship with her daughters, a loss of confidence, and a feeling of isolation due to limited social connections during the abusive relationship. She also faced the challenge of unemployment and the need to rely on benefits while she regained stability.

Upon referral, we provided M with reassurance and practical support, including a food parcel and a voucher for groceries. We listened to her story and focused on ensuring she received appropriate mental health support. We facilitated her registration with a local doctor and supported her application for Personal Independence Payment (PIP), which she was subsequently awarded.

Progress and Empowerment: Initially interested in relocating to Colchester, M decided to remain in Ipswich after settling into the refuge. Crucially, her daughters were able to move nearby, providing her with much-needed support and enabling her to envision a future in the area. M actively engaged with support services, including the Freedom Programme, which helped her understand the dynamics of domestic abuse and recognise that she was not to blame. She also participated in activities within the refuge, such as a journaling course, which she found beneficial for her emotional well-being. Counselling further supported her in processing the abuse and addressing her fears about the future. M even shared her DIY skills, offering advice on upcycling furniture for the refuge.

Recognising the financial challenges of moving on, we applied for funding from the Women's Aid Future Fund and secured £1500 for M to use when she moves into her own accommodation. This funding will be invaluable in helping her set up her new home, particularly with essential items like carpeting.

Current Status and Future Plans: M has gained considerable confidence and a deeper understanding of domestic abuse and its impact. Counselling and journaling have provided her with valuable outlets for self-expression. The proximity of her daughters has given her a strong foundation for rebuilding her life. She is prepared for moving out and, while acknowledging the potential impact on her mental health, feels resilient and ready to move forward. She is currently high on the bidding list for properties and eager to establish her own home. Once settled, she plans to seek employment.

Dispersed Accommodation

Dispersed accommodation is a type of safe accommodation for survivors of domestic abuse. Unlike traditional refuges, which often consist of a communal building or a block of flats, dispersed accommodation involves individual, self-contained properties located within the community.

- **Self-contained properties:** Survivors are housed in individual flats or houses, providing them with greater privacy and independence compared to communal refuge settings.
- **Community integration:** Dispersed properties are located within regular residential areas, allowing survivors to maintain a degree of anonymity and rebuild their lives within the community.

- **Support services:** While living in dispersed accommodation, survivors continue to receive support services tailored to their needs, similar to those provided in traditional refuges. This can include emotional support, practical assistance, advocacy, and safety planning.
- **Flexibility:** Dispersed accommodation can be more suitable for certain individuals or families who may not be able to access or prefer traditional refuge settings. This might include individuals with complex needs, larger families, or those who prefer a more independent living arrangement.
- **Increased privacy and independence:** Residents have their own space and can live more independently.
- **Community integration:** Living within the community can help survivors rebuild their social networks and support systems.
- **Greater flexibility:** Dispersed accommodation can be more adaptable to individual needs and circumstances.

Overall, dispersed accommodation offers an alternative model for providing safe accommodation and support to survivors of domestic abuse, allowing them to rebuild their lives with greater independence and integration within the community.

Case Study: Supporting a Male Survivor of Domestic Abuse

Referral and Initial Contact: J, a highly educated male, presented as a victim of domestic abuse (DA) requiring urgent support. His home was no longer safe due to the presence of the abuser (AP). J needed secure housing and support in several key areas, including exploring work or education opportunities, accessing the community, and rebuilding his social circle. He struggled to comprehend the abuse he had experienced, finding it difficult to accept help and fully understand the dynamics of the situation. Emotionally exhausted and struggling to focus, J also faced the challenge of adapting to changed circumstances and a more limited budget. A critical issue was his need to reconnect with his child, a relationship severed by AP. Furthermore, J's social network had been significantly impacted, as most of his friends were shared with AP, leaving him unsure of who to trust.

Intervention and Support: J was assessed for housing and, due to his precarious situation of sleeping in his car or sofa-surfing, was moved into safe accommodation within 48 hours. A comprehensive support plan was implemented, including:

- Assistance with applications for benefits.
- Signposting to legal aid services to facilitate regaining access to his son.
- Support in accessing community groups to help him occupy his time and rebuild his social connections.
- Provision of safe and secure accommodation.
- Financial guidance to review his finances and reduce outgoings, enabling a more comfortable lifestyle.
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Outcomes and Progress: Since receiving support, J has made significant progress. His confidence has grown, and he is now actively planning for his future. Crucially, he has come to terms with the abuse, recognising that he is not to blame. He has begun rebuilding his relationship with his child and is looking forward to face-to-face visits in the new year (his child resides in Scotland). J has also established new friendships and has discovered that others in his social circle had always disapproved of AP's behavior and are proud of him for leaving the abusive situation. He has even received support from AP's family.

Current Status: While still rebuilding his life, J is in the process of applying for social housing to secure his own property. He is currently safe and secure, focused on his future with his son and his developing network of friends. Ongoing housing support and support from the Domestic Abuse Outreach Service (DAOS) remain in place.

Sanctuary Scheme (Target Hardening)

A Domestic Abuse Sanctuary Scheme is a program designed to help survivors of domestic abuse remain safely in their own homes. It recognises that sometimes the safest option is not to flee, but to enhance security and support within the existing home

Focus on safety: The scheme prioritises the safety of the survivor and any children in the home. It operates on the principle that the perpetrator is the one who should leave, not the victim.

Security enhancements: Trained professionals assess the property and install security measures to make it more difficult for the abuser to gain access. These measures can include:

- Upgraded locks on doors and windows
- Security lighting
- Door chains and peepholes
- Window alarms
- CCTV systems

Support and advocacy: Beyond physical security, Sanctuary Schemes provide crucial support services to survivors, such as:

- Emotional support and counselling
- Advocacy and assistance with legal matters
- Safety planning to minimise risks
- Links to other support services

Collaboration: These schemes often involve a multi-agency approach, with collaboration between local authorities, police, domestic abuse charities, and other relevant organisations.

Case Study: Enhancing Security and Safety for a Domestic Abuse Survivor

Referral and Initial Contact: A client was referred to our service by Leeway on June 28, 2024. We contacted her within 24 hours to address her urgent security needs and alleviate her fear of the perpetrator and their associates.

Client Background: The client is a homeowner with two children. She had experienced a range of abuse, including sexual violence, controlling and coercive behavior, and stalking. The referrer noted that the perpetrator had criminal connections, and the client expressed significant concern about potential repercussions following her police report.

Needs Assessment and Security Enhancements: Our engineer conducted a two-hour on-site assessment of the client's home. He discussed her specific concerns and provided comprehensive security and safety advice. The client highlighted her worries about the property's doors and inadequate lighting.

To address these vulnerabilities, the following security upgrades were implemented:

- All locks were replaced.

- Security lighting was installed at the front and rear of the property.
- Window alarms and a door chain were fitted.
- A personal attack alarm was provided.
- Our engineer also assisted with the installation and setup of the client's existing video doorbell.

Beyond the physical improvements, our engineer advised the client not to leave keys in the doors and to keep wheelie bins secured behind a locked garden gate to prevent their use for climbing.

Outcome and Client Feedback: The security enhancements significantly improved the physical safety of the client's home. On the client feedback survey, she stated that she felt safer and that the security products were appropriate. She also added a comment expressing her gratitude: "Thank you very much. Very helpful, kind, and friendly."

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