

**Initial findings from research project
Women’s safety in the asylum support system**

Contents

1. About this study	1
1.1 Methodology	
2. The scale of the problem	3
2.1 Disclosures of domestic abuse	
2.2 Asylum Support Policy	
2.3 Barriers to reporting abuse	
3. Navigating the asylum support system – responses to domestic abuse	8
3.1 The asylum support system: an overview	
3.2 Access to asylum support	
3.3 Women living on asylum support	
3.4 Access to support after refusal of asylum	
3.5 Domestic abuse after grant of status	
4. Need for advocacy	22
5. Draft recommendations	23

1. About this study

Since February 2018, we have been exploring the extent to which current Home Office asylum support policies keep women who disclose or are at risk of abuse, safe from harm.

As noted below, this work has been commissioned as part of ongoing advocacy around Violence Against Women and Girls with the Home Office and other stakeholders.

Gender-based violence suffered prior to arrival in the UK is often a feature of women’s claims for asylum. However, this project considers the forms of violence and abuse that women can face during their time in the UK.

The focus of this paper is domestic abuse. Abuse from partners, ex-partners and other family members is part of a wider spectrum of gender-based violence that includes: sexual violence, sexual exploitation, and other forms of exploitation including domestic servitude. The full research report will include findings relating to these multiple types of abuse.

Woman who identify as LGBTQI+ including trans-women are firmly included in our analysis; and we suggest that the safety considerations outlined are applicable to all applicants who identify as women and live within, try to access or exit, the asylum support system.

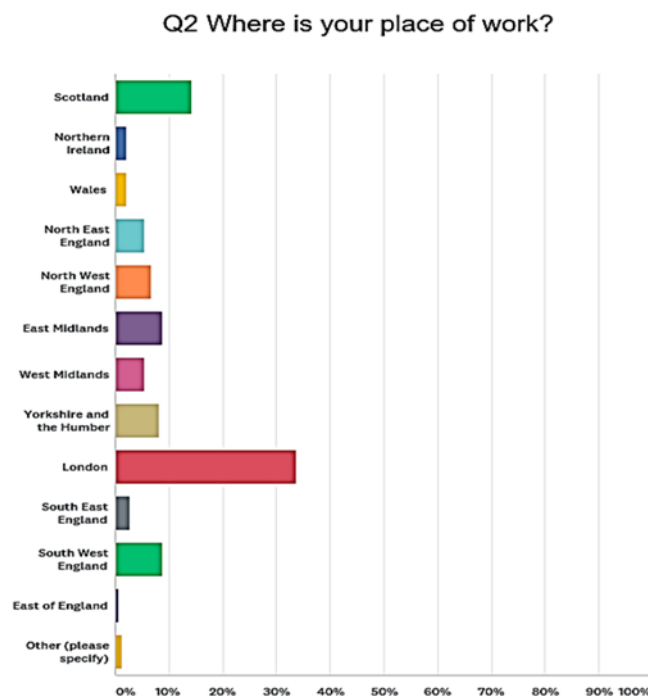
1.1 Methodology

These initial findings are drawn from two datasets. The first are the results of a survey, distributed via email, to all members of the Asylum Support Appeals Network of organisations and advisers around the UK.

152 people responded to our survey, the majority of whom worked within specialist refugee organisations (52 respondents) or for charities working with refugees amongst other client groups (57 respondents).

Only 22 respondents (14%) were working within services that had a focus on women seeking safety from domestic abuse or other violence. Despite this, almost 50% of respondents deal with disclosures of domestic abuse once a month or more.

Responses were gathered from across the UK, giving our findings a geographical spread that has enabled us to identify common patterns across the different 'dispersal regions' where the Home Office accommodates and supports asylum claimants. The highest number of respondents were based in London (35%) and Scotland (14%), with the responses from all other regions being 10% or under.



Additional data have been drawn from a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with subject specialists who volunteered for interview having completed the survey. Interviewees were asked to reflect upon two to three cases involving women who disclosed that they were at risk from domestic abuse or other forms of harm.

To date, thirteen interviews have been conducted in a variety of locations around the UK. Data from these interviews is presented below in quotes, or through detailed individual case studies.

All case studies have been fully anonymised to safeguard the confidentiality of individual women.

2. The scale of the problem

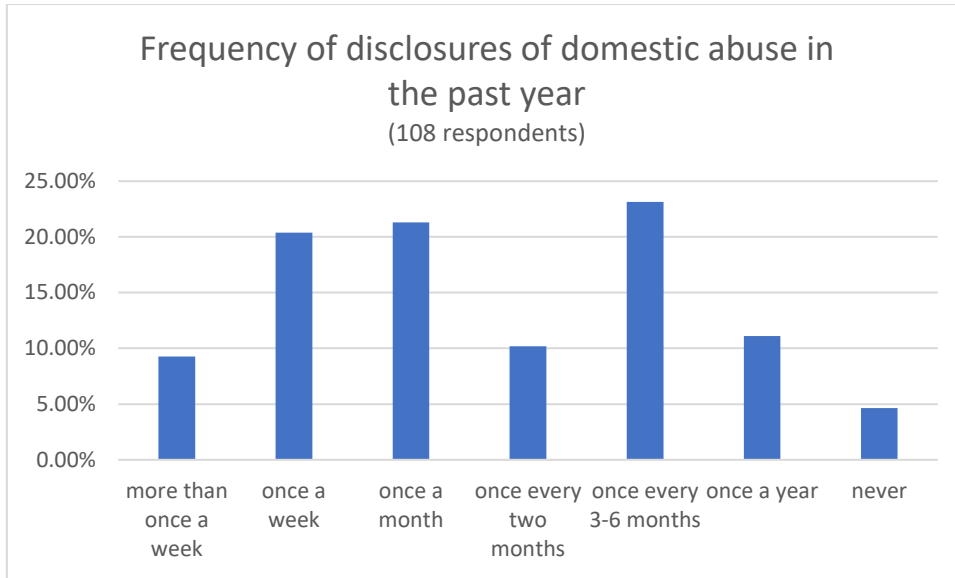
Key findings

- Over 50% of respondents to our survey dealt with disclosures of domestic abuse once a month or more in the past year.
- Almost 10% of these respondents dealt with disclosures of domestic abuse more than once a week.
- Women disclose that they are at risk from domestic abuse at all stages of the asylum support process.
- Women can face other forms of gender-related harm, including sexual violence and sexual exploitation, at all stages of the asylum support process.
- Women asylum claimants may face particular barriers when disclosing and seeking safety from domestic abuse.

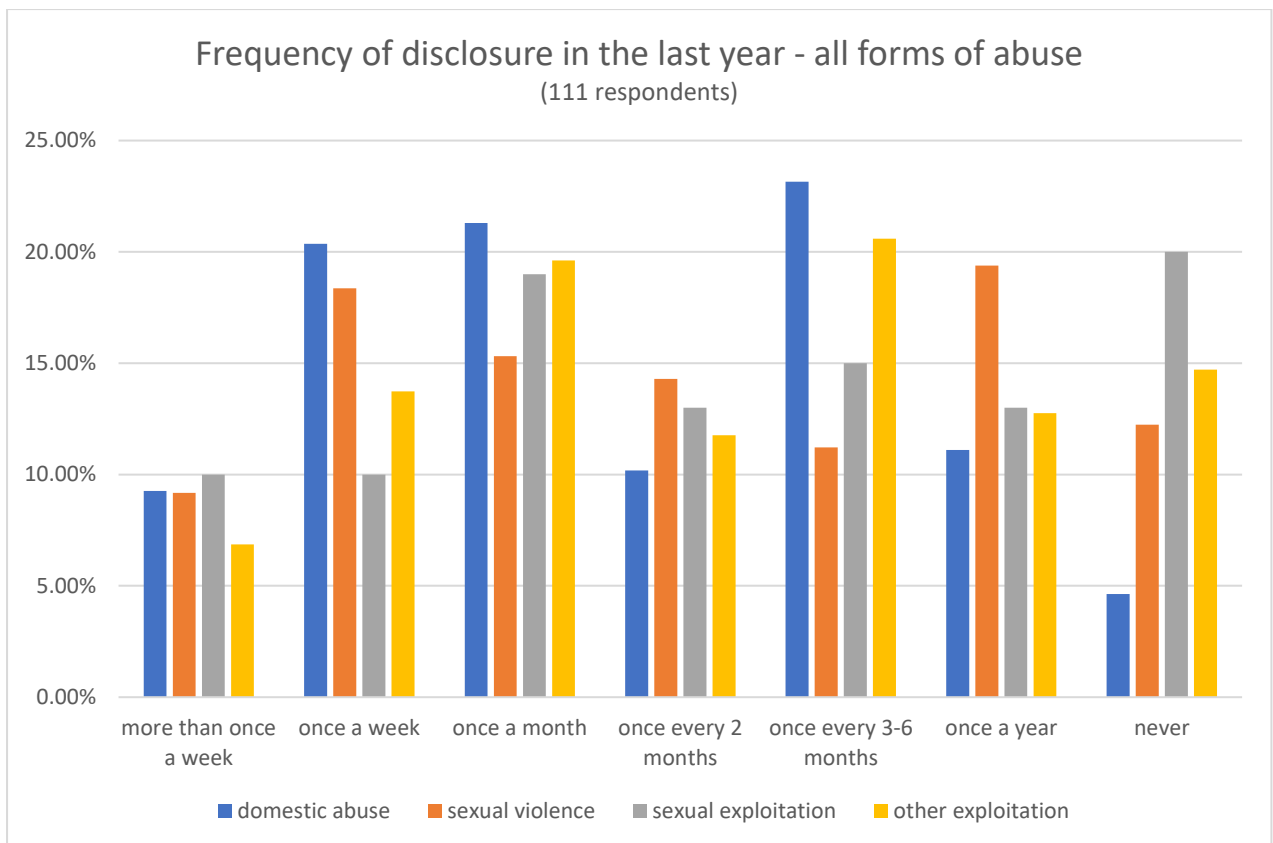
We asked practitioners from a range of organisations across the UK how often, if at all, they dealt with women asylum claimants who disclosed that they had suffered, or were still at risk, from domestic abuse in the UK. Their responses are summarised below.

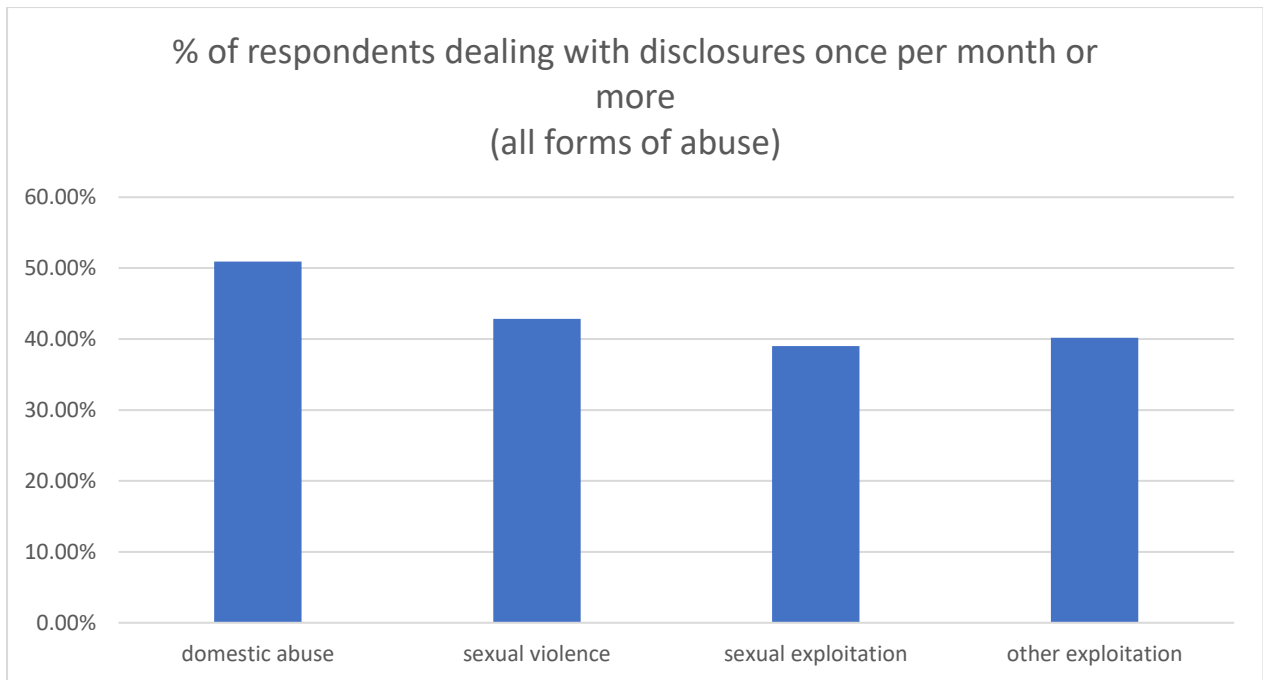
2.1 Disclosures of domestic abuse

Just over 50% of respondents to our survey told us that they dealt with disclosures of domestic abuse at least once a month. Almost 10% of respondents dealt with such disclosures more than once a week.



While not the focus of this paper, it is useful to note that at the upper end of the scale, disclosures of all forms of abuse identified in our study occur at comparable levels of frequency.





We note here the potential links between these different types of abuse and harm, for example between domestic servitude and exposure to sexual violence and abuse. This underlines the importance of taking a holistic view of women’s past and current experiences when assessing their safety, particularly in the context of forced migration.

“There was one woman, she came, was put with a family [...] she was looking after children and at night the husband was taking advantage of her, she can’t tell the wife because of fear of getting kicked out ... they pass [her] to another family, when children reach school age, she is no longer needed, pass to other family, sexual abuse by other men or by husbands of family, and no family there to help her. It’s like a uniform experience of abuse. They have no privacy, they live in the living room, any man who is hanging around in that accommodation exploits them ...”

(Interviewee 13)

2.2 Asylum Support Policy

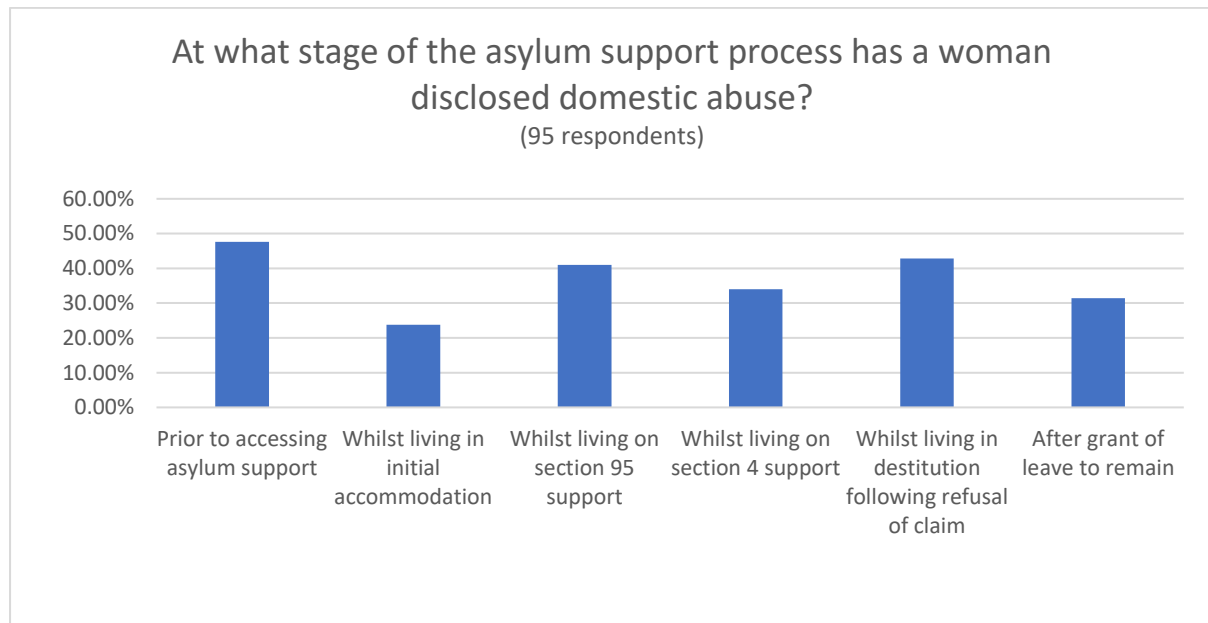
Chapter 23 of the Home Office’s Asylum Support Policy Bulletins Instructions provides asylum support caseworkers with guidance in dealing with cases where women disclose domestic abuse.

Since 2014, ASAP, Refugee Council and other stakeholders have been working with the Home Office with a view to expanding this guidance. A revised version of the relevant asylum support policy was put out to consultation in March 2017 and there are ongoing discussions with the Home Office around this. We hope that our research findings can inform the final version of the policy.

The current guidance primarily concerns the procedures to follow for women who are already living within asylum accommodation.

However, the survey findings indicate that disclosures of domestic abuse can occur at all stages of the asylum support process. Domestic abuse, and other forms of violence, can put women asylum claimants at risk before they are in receipt of asylum support¹, and after they exit the asylum support system.

It is therefore crucial that the Home Office, and other relevant agencies, do everything possible to assess and minimise risk to women, and where applicable, their children, at all of the stages we outline below.



2.3 Barriers to reporting abuse

While our findings reflect the experiences of women who were able to report abuse, we are aware that women from all backgrounds and cultures may find it difficult to disclose abuse and seek help from external agencies to exit abusive situations.

EU-wide data suggest that, of the one in five women who have experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetime, only 14% of women reported their most serious incidence of intimate partner violence to the police².

Women seeking asylum, and other women subject to immigration control, may face additional barriers that impede or prevent them from accessing services and seeking safety. This was confirmed by our interviewees. We summarise these additional barriers below.

- Lack of awareness of legal systems and rights in the UK

“It’s difficult for a woman with good English to understand how all different services coordinate...it’s just more complicated ... if you put all the new domestic violence

¹ For clarity, while we recognise that women with different types of insecure immigration status -e.g. spousal visas – may experience and flee domestic abuse; in this project we focus only on women who have lodged a claim for asylum or are in the process of doing so.

² <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2014/violence-against-women-eu-wide-survey-main-results-report>

policies into the criminal justice system, migrant women lose out because you're presuming that they're ok to use criminal justice system but [for] most of them it's too scary because of implications about immigration, whether police listen to them as opposed to husband who has better English ..." (Interviewee 7)

- Coercive control by perpetrator based on woman's lack of immigration status

"there have been incidents, there was domestic abuse but ...woman not reporting it...it's like it's because both parts are difficult, they'd rather stay with it and belong to the perpetrator because of the fear of being sent back home and perpetrator using that as a huge power game, 'I'm going to phone Home Office and tell them and they'll send you back' ... and when they have no family and no support and are faced with that controlling behaviour, it's very difficult..." (Interviewee 8)

- Fear of reporting abuse due to mistrust of authorities and fear of removal

"I saw this woman and she said in the beginning that she did not want me to contact the Home Office as she was terrified it would go against her asylum case, I tried to reassure her that they're quite separate, asylum support and asylum, immigration...quite separate but she didn't want me to get the Home Office involved..." (Interviewee 12)

- Health issues, particularly mental health and the impact of trauma

"she's quite switched on and her English is reasonable but because of her trauma it's difficult for her to advocate for herself" (Interviewee 9)

"People are not getting their needs met, from a mental health perspective, making them very vulnerable, if there is conflict in the house or any kind of abuse, they are not given any space at all to deal with what has historically happened ... level of mental health support nowhere near sufficient [...] to deal with things they have experienced ..." (Interviewee 11)

- Shame and guilt

"... it was a forced marriage... For her she thought this is the only man I can have, I'll dishonour my family if I don't accept ... this particular woman did leave him but had to carry all the shame and guilt and there was no recourse to refuge or anything like that. A lot of the presenting issue is 'I'm being punished because I have left this man, how am I going to be presented as a woman?' (Interviewee 8)

3. Navigating the asylum support system – responses to domestic abuse

Key findings

- Applications for support from women experiencing or at risk of abuse are subject to long delays with little evidence that their applications are being prioritised.
- Staff at the Asylum Screening Unit in Croydon do not appear to systematically take into account women's vulnerability to ongoing abuse and harm when assessing destitution.
- Women experiencing abuse already living within the asylum support system are, in some cases, able to access alternative Home Office accommodation.
- However, there are inconsistencies in the application of existing policies on domestic violence, particularly by accommodation providers.
- Our data suggests that women asylum claimants are rarely able to access refuge provision.
- Assessments of women's safety in alternative accommodation rarely, if ever, consider women's access to services including health care and schooling for children; nor their potential isolation in new dispersal areas.
- Even women who are personally resilient and capable for advocating for themselves often require specialist assistance to access their rights and find safety.
- Women who are living in destitution following refusal of their asylum claim are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.
- Women who are left homeless when asylum support ends following a grant of refugee status are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

3.1 The asylum support system: an overview

Since April 2000, asylum claimants in the UK are excluded from accessing public funds. Permission to work is only granted in exceptional circumstances and allows access only to jobs on the UK's shortage occupation list.

People who have claimed asylum in the UK, and who would otherwise be destitute, can apply to the Home Office for provision of asylum accommodation and/or financial support.

"Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 enables the provision of support to asylum-seekers or dependants of asylum-seekers who appear to the Secretary of State to be destitute or be likely to become destitute within 14 days.

An asylum seeker is defined as a person who has made a claim for asylum which has been recorded by the Secretary of State but which has not been determined.”³

A system of initial accommodation, provided under Section 98 of the 1999 Act, enables people to be housed while their applications for section 95 support are under consideration:

“Section 98 of the 1999 Act provides that the Secretary of State may provide or arrange for the provision of support for asylum seekers or dependants of asylum seekers who appear to the Secretary of State to be destitute or likely to become destitute pending the consideration of their support application under Section 95 of the 1999 Act.”⁴

Initial accommodation can be made available to certain categories of people who have not yet registered their claim for asylum, including:

“asylum seekers whose individual needs appear to require special consideration”⁵

People whose asylum claims have been refused but who have applied to return voluntarily to their country of origin or who, for one or more reasons accepted by the Home Office, cannot be expected to return, may be eligible for limited, non-cash support under Section 4 of the 1999 Act.

For all forms of support, claimants will be expected to provide proof that they are destitute.

Given this legislative backdrop, we use the data from this project to explore the reality of trying to access, live within or exit the asylum support system, for women who are at risk from domestic abuse in the UK.

3.2 Access to asylum support

The findings indicate that there continues to be a lack of uniform good practice when women who escape domestic abuse seek to enter the asylum support system.

We highlight some of the continuing issues below.

3.2.1 Access to the asylum procedure

Women will only be able to enter the asylum support system if they have an ongoing claim for asylum. Women who wish to lodge a claim for asylum must attend a Home Office 'screening interview' in person. Attending such an interview is a prerequisite for access to the asylum support system.

Most screening interviews take place at the Home Office's Asylum Screening Unit in Croydon. People who are immediately destitute, or at risk of destitution can in theory 'walk-in' to the Asylum Screening Unit on any given week day without making a prior appointment.

³https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/487402/Asylum_Support_Policy_Bulletin_Instructions_Public_v7.pdf

⁴https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/487402/Asylum_Support_Policy_Bulletin_Instructions_Public_v7.pdf

⁵ Idem.

Those who have some support available to them are encouraged to make an appointment in Croydon prior to attending. There is provision for screening interviews to be conducted more locally, on appointment, if safeguarding or other issues of vulnerability are raised, although advocacy is usually required to achieve this.

Where women disclose that they are fleeing an abusive relationship, we have found some evidence of good practice, including procedures that enable local screening, so women avoid having to travel long distances on their own, sometimes with their children:

“The safeguarding team at the Home office have responded well and given the woman “a vulnerable women's appointment” to claim asylum locally instead of London”
(Survey respondent 134 – North West England)

However, the criteria for enabling a woman to claim asylum at a local location, rather than at the Asylum Screening Unit, do not appear to be consistent or transparent:

“[There is] no pattern to people being screened ‘locally’ - no pattern, we can’t look at criteria as to why some go to [local Home Office unit] and some go to London.”
(Interviewee 2)

One interviewee noted that even if referring agencies successfully arrange for screening to take place locally due to safeguarding concerns, system delays in her region leave women who have children reliant upon support from social services, themselves overstretched in terms of budget:

“the whole process takes many weeks sometimes months and this means social services are not always willing to pay for them in NRPF accommodation ...”
(Interviewee 7)

A survey respondent noted that it is not always accepted at the Asylum Screening Unit that a woman is in fact destitute. This can lead to women being turned away without a screening interview being carried out, in turn leaving them without recourse to any asylum support provision.

“Women who have been turned away by the Asylum Screening Unit when attempting to claim asylum on the day as they are not deemed destitute and therefore not eligible for a walk-in appointment... This is an area of concern as gatekeeping at the ASU can result in potential victims of trafficking and vulnerable asylum seekers being left at risk of exploitation.”

(Survey respondent 26, London)

3.3.2 Access to the asylum support system

Even if women are able to lodge their asylum claims at the Asylum Screening Unit, Martha's story illustrates the problems that women may face if they are not deemed to be 'destitute' when, having made a claim for asylum, they request entry to Initial Accommodation.

Martha - September 2017

Martha, a woman aged 25, had been in the UK for a number of years, living with her spouse who was abusive.

She escaped the abuse and went to live with an aunt in another city. When she first contacted a voluntary sector agency for support, she was unsure of her immigration status. After seeking legal advice, she was advised to claim asylum. At this time, her aunt stated that she could no longer afford to support or accommodate her.

The voluntary sector agency assisted Martha to travel to Croydon to make her claim for asylum. Martha was given a one-way bus ticket from charitable funds and provided with a letter clearly stating that she had experienced domestic abuse and so, although she had been in the UK for some time, did not have accommodation or financial support available to her.

Despite this, after screening, Martha was not offered initial accommodation. Instead she was told to make her way back to her aunt's home. Martha had to beg on the streets in Croydon to find money to pay for a ticket to return.

Martha was only able to avoid street homelessness through the intervention of advocacy workers and friends. No statutory safety net was made available to her, despite having disclosed a history of abuse.

More generally, whether at the Asylum Screening Unit or within the Home Office asylum support teams that assess applications for support, there appears to be no evidence that priority is given to women who have escaped an abusive situation.

"If it's an Initial Accommodation request to get the woman out of a dangerous situation we have had mixed responses. Usually Initial Accommodation has been granted immediately but on a couple of occasions the Home Office have questioned whether the woman is essentially making it up in order to get accommodation.

When we have been applying for section 95 or section 4 support and have raised safeguarding of a woman as an issue it does not seem to result in the application being looked at any quicker." (Survey respondent 91, North West England)

"We raised that a woman was experiencing domestic violence from her extended family with whom she lived, and there was a risk of escalation if they discovered she had claimed asylum. Sought s.95 accommodation on this basis and asked the Home Office never to send correspondence to the client's home address. Home Office

refused s.95 accommodation and (despite repeated requests by letter and over the phone) sent a further 5 letters to the client's home address. The Asylum Support Tribunal found that the client was experiencing domestic violence and should be granted s.95 support.” (Survey respondent 39, London)

Given that the process of establishing whether a woman has an ongoing asylum claim is relatively rapid, we can assume that these delays and barriers stem from the Home Office's processes for assessing whether a woman is destitute. There is little evidence of any concession being made with regards to evidencing destitution where women have been victims of abuse.

“I worry that it takes so long and the information that female clients are required to provide - a letter from host, proof of host's utility bills, tenancy agreements for clients. This is extremely off putting to someone who is living in fear and being exploited. Is it really necessary that a woman has to provide all these documents?”

(Survey respondent 41, London)

“they will still ask the same questions to prove destitution as someone who's not experienced [gender-based violence] – historical address history, financial history [...] if somebody who has been trafficked and slaving in house, how do they know all the details you are looking for? [Do you need] a supporting letter from the abuser?”

(Interviewee 13)

3.3 Women living on asylum support

Asylum Support Policy Instruction Bulletins – Chapter 23

The accommodation provider must ensure that a victim and any children are transferred to alternative accommodation that is safe and secure.

The accommodation provider does not require prior consent from the Home Office in order to transfer a victim and any children to alternative accommodation that is safe and secure for them, when the victim believes they cannot in the interests of their safety return to their previous accommodation.

Women who have, despite the barriers described above, managed to access financial support and accommodation through the asylum support system, benefit from some protection from domestic abuse through specific provisions within the Home Office's current Asylum Support Policy Instruction Bulletins.

3.3.1 Responsiveness to immediate safety concerns – an inconsistent approach

In many of the case recounted to us, immediate safety concerns around a woman, and where applicable her children, focused on the need for her to access safe, alternative accommodation. Our initial findings confirm that some women can, and do benefit from swift moves away from abusive situations:

“Several times a woman has raised concerns after fleeing domestic violence and the woman has not felt safe in her accommodation. Of what I can recall Home Office has moved her every time I have raised concerns”

(Survey respondent 84, Scotland)

“We have raised concerns when a woman is at immediate risk and needs accommodation to mitigate against the risk. When the woman has been in Home Office accommodation they have been reasonably quick to respond and also [accommodation provider] have been quick to respond to move a client who is at risk (eg when there’s DV in the relationship).”

(Survey respondent 91, North West England)

“In cases of domestic violence, where perpetrators are also accommodated in asylum support, we have found that the safeguarding response has been quick in terms of changing accommodation”

(Survey respondent 29, East Midlands)

“They offered to rehouse the victim and made sure children were protected and safe”

(Survey respondent 47, North West England)

There is some evidence that even where perpetrators are not living with the victim, but belong to the wider community or family, the Home Office will work with partners to ensure a woman’s safety through offering relocation.

Erica – 2015

Erica was studying in the UK when she became aware that her family wished to force her into marriage.

She sought asylum on that basis. The Police were involved with her case and supported her to seek legal remedy against the forced marriage.

Shortly after Erica was placed into asylum support accommodation, the Police and accommodation provider became aware that people from her home country had been seen in her area, asking about her whereabouts.

The asylum accommodation provider immediately arranged for Erica to move to another location. Erica’s safety needs were prioritised several times by the agencies involved in her case.

However, there were indications that in some cases, particularly where there may be a lack of ‘proof’ of abuse, that women, and sometimes children, are not always moved as soon as a relocation is requested.

The contrast between Erica’s case – where the Police, Home Office and accommodation provider worked together to ensure her safety; and Asma’s situation, as recounted below, is striking:

Asma - 2017

Asma had claimed asylum as part of a family unit, with her husband as the main applicant both for the asylum claim and for asylum support.

When Asma first presented to a local drop-in service, run by a specialist voluntary sector agency, she explained that she wished to get her own asylum support, separate from her husband. It was only during later conversations that Asma disclosed she had been experiencing domestic abuse.

Although the agency to whom disclosure was made alerted the Home Office to the domestic abuse, Asma was unwilling to report this to the Police or to a Women's Aid agency. The Home Office requested proof of the abuse before granting any relocation.

Asma remained in the abusive relationship for several months, unable to exit the situation. She was unwilling to escalate the matter to the Police, and therefore could not obtain the 'proof' of abuse required by the Home Office.

Finally, Asma's children's school alerted social work to problems within the family. It was only once social work contacted the Home Office that a move to another dispersal region was arranged. The move to another region was exactly what Asma had requested initially.

Throughout the time that she was pursuing her independent claim for asylum support, Asma's husband was using intimidatory tactics to try to prevent her from leaving the family home with their children.

As Erica's caseworker commented:

"The police were in the contact with the Home Office. If the police understand the dangers and take it seriously, they have had a really good impact on the Home Office, but as you can see in other cases where the police have not been on board or not understood the dangers, then the response is not so good. Erica had so many different people and support. That was really helpful – my worry is that it is not really often that women have so many." (Interviewee 5)

Certainly, our findings tend to show that swift action to safeguard women is not consistently taken.

Concerns around a lack of responsiveness to reports of domestic abuse, and an incomplete understanding of existing policy, appear to be particularly acute with regards to the role of accommodation providers.

"Generally, we have found that safety concerns raised with subcontractors are escalated as incidents to Home Office as subcontractors report they cannot take action to make any changes to accommodation unless authorised by Home Office." (Survey respondent 26, London)

“Reported risk of domestic violence and [asylum] accommodation providers advised that we should talk to the Home Office. They recorded the incident, but no further action was taken.”
(Survey respondent 54, East Midlands)

“Serco generally say that we have to contact the Home office to get a woman moved who is danger from violent partner or family.”
(Survey respondent 134, North West England)

“High risk DV concerns, I requested a relocation due to a significant safeguarding risk to the mother and her 2 children. It took a lot of chasing to get the relocation request looked at and around 10 days to get them moved.”
(Survey respondent 30, London)

3.3.2 Beyond immediate safety needs – sustainable solutions?

- *Access to refuge provision*

Asylum Support Policy Bulletins Instructions – Chapter 23

If an accommodation provider receives a request for help from a victim of domestic violence, and the victim and any children need alternative accommodation, the provider should offer alternative safe accommodation immediately. This accommodation is to be offered on the condition that their transfer must be reported to the Home Office (merely for the purpose of keeping a record of how accommodation is allocated). If, exceptionally, this is impracticable, or does not accord with the preference of the victim for accommodation with support, then the provider should either refer the victim to a refuge or consult with the local authority about the action to take

We are aware that women from all backgrounds may struggle to access specialist refuge spaces after exiting abusive situations⁶.

However, our findings confirm that asylum claimants are rarely, if ever, able to access or even contemplate refuge spaces.

“I have never had a case where woman was able to access refuge as an asylum seeker.”
(Interviewee 6)

A crucial barrier appears to be that the, albeit limited, provision of the Home Office’s current asylum support policy on domestic violence in regard to access to refuges is not widely known, externally and internally. The result is that women in the asylum system are perceived as being ineligible for refuge support.

“I tried to get her into specialist domestic abuse South East Asian domestic violence refuge, initially I was told that because she had No Recourse to Public Funds they couldn’t do that.”
(Interviewee 7)

“Until recently (I think) there has been no provision for women to be able to move to Refuges. The support and safety that can be provided by a refuge should not be

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/jan/22/why-womens-refuges-cant-afford-more-cuts-life-death>

restricted to those with recourse to public funds, it is dangerous and leaves women in risky situations.” (Survey respondent 91 – North-West England)

Lack of access to refuge provision can leave women, living in dispersal accommodation that is typically ‘known’ in the wider community, vulnerable to further abuse from the perpetrator:

“Woman with NRPF cannot access refuge accommodation. It is very difficult sometimes when there are no safe choices. I have had experience when a partner was moved from asylum accommodation, but they kept on going back to persuade the woman to take them back.” (Survey respondent 152, Scotland)

Women are also unable to benefit from the specialist services provided by refuges.

Another interviewee noted that agencies external to the asylum support process may perceive that women who have been accommodated in alternative Home Office accommodation, including Initial Accommodation, are safe and so do not require any further advocacy around their living conditions:

“It’s really unusual for women to access specialist accommodation, usually [initial accommodation] is considered a place of safety [...] other services do have the perception that it is a supported hostel, which it isn’t, it’s a living accommodation and that’s about it really but other services seem to have [a] perception that it is staffed 24/7, women have a key worker, they are getting therapy, but it’s not that sort of hostel ...” (Interviewee 4)

Given that Initial Accommodation, in some regions, is provided in mixed sex hostels; and that perpetrators and other community members may have lived there previously, or otherwise know of the address, this assumption is particularly erroneous. Despite this, Initial Accommodation does indeed appear to be a typical ‘alternative’ accommodation option offered to women exiting abusive situations. We explore the implications of this below.

- *Initial accommodation – safe, alternative accommodation?*

Asylum Support Policy Bulletins Instructions – Chapter 23

It is preferable that a victim seeking alternative accommodation should not resort to using Home Office Initial Accommodation.

Current asylum support policy discourages the use of Initial Accommodation to accommodate women fleeing domestic abuse.

Our survey respondents and interviewees raised particular concerns around the appropriateness, in certain IA provision, of mixed sex environments for women who have suffered previous gender-based violence.

“I have supported women who would like to apply for accommodation through the Asylum Support system and who are told to apply for S98 accommodation - the women are too scared to take this accommodation offer and have remained in a potentially exploitative or vulnerable situation to avoid Initial Accommodation.”

(Survey respondent 34)

“There are no women only spaces to enable women’s safety. Mixed sex environments can be problematic with high prevalence of sexual violence experiences.”
(Survey respondent 32-London)

It would seem though that women who are already living on asylum support will typically be offered a space in Initial Accommodation, at least initially, as is evident in Indira’s case, below.

Indira’s story - 2016

Having fled abuse in a situation of domestic servitude, Indira was accommodated by the Home Office. Indira had poor mental health and had attempted suicide in the past.

Indira raised concerns that people from her country were stalking her and knew where she was living.

An advocacy worker from a specialist charity helped Indira to report her concerns to the Police and to the Home Office. However, this led to Indira, at very short notice, being moved to Initial Accommodation in another dispersal region:

“she was very upset [...] It was from one day to the next. She was put in a van with other people who I guess were going to be moved [...] she was all of a sudden in a hotel with men [...] She was terrified, crying because she was so stressed and upset and people knew exactly where she was. I tried to do contact the Home Office but it is really difficult to get hold of the safeguarding team [...] it didn’t matter how many times I called or emailed.”

Indira’s case also highlights the limited conception of ‘safety’ that appears to be employed by the Home Office, and accommodation providers, when moving women to alternative accommodation.

- *Moving regions*

It may well be that, as in Asma’s case above, a woman feels that she will only be safe in a region far away from her previous abuser. However, there is little evidence from our findings that women who disclose domestic abuse benefit from an individualised, holistic assessment of their circumstances. Instead, women who are living on asylum support will, if believed, most frequently be moved to a different ‘dispersal’ region, with little or no effort made to connect or reconnect her, and any children, to the services she might need.

“[It] is an issue with women being moved to other areas far away when they are deemed not being safe as they are removed from support networks and being isolated which increase women’s vulnerability.” (Survey respondent 84 - Scotland)

June – 2017

June was living in asylum accommodation. Her partner, who was a UK national, was abusive. He had been able, on at least one occasion, to enter her asylum accommodation and physically assault her as the lock was not secure.

Following the assault, June received specialist advice from a local charity, and was referred into the MARAC process by the Police. Her advocacy worker contacted the Home Office and her accommodation provider to request that she be moved into alternative accommodation within the same dispersal region, as her son was attending nursery and June had a college place.

“[accommodation provider] would say they would move her but couldn’t guarantee it would be in same area so she just wasn’t confident enough to do that, she didn’t want to move away from the little support that she did have ...”

The Home Office and the accommodation provider were unable to confirm that June could remain in her dispersal region. June chose not to pursue a relocation request and remained in her accommodation.

“It’s a blanket policy, they said ‘yes, we’ll move her but on our terms so anywhere’ [...] there’s more at stake for women asylum seekers, they have so little support as have no family... they’re even more isolated [...] it shouldn’t be a random thing that you lose everything to protect yourself ...”

Similarly, while the Home Office’s current domestic violence policy bulletin recommends that a case conference be convened to involve women and agencies supporting them in decisions around their future support arrangements, there was little if any evidence that the Home Office or accommodation providers have any standard procedure for taking into account the views and experiences of outside agencies, let alone of women themselves:

“I would just like [them] to take everything into account, not just physical safety [...] Every time they have moved anyone that we haven’t been able to prevent, we are trying to get hold of other women’s organisations so that they have some support network but it is really important to understand that - it is safety in a different kind of meaning. And very often, these women are suicidal and the last thing they need is to feel completely isolated and alone in a new place.” (Interviewee 5)

- *Partnership working & onwards referrals*

Beyond sourcing alternative accommodation, our initial findings provide little evidence of women being referred by accommodation providers or the Home Office to appropriate services for ongoing support following disclosure of domestic abuse.

“They are acting [...] in terms of putting someone into safe accommodation but anything to follow that, there doesn’t seem to be a very clear guidance for staff ... in terms of referring them to third sector like ourselves, thinking of referring to other agencies in terms of signposting or referring to social work, they think their job is done as soon as they take that person out of that accommodation, but what is the support for that person? Financial support, lawyers, any of those kind of things... it’s not definitely implemented automatically.” (Interviewee 13)

Sohail – late 2017

Sohail and her son had been living in the UK for some years with Sohail’s partner, who was abusive. Sohail had complex health conditions but was repeatedly prevented from seeking health care by her husband.

When she managed to leave her husband, Sohail was assisted by social work and a local charity to lodge a claim for asylum. Although she was working with a legal representative and a support worker in one city region, after claiming asylum she was transferred to Initial Accommodation 50 miles away. She was later dispersed to a region over 100 miles from where she had initially sought support.

Her advocacy worker from a specialist refugee charity has attempted to link her into services in her new region, but with limited success.

“I was trying to get her support, I was keeping in contact with her all over the phone ... but she has very little English, all issues around domestic violence that have never been dealt with properly ... most of the support was around practical issues of getting to doctors, getting to drop-in and things like that, sorting out food bags etc...”

She’s missed out on the emotional support [although] she had horrendous years with her husband in very abusive relationship...”

As in Sohail’s case, and in many of the other case studies we have encountered, much of the multi-agency liaison is undertaken by voluntary sector agencies who themselves are stretched in terms of resourcing and geography.

“it’s me who arranges the meetings with the local councillor and Police liaison officer, we do so much stuff that’s helping them, if they listened to us it would make their lives easier as well...” (Interviewee 11)

3.4 Access to support after refusal of asylum

“if a woman doesn’t have children and becomes a failed asylum seeker, the battle begins then, without fresh new evidence, without case being reconsidered, you’re destitute, you’re on the street and vulnerable to exploitation of every kind.

Unfortunately, the system puts people in a situation where they’re desperate and they’re vulnerable ... As a woman you’re particularly vulnerable and that can lead you down any path, trafficking...if you don’t have a support system, anything can happen to you...”

(Interviewee 6)

The focus of this project is on women who are trying to access or are living within the asylum support system.

However, we recognise the substantial evidence from previous studies that the Home Office's policy of removing asylum support from people without children if their asylum claims are fully refused, leaves women in an extremely vulnerable position with regards to the strategies they may need to use to survive on the streets⁷.

Our interviewees reiterated concerns about women's vulnerability to all forms of abuse and exploitation if they are unable to access the asylum support system.

"I did have a woman once that sticks in my mind, [...] this particular woman came and said she was sleeping with men to get a roof over her head" (Interviewee 12)

These concerns persist even where women are in fact eligible for section 4 support, where as we noted above, there appears to be no priority given to the assessment or processing of women's claims for support, even where they have a clear and documented history of abuse and harm.

Alice – 2017

Alice separated from the father of her child in 2014 due to domestic abuse. She subsequently lived in accommodation provided by a 'friend' who later started to harass her. When she reported him to the Police, he stopped paying for her rent and she was evicted.

Although Alice had been refused asylum, she and her daughter were admitted to Initial Accommodation and asked to complete an application for section 4 support.

Alice applied for section 4 support via Migrant Help. Detailed evidence of the abuse that she had suffered at the hands of the father of her child was submitted at the time of her application. She also supplied proof that due to outstanding proceedings around child custody in the family court, she could not leave the UK.

The Home Office asked Alice to provide further information two times. She sent this promptly on both occasions, but six weeks after applying for support, her application was refused. The refusal letter gave no indication that the Home Office had considered the particular vulnerability of Ms A and her daughter, either in the processing of the application or the refusal itself. The refusal letter gave no indication that the Home Office had considered the particular vulnerability of Ms. A and her daughter, either in the processing of the application or the refusal itself.

Ms. A appealed against the refusal of support. With help, she successfully argued that the Home Office had, in fact, been sent all necessary evidence to support Ms A's destitution. Alice was granted support two months after she first applied.

⁷ <http://www.options.co.uk/sites/default/files/rr-coping-with-destitution-survival-strategies-uk-040211-summ-en.pdf>

3.5 Domestic abuse after grant of status

“the move on period from [asylum support] accommodation does not provide enough time to access mainstream benefits and housing support - homeless refugee women [are] at greater risk of violence” (Survey respondent 117 – London)

Asylum support is designed to cease 28 days after a person is granted refugee status or another form of leave to remain. This is known as the ‘move on period’. In this time, newly granted refugees are expected to apply for, and access, mainstream benefits and find suitable housing. A body of research has shown that this is an insufficient length of time if homelessness and destitution is to be avoided.⁸ The majority of refugees will, at this stage, have to present as homeless to their Local Authority, despite the fact that this homelessness is in many ways entirely predictable⁹.

Recently granted refugees can, despite their personal resilience, therefore find themselves in a uniquely vulnerable situation at the point at which they exit the asylum support system. Since 2011, the government have ceased to fund specialist integration support for refugees, leaving people to navigate the complexities of the benefits and homelessness system largely on their own¹⁰.

“I think a lot of the women that are granted leave to remain, refugee status, because it’s been a long period of going through the system, a few have said to me they’re more stressed than they’ve ever been, battling this system that is just so complicated, it’s really difficult for them to access services”. (Interviewee 3)

Research from Ireland highlights the ‘hidden homelessness’ that many migrant women, including refugees, can experience, with migrants more likely than other groups to rely on friends and acquaintances during periods of homelessness¹¹. For Awet, this left her open to abuse.

⁸ https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0003/1769/28_days_later.pdf
https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0003/7935/England_s_Forgotten_Refugees_final.pdf
https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0004/1546/Refugees_without_refuge_September_2017.pdf

⁹ http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0001/1142/Full_Integration_Report_June_2016.pdf
https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0004/1432/Refugees_without_refuge_Sept_2017.pdf

¹⁰ The voluntary sector do have specialist projects – for example, Scotland’s Refugee Integration Service, and the Refugee Council’s Holistic Integration Service. However, there is no UK-wide, government funded support available for refugees.

¹¹ <http://womenshomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Migrant-women-and-homelessness.The-role-of-gender-based-violence.pdf>

Awet's story – 2016

Awet is a young woman in her early 20's who sought advice from a specialist refugee charity as soon as she was granted refugee status by the Home Office. She really wanted to go to university and get a job.

She was homeless because her asylum support and accommodation had ended. She was unable to access temporary homeless accommodation as she wasn't considered priority need and was placed on the waiting list of women's hostels in her locality.

During this time, she was sofa surfing with people in her community. One night, while at the house of someone with whom she was sofa-surfing, she was raped and as a result became pregnant.

Awet was then assisted to make a homelessness application to the local council and they accommodated her because she was pregnant. But her plans have been put on hold because she is now a single parent of a child.

“this is something that sadly I've seen happen quite a lot with homeless young female clients, they are sofa surfing and become pregnant ... it's very difficult for them to talk about the circumstances, I interpret it to be that they're in a really vulnerable position, they don't have the same control over their circumstances as if they had their own room and own bed to sleep in...”

4. Need for advocacy

The case studies we cite above illustrate not just gaps in current asylum support policies and their application; but the fact that women require often extensive advocacy to find safety from abuse.

The Home Office do fund specialist asylum support advice, delivered by one national voluntary sector partner. However, this service is provided via a national telephone advice line with very limited face to face advice. This telephone service model has clear limitations when it comes to dealing with complicated and sensitive cases involving abuse.

The over-riding finding from our current data is that, to ensure that current procedures are consistently applied and women are able to find safety, lengthy and in-depth advocacy is regularly required. This is often provided by very busy front-line charities around the UK. In our survey responses they consistently highlighted the time-consuming and intensive nature of the advocacy work required in these cases.

“The policies and procedures are not consistently applied. Any deviation as a result of safety concerns is not welcomed and/or able to be resolved through practices and procedures. More often than not - the status quo for all asylum seekers prevails unless a woman has access to specialist resource.”

(Survey respondent 79-Scotland)

“It’s quite a process to go through, not easy to get, it’s so complicated that without someone supporting you I don’t know how people manage it themselves really ...”

(Interviewee 12)

“Many women have little understanding of their rights, and without strong advocacy, find it extremely difficult to access the support they need, challenge bad decisions and leave harmful environments [...] people who have the weakest voice will be least able to access the support they need.” (Survey respondent 50-London)

The lack of awareness of the current domestic violence policy by all agencies, both charitable and statutory and including the Home Office itself, exacerbates the time and resources required to deal with these cases. As a result, as highlighted above, when a woman presents with critical safety issues the support system struggles to react in an appropriate manner.

Women experiencing abuse are always likely to require advocacy to help them navigate the asylum support system and other avenues of support and advice. However, improved Home Office procedures on this issue, embedded in the culture of the asylum support teams and publicised to stakeholders, would go a long way to reducing the stretched time and resources currently spent on these cases. More importantly, they would result in a safer response to women and children themselves.

5. Draft recommendations

a) Publication of a revised Home Office policy that addresses the domestic violence and abuse experienced by asylum seeking women, as a priority.

The revised Home Office policy should provide an effective and consistent response to domestic abuse at all points of the asylum support journey. This can be achieved through:

- Prioritising support applications, or requests to change the support package, from asylum seeking victims of abuse.
- Providing guidance on sensitive and safe decision making on support cases when abuse is a factor.
- Ensuring that the views of victims and the professionals supporting them are given full consideration when decisions are taken about how to respond. This will support safe and sustainable outcomes for victims in the longer term.
- Allowing prompt access to safe emergency housing (including through the funding of refuge places for asylum seeking women) at all stages of the asylum support process.
- Including safeguards for women experiencing, or at risk of DV, who have recently been granted refugee status and are transitioning into the mainstream welfare benefits system.

b) Implementation of a Home Office programme of awareness raising & training around the published revised policy, with a focus on Home Office asylum support caseworkers, staff at the Asylum Screening Unit, and contractors within the asylum support system.

c) Implementation of a Home Office awareness raising exercise around the revised policy for statutory agencies and the DV specialist sector. This could be led by the Home Office Safeguarding Hub.

d) Ongoing and transparent Home Office monitoring of the revised policy including, as a minimum, the recording of numbers of reported cases of abuse and the geographical locations of the cases.

For further information, please contact:

Alice Webb, Asylum Support Appeals Project (ASAP): Alice@asaproject.org.uk / 020 3716 0284 ext 202

Anna Musgrave, Refugee Council: anna.musgrave@refugeecouncil.org.uk / 020 7346 1031