

Train companies to offer free travel to those fleeing domestic abuse during coronavirus lockdown

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People fleeing domestic abuse anywhere in Britain during the coronavirus lockdown can apply for free train travel to refuge accommodation, through a partnership between train companies and Women's Aid.

- Train companies announce they will cover the cost of train tickets for anyone travelling to refuge accommodation while coronavirus lockdown measures are in force, in a joint initiative with Women's Aid.
- Announcement comes in response to campaigners reporting an increase in domestic violence reports since coronavirus lockdown measures came into force.
- The industry-wide scheme follows the successful launch of similar initiatives by Southeastern and GWR prior to the coronavirus outbreak.

The commitment from rail companies comes as campaigners report a rise in requests for help from victims of domestic abuse since coronavirus lockdown measures came into force. Between 26th March and 1st April, Women's Aid experienced a 41% increase in users visiting their Live Chat site, compared to the previous week. The Women's Aid COVID-19/Coronavirus advice page for survivors has had 27,000 page views since its launch.

The 'Rail to refuge' scheme was first introduced by Southeastern in 2019. The initiative was proposed by one of the train operator's station managers, Darren O'Brien, after he watched a *Dispatches* documentary about Reigate and Banstead Women's Aid. Train operator GWR joined the 'Rail to refuge' scheme last month as part of its celebration of International Women's Day at the beginning of March.

Already, these schemes have helped a number of people, and their children, escape domestic abuse and begin a new life away from their perpetrator.

People escaping domestic abuse are usually advised to seek refuge services at a considerable distance from their perpetrator, but for many, raising the cash to pay for a train ticket can be very difficult. This is especially true for people experiencing economic abuse, who may have no access to cash.

The 'Rail to refuge' scheme aims to remove this barrier by offering free train tickets for women or men, and their children, to travel to a recognised refuge. From today, survivors can access the tickets through the member services of Women's Aid Federation of England, Welsh Women's Aid, Scottish Women's Aid and Imkaan, once they have received an offer of a refuge place. Members of these organisations can book the tickets via a bespoke booking system for the people they are referring to, or receiving in, their refuge accommodation.

Nicki Norman, Acting Chief Executive of Women's Aid, said: "Free train travel for women fleeing to refuge anywhere in the country could not come at a more important time. It could be lifesaving for countless women and children and we are delighted by the announcement.

"During the pandemic, women and children trapped with a perpetrator are incredibly vulnerable as the lockdown has already shut down common routes to safety and support. When you pair this with the increased economic uncertainty being experienced by many, escaping abuse is more difficult than ever but we hope that this initiative can help those most in need."

Jac Starr, chief operating officer at the Rail Delivery Group, which represents train operators and Network Rail, said: "The railway is much more than trains and tracks – for many it is about connecting people and places, and for some it is a lifeline in difficult circumstances.

"So, we are only too pleased to be able to offer this vital service to people in need across the rail network. At this time of national crisis, the rail industry is committed to working together not only to keep trains running for key workers and vital freight, but to support the most vulnerable people within the communities we serve."

Southeastern station manager, Darren O'Brien said: "I was extremely moved by the *Dispatches* documentary and asked whether we at Southeastern could do anything to help. When we introduced the

'Rail to refuge' scheme last year, we knew that it was only a small thing for us but would make an enormous difference to women escaping domestic abuse. It's fantastic that other train operators are following in our footsteps."

Emma Rawlings, Chief Executive Officer of Swindon Domestic Abuse Support Service who have used the service three times, said: "Rail to refuge has already proved to be a lifesaver, helping several victims and their children to places of safety. We are already seeing a large rise in calls during this COVID-19 crisis and it is more important than ever we can access this essential travel service quickly."

Photo credit: Great Western Railway