

Train operators to extend lifesaving travel scheme

March 24, 2021



The 'Rail to Refuge' scheme, which was due to end next week, is being continued by train companies to help more people escape domestic abuse and reach a safe refuge. The decision comes as figures show four survivors a day, on average, have been using the lifesaving scheme to access free train travel.

Rail to Refuge is a joint initiative between rail companies and Women's Aid in which train operators cover the cost of train tickets for women, men and children travelling to refuge accommodation. Since April 2020, train operators have provided free tickets to 1,348 people, including 362 children over five, equivalent to four survivors travelling to safety each day on average.¹

Free travel can be a lifeline for people fleeing abuse who may not have access to cash. Almost two-thirds (62%) of people who used Rail to Refuge said they would not have travelled if the journey had not been paid for.²

Rail to Refuge was first introduced by Southeastern in September 2019, after one of their station

managers, Darren O'Brien, watched a Dispatches documentary 'Safe at Last' about Reigate and Banstead Women's Aid. GWR joined the scheme in March 2020 to offer free travel on its routes as part of its celebration of International Women's Day.

All train operators in Great Britain took up the initiative on 9 April 2020, initially for the length of the first lockdown, before extending it until the end of March 2021.

Train companies have now decided to continue Rail to Refuge as reports show that abuse has worsened during coronavirus restrictions. Two-thirds (67%) of survivors currently experiencing abuse say that their abuser has started using lockdown restrictions or the Covid-19 virus and its consequences as part of the abuse.³

Many survivors have experienced years of economic abuse, and it is common for a perpetrator to control access to money leaving survivors with nothing.⁴ This restricts their practical ability to escape when they may have to travel considerable distances to get away from their abuser or because of a lack of local provision.

Women's Aid estimates that in 2019-20, refuge services in England supported 10,592 women and 12,710 children, but demand is even higher.⁵

Andy Bagnall, Director General of the Rail Delivery Group, said: "Train operators have provided lifesaving travel to four survivors every day through the Rail to Refuge scheme, and it's right that we keep it going for those who sadly still need it. Rail staff are continuing to work hard helping survivors of domestic abuse with free train travel, while supporting all our passengers to feel safe on their journeys."

Farah Nazeer, chief executive at Women's Aid, said: "Women face many barriers when escaping an abuser. Leaving your home because you and your children are not safe is a massive undertaking. Additionally, leaving the abuser is a dangerous time with a huge rise in the likelihood of violence after separation, so it needs to be done as safely as possible, with support from expert refuge services.

"Many women and children have to travel long distances to escape their abuser. There remains a serious shortage of refuge spaces, so it is vital that women are not prevented access to safety in a refuge by the cost of travel. In addition, many survivors have experienced years of economic abuse and will not have access to a bank, credit card or even cash. Women tell us that they cannot afford to leave because the perpetrator has controlled their money and they have none of their own.

"We are delighted that train companies have worked with us to remove a significant barrier to people escaping abuse. The Rail to Refuge scheme will continue to be lifesaving for hundreds of women and children, and it is incredibly welcome news that it has been extended."

In a specially recorded video message to celebrate the scheme Her Royal Highness The Duchess of Cornwall, a longtime advocate for victims of domestic abuse, said: "Lockdown has been hard for everyone, but for the survivors of domestic abuse, it has been life-threatening. I'm delighted to hear that Britain's train companies are extending the Rail to Refuge scheme for longer to provide free travel to a safe refuge

for those fleeing domestic abuse. If you need help, contact Women's Aid for support and access to the Rail to Refuge scheme."

Rebecca Hirst CEO of Pennine Domestic Abuse Partnership (PDAP) said: "Our client fled London with her four children to the safety and support of our refuge in Kirklees. She would not have been able to travel across the country to the safety of a refuge if it had not been for the Rail to Refuge scheme. She had been subject to physical, emotional, and economic abuse and had no access to money or her own bank account. Without the support of Rail to Refuge, she and her children would have found it incredibly difficult to travel to Kirklees and access safe accommodation. The scheme has made an extraordinary difference to survivors, and the flexible and timely support provided by train operators has been lifesaving."

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said: "I support every effort to counter the insidious and heinous crime of domestic abuse. Rail to Refuge has helped hundreds of survivors to reach safety by removing the financial barriers that prevent escape.

"Extending this vital support is truly lifesaving and I thank all those working so hard to help keep people safe on our railways."

Survivors of domestic abuse who would like to access the scheme, or need other support, can get in touch with Women's Aid through their Live Chat service, open Monday – Friday, 10:00am – 4:00pm, Saturday and Sunday 10:00am – 12:00pm: <https://chat.womensaid.org.uk>⁶

If you would like to contribute to help survivors access the lifesaving support they need and help them reach refuge, please make a donation today: www.womensaid.org.uk/rail-to-refuge.

Helplines:

- In England: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/>
- In Scotland: Scotland's Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline, available 24/7 on 0800 027 1234 or via email and web chat at sdafmh.org.uk
- In Wales: Live Fear Free helpline available 24/7 0808 80 10 800 <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/>
- Respect: Male victims of domestic abuse can call the Respect Men's Advice Line on 0808 8010327 or visit: mensadvice.org.uk
- Imkaan: <https://www.imkaan.org.uk/>

1. Train operators provided 1,348 free train tickets as part of the Rail to Refuge scheme between 9 April 2020 and 14 March 2021. Survivors can access the tickets through the member services of Women's Aid Federation of England (including Respect, which runs the Men's Advice line), Welsh Women's Aid, Scottish Women's Aid, and Imkaan, once they have received an offer of a refuge place.
2. In answer to the question: 'Would the person have travelled if the journey wasn't paid for?' which was asked for all 965 Rail to Refuge bookings, responses were: Yes – 24%, No – 62%, Not sure – 8%, Didn't answer – 6%
3. Two-thirds of survivors identifying as currently experiencing abuse (66.7%, 46 out of 69 answering the question) told Women's Aid that their abuser had started using lockdown restrictions or the Covid-19 virus and its consequences as part of the abuse. (Women's Aid June 2020 Survivor Survey, reported in *A Perfect Storm*)
4. Nearly a third (31.9%) of survivors surveyed in 2018 said their access to money during the relationship was controlled by the perpetrator. (*The Domestic Abuse Report 2019: The Economics of Abuse*). In addition a 2015 report found that 52% of women surveyed who were living with an abuser couldn't afford to leave because they had no money of their own. (*Unequal, Trapped & Controlled, Women's Aid and TUC*).
5. In 2019-20 Women's Aid estimates that refuge services in England supported 10,592 women and 12,710 children and community-based services supported 103,969 women and 124,762 children. Demand is still higher than the provision available, with 57.2% of refuge referrals declined during the year – 18.1% of all referrals were turned down due to lack of capacity in the refuge. (*The Domestic Abuse Report 2021 : The Annual Audit*)
6. Women's Aid reported a 41% increase in users visiting its instant messaging Live Chat site within the first two weeks of lockdown in March 2020 and as a result extended its opening hours to 10am – 4pm daily. Respect, which runs the Men's Advice Line, has increased service hours from 46 to 75 hours weekly to support male victims, after seeing a huge increase in demand since March 2020.

Photo credit: Rail Delivery Group