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**Title:**

**Redefining safety: a narrative review of literature on the underground and open or 'Dutch' models of refuge**

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**Abstract**

*This article synthesises literature on the evolution of domestic abuse (DA) refuges, with particular attention to the development of two models: the conventional or 'underground' refuge (UR) and the open or 'Dutch' refuge. The article will detail what the available evidence says about the benefits and drawbacks of these models and explore their implications for the DA sector in England, with reference to extending women's space for action and meeting the needs of underserved victim-survivors.*

*The article argues that multiple models of provision are needed to meet the intersecting, complex and at times competing needs of different victim-survivors, and that available evidence provides preliminary support for the viability of the open model as part of a wider suite of responses to DA. Further research is needed to extend the evidence base on the open model, and to develop a whole system approach which can meet the needs of a wider range of victim-survivors.*

**Key messages:**

1. No single model of refuge is suitable for all victim-survivors; a range of options is crucial
2. Data regarding the open or Dutch model of refuge is encouraging but sparse. More research is needed to develop the evidence base and assess its applicability in an English context
3. The introduction of a statutory duty for Tier 1 English Local Authorities to fund supported DA accommodation is promising; local commissioning should be undertaken in consultation with specialist DA services and informed by the evidence base on national as well as local need to avoid perpetuating inequities in provision

**Key words**

**Key words/short phrases:**

**Domestic abuse, intimate partner abuse, refuge, VAWG sector in England,  
Domestic Abuse Act 2021**

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*Redefining safety: a narrative review of literature on the underground and open or 'Dutch' models of refuge*

## **Redefining safety: a narrative review of literature on the underground and open or 'Dutch' models of refuge**

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### **Key messages for policy and practice**

- No single model of refuge is suitable for all victim-survivors; a range of options is crucial
- Data regarding the open or Dutch model of refuge is encouraging but sparse. More research is needed to develop the evidence base and assess its applicability in an English context
- The introduction of a statutory duty for Tier 1 English Local Authorities to fund supported DA accommodation is promising; local commissioning should be undertaken in consultation with specialist DA services and informed by the evidence base on national as well as local need to avoid perpetuating inequities in provision

### **Introduction**

The threat, and actuality, of gendered violence continues to shadow women and girls' daily lives and limit their freedoms. Crime survey data for England and Wales suggests lifetime DA prevalence rates of around one in four, with 24.7% of female respondents reporting that they had been subject to some form of physical or sexual abuse by a partner since the age of 16 (Crime Survey for England and Wales, 2019). In 2020-21 alone, Women's Aid data shows that 10,809 women and 11,890 children accessed refuge services and a further 124,044 women and 148,852 children received community-based services (Women's Aid, 2022). Further, DA is a

1 significant contributor to forced internal migration and homelessness in England  
2 (Bowstead, 2018; Bretherton & Pleace, 2018).

3  
4 Refuge and other crisis accommodation are crucial for women experiencing  
5 DA because poverty itself is gendered and racialised; women in England are more  
6 likely to be poor, have lower levels of savings and wealth than men, and have unpaid  
7 caring responsibilities which may limit their ability to take on more or better paid work  
8 (Reis, 2019). Evidence also suggests that Black, Asian, and other racially minoritised  
9 women are subject to intersecting economic disadvantage, more likely than their  
10 white counterparts to live in poor households, and have substantial unpaid caring  
11 responsibilities (Ibid). Refugee and migrant women with no recourse to public funds  
12 are uniquely vulnerable, with reduced access to refuge or other forms of crisis  
13 accommodation (Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 2021).  
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16  
17 There have been recent legislative strides in securing women's right to  
18 freedom from gendered violence, such as the passage of the Domestic Abuse Act  
19 2021. The Act places a statutory duty on Tier One Local Authorities in England to  
20 fund supported emergency accommodation for those fleeing DA. With this move, the  
21 relationship between the DA refuge sector and local authorities is further narrowed,  
22 potentially heralding a move away from precarious and fragmented funding streams  
23 but raising questions about the future autonomy and specialisation of the DA  
24 accommodation sector.  
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28 In light of the historic opportunities afforded by the Domestic Abuse Act, and its  
29 potential ramifications for the specialist DA sector, this article considers the extent to  
30 which multiple models of refuge provision could contribute to the development of a  
31 more inclusive accommodation 'offer' for victim-survivors in England. Additionally,  
32 the article examines whether the open refuge model, and the extended concept of  
33 safety it embodies, addresses issues that are intrinsic to the 'underground' model.  
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36  
37 The article begins by outlining the statutory definition of DA enacted in the Domestic  
38 Abuse Act 2021 and explaining why, for historical and empirical reasons, authors will  
39 depart from this 'official' definition by specifically focusing on female victim-survivors  
40 of DA perpetrated by an intimate partner. Authors discuss the emergence of DA  
41 refuges in England in the 1970s, examining the wider social forces and cultural  
42 context that necessitated their development. The article then discusses the divergent  
43 models of refuge that are the subject of this review, exploring their import and  
44 implications for policy and practice, and arguing that multiple models of provision and  
45 an evidence-based whole-systems approach is needed to meet the intersecting,  
46 complex, and competing needs of different victim-survivors.  
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## 50 **Background**

51  
52 The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 (England and Wales only) established a cross-  
53 government statutory definition of DA, which formally recognises non-physical forms  
54 of abuse such as controlling and coercive or economically abusive behaviours  
55 (Home Office, 2022). This cross-government guidance is designed to mobilise a  
56 coordinated response to DA across government departments and agencies,  
57 including statutory and non-statutory bodies.  
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1 DA as defined by the Domestic Abuse Act encompasses any incident or  
2 pattern of behaviour which constitutes:

- 3 “(a) physical or sexual abuse;  
4  
5 (b) violent or threatening behaviour;  
6  
7 (c) controlling or coercive behaviour;  
8  
9 (d) economic abuse [...]  
10  
11 (e) psychological, emotional, or other abuse” (Domestic Abuse Act, 2021)  
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16 To be classified as DA, the incident or pattern of behaviours must involve two  
17 people aged 16 or over with some form of “personal connection”, including familial or  
18 (ongoing or previous) intimate relationships (Ibid).  
19

20 Notably, this statutory definition for England and Wales differs in significant  
21 respects from those employed in other UK nations, as enacted by the Domestic  
22 Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 and the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act  
23 (Northern Ireland) 2021. The Scotland Act adopts a gendered definition of DA, and  
24 defines DA as physical or non-physical abuse perpetrated by a current or former  
25 intimate partner, while the Northern Ireland Act explicitly alludes to a course of  
26 conduct which is intended, or may reasonably be anticipated, to harm the victim.  
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30 Meanwhile, the statutory definition outlined in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021  
31 removes the important contextual factors defined in the Scottish and Northern Irish  
32 Acts. In contrast to definitions of abuse developed by DA practitioners and  
33 researchers, this definition is gender-neutral and context-insensitive, applicable to  
34 individual acts as well as courses of conduct, familial as well as intimate  
35 relationships. Critics of earlier cross-government definitions argue that this  
36 “incidentalism”, and the conflation of abuse occurring within different relational  
37 contexts, acts to obscure the gendered nature of DA (Kelly & Westmarland, 2016).  
38 Persistent, coercively controlling, sexually violent and physically injurious DA is  
39 overwhelmingly perpetrated by men against women (Walby & Towers, 2018; Myhill,  
40 2017) – “Less than 5 per cent (4.5 per cent) of victims report almost half (48 per  
41 cent) of all domestic violent crimes; these victims are women” (Walby & Towers,  
42 2018: 19). Critics also argue that this type of definition elides important differences  
43 between abuse perpetrated by a partner or former partner and family member/s  
44 (Kelly, 2014).  
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51 Equally, when discussing the evolution of DA refuges, it is important to locate  
52 their emergence in historical context. Refuges arose in response to the abuse victim-  
53 survivors were fleeing, and the economic and social inequalities that conspired to  
54 trap women in abusive relationships and legitimise their subordination. The feminist  
55 activists who established the first refuges did so to provide a safe space for “battered  
56 women” (Schechter, 1982), often while facing apathy or hostility from police,  
57 statutory agencies, and local communities (Hague, 2021; Pizzey, 2014). This will be  
58 discussed in more detail later in the article.  
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Therefore, while acknowledging that people of any gender can experience, or perpetrate, DA, and that relational dynamics and patterns of behaviour classifiable as DA arise in familial contexts, this article will situate the discussion of the UR and open refuge models in relation to the accommodation and support needs of female victim-survivors who have experienced ongoing DA by an intimate partner (or former partner).

However, authors recognise that women are not a unitary category of person with homogenous needs: victim-survivors' experiences of abuse and help-seeking are shaped by multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination and disadvantage, including ethnicity, class, sexuality, gender identity/reassignment, and disability (Crenshaw, 1991). In a UK context, migrant survivors face significant structural violence associated with migration status, navigating an "increasingly complex landscape of immigration policy and practice" (Farmer, 2017: 357). Similarly, there is a dearth of ringfenced funding for expert 'by and for' services for racially minoritised victim-survivors (Imkaan, 2018). When exploring the merits of different models of refuge, authors will take these intersecting needs and vulnerabilities into account.

### **Current study**

This article builds on selected findings from a scoping review commissioned as part of a wider evaluation of local refuge provision (Adisa *et al*, 2020). The scoping review investigated prevailing models of refuge in England, gaps in English refuge provision, and alternative models of refuge which have been trialled nationally or internationally.

This article will explore and develop the findings regarding two refuge models identified during the scoping review: the conventional or 'underground' model and the open or 'Dutch' model. Other accommodation models for DA victim-survivors identified during the scoping review, but outside the scope of this article, include dispersed or satellite accommodation (Magić & Kelley, 2021) and sanctuary schemes (Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance, 2020).

This article will discuss the emergence of the underground and open refuge models, assessing whether the open model represents a viable alternative, or complement, to the more culturally familiar UR. This review is timely considering the recent introduction of a statutory duty regarding accommodation-based support for DA victim-survivors, which obliges upper tier local authorities to assess, and make provision for, local needs (Domestic Abuse Act 2021). This legislative change represents a historic opportunity, potentially facilitating a move away from competitive, piecemeal, and short-term funding and towards a more holistic and sustainable approach. However, it could also result in further genericisation of the violence against women and girls (VAWG) sector and deepen existing inequalities in funding allocation, which particularly disadvantage 'by and for' services, and heighten barriers to access for Black, Asian, and other racially minoritised victim-survivors (Barter *et al*, 2018; Imkaan, 2018).



1 Further, an ongoing shift to localism and 'place-based' (Worrall & Leach, 2018)  
2 approaches to funding and commissioning may not consider that some victim-  
3 survivors will not be able to safely access the DA services they need in their local  
4 area and will need to cross administrative boundaries to find safety and/or the right  
5 support (Bowstead, 2015). Early feedback from Women's Aid Federation of England  
6 (WAFE) services points to "considerable variation in how this duty is being  
7 implemented in different areas" (Women's Aid, 2022: 5), including a lack of  
8 consultation with specialist DA providers in some areas (Women's Aid, 2022). To  
9 avoid returning to a "postcode lottery" of provision, commissioners must not work in  
10 silo or towards a 'one size fits all' model of generic provision, but should have access  
11 to emerging evidence on a range of approaches (Coy et al, 2007: 5)  
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15 The findings underline that those subject to DA are not harmed or disempowered  
16 solely by perpetrators, but by the upstream social and economic conditions that  
17 marginalise and immiserate women and children, particularly those from racialised  
18 and migrant communities. Accordingly, legislative efforts to end VAWG must account  
19 for and address these factors, through meaningful national investments in ringfenced  
20 funding for expert by and for services, accessible accommodation-based services  
21 and redressing the substantial barriers facing migrant victim-survivors. Multiple  
22 models of provision are needed to meet the intersecting, complex and at times  
23 competing needs of victim-survivors.  
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## 27 **Research questions**

28  
29 There are several key issues facing the contemporary DA sector with which  
30 any refuge model must contend.  
31

32  
33 Firstly, DA refuges in England have historically been oversubscribed and  
34 underfunded, and provision continues to fall short of the Council of Europe's  
35 recommendation of one family place per 10,000 people by around 24% (Women's  
36 Aid 2022).  
37  
38

39 Secondly, available refuge spaces are not equally accessible to all victim-  
40 survivors, with marginalised victim-survivors encountering further barriers to  
41 accessing support. Migrant women with no recourse to public funds and Black,  
42 Asian, and other racially minoritised women are disproportionately represented  
43 among those unable to access refuge, as well as disabled women and those with  
44 mental health support needs (Women's Aid, 2021).  
45  
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47 This article will synthesise reviewed evidence on two models of refuge  
48 provision, outlining the merits and potential drawbacks of each model, particularly  
49 given these systemic challenges, and make policy and practice recommendations  
50 based on the findings.  
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55 The article will address the following questions:  
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- 57 • Does available literature support the argument that the underground model's  
58 default/universal "secrecy policy" is grounded in an inflated sense of threat?  
59 (Haaken, 2010: 112)  
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- Does available literature support the safety and efficacy of the open or 'Dutch' model which has emerged in the Netherlands?
- Are there **model-specific** gaps or issues with refuge provision in England, which are not attributable to wider issues across the VAWG sector (e.g. funding shortfalls, lack of ringfenced funding for expert by and for services)?
- Could the open or 'Dutch' model address some of these gaps or issues?

## History of refuges

Women's refuges emerged in the early 1970s, in the context of a wider feminist awakening. It was against this backdrop, and in response to a dearth of emergency accommodation for local women and children fleeing abuse, that the first 'modern' women's refuge was established in Chiswick in 1971 (Pizzey, 2014).

Refuges across England embodied a grassroots and egalitarian approach, with a distinctively feminist ethos, with women who came to stay in refuges acting as collective members (Hague, 2021) sharing equally in decision-making (Warrington, 2003). While providing a safe and supportive space for women and children fleeing abuse was a core aim of first-generation refuges, other, equally important aims included challenging gendered violence, empowering women, and advocating for societal change (Warrington, 2003).

Over the following decades, refuges became increasingly professionalised, moving away from the volunteer-led, non-hierarchical working model instituted by founders. This shift was precipitated by a clear and "overwhelming demand" for refuge spaces and consistent wraparound support (Warrington, 2003: 130), as well as pressure by funders to adopt more traditional management structures (Hague, 2021; Warrington, 2003). Contemporary refuges continue to focus on empowering victim-survivors and "working to end domestic abuse against women and children" (Women's Aid, 2022: 1).

## Refuges in England today

The recent Women's Aid annual audit indicates that most of the 269 DA refuge services in England provide a range of additional support services for women and children, offering some form of dedicated children and young people's support (65.8%), support groups/group work (70.3%) and resettlement support (77.32%). Funding challenges mean that currently just 36.1% of surveyed refuges can provide formal counselling (Women's Aid, 2022).

2020-2021 saw the highest annual increase in DA accommodation spaces due to the release of Covid-19 related emergency funds, bringing the total number of spaces in England to 4,289 (Women's Aid, 2022). However, data for the period found that around 1 in 4 of all referrals received by refuge services were rejected due to a lack of refuge space (Ibid). Further, "the actual number of spaces available to [any individual] woman looking for refuge will be dependent on whether available

spaces are appropriate for her specific needs and circumstances” (Women’s Aid, 2022: 34). Less than half of the refuge spaces posted on the Women’s Aid Routes to Support database between 2020-21 could accommodate a woman with two children, while fewer than one in five were suitable for a woman with three children (Women’s Aid, 2022). Just 6.3% of vacancies could consider women with no recourse to public funds (Ibid).

Disabled victim-survivors, and those with substance use and/or mental health support needs, may also face additional barriers in accessing refuge spaces that are equipped to meet their needs. During 2020-21, only 2.6% of refuge spaces were either fully wheelchair accessible or suitable for women with limited mobility, 14.5% had a specialist mental health support worker, and 9.3% had specialist substance use (Ibid). These figures suggest that significant investment is needed from Local Authorities to ensure that there are enough *suitable* spaces equipped with specialist staff.

These findings underline that DA is not a geographically bounded issue and is unlikely to be amenable to ‘localist’ approaches and needs assessments. Victim-survivors facing intersecting inequalities travel significant distances to access dedicated or by and for services, which make up “just 11.4% of all refuge spaces in England, and just under half of these are in London” (Women’s Aid, 2022: 28). Some organisations with specific expertise in supporting a particular group of women may be located in one area but “work nationally and even transnationally” (Imkaan, 2018: 17).

## **Refuge Model Review**

### **Conventional or underground model**

DA refuges arose from the women’s liberation movement, emerging as an innovative and countercultural response to the problem of men’s violence against female intimates. Historically, DA refuges in both England and US have operated from a confidential location (Chester-James, 2004; Haaken & Yragui, 2003; Hague, 2021), and many remain “organisations of women, working with women for women” (Hague, 2021: 119). The underground model is not just a legacy of these subversive roots but reflects a practical response to security concerns. Operating from an undisclosed location, with rules against revealing the location or admitting men to the premises, is intended to reduce the risk of perpetrators finding and harming victim-survivors (Chester-James, 2004; Hague, 2021). Conventional refuges typically have shared kitchens and living spaces for residents and, in contemporary refuges, access to intensive wrap-around support from staff.

One central selling point of the UR model is safety. While victim-survivors ending their relationship with the abuser is widely seen as protective, separation is a predictor of domestic homicide (Chopra *et al*, 2022). Refuges which allow women and children to ‘go underground’ offer additional reassurance regarding their physical safety, and provide a recuperative, women-only space where they can gain distance from the perpetrator’s emotional abuse and coercive control (Chester-James, 2004),

“abused women helping themselves and other women to make their own recoveries” (Hague, 2021: 125)

Two major critiques of the UR examine the presumption that secrecy implies physical and social safety. First, critics claim that the default confidentiality of refuge locations is unnecessary and “partly illusory” (Haaken & Yragui, 2003: 58), in one sense unduly pessimistic - working from the “worst-case-fits-all” assumption that perpetrators will otherwise track down and harm victim-survivors (Goodman et al, 2020: 3) – and in another overly sanguine about the efficacy of ‘underground’ working practices. Experiential evidence from US refuge workers and victim-survivors suggests that the UR is no longer feasible as the default model in the “age of social media and location sharing”, with refuge locations operating as an “unkept secret” (Ibid).

Second, critics observe that at an experiential level, living in secrecy apart from the wider community can reproduce the isolation and control inherent to DA, cutting women off from informal support sources and community ties (Haaken & Yragui, 2003; Burman & Chantler, 2004; Shimmin, 2011; Goodman et al, 2020). For children and young people, behavioural restrictions may inspire confusion and anxiety, experienced as part of a wider “culture of silence” around DA (Øverlien, 2010: 76). Meanwhile, risk averse and “protectionist” safety measures can disrupt education, socialising, and leisure and exacerbate the isolation associated with fleeing abuse (Bracewell et al, 2021: abstract).

The implicit construction of women-only spaces as “safe havens” is additionally complicated by the fact that within women-only groups there are underlying “border tensions”, multiple intersecting axes of inequality which shape women’s experiences and constrain their space for action (Haaken & Yragui, 2003: 50). While for some refuge represents “a securely bordered site in which safety is guaranteed” (Bridge, 2020: 403), others are marked as “ineligible” for entry via familiar logics of exclusion and structural violence that marginalise racially minoritised women and migrant women with no recourse to public funds (Burman & Chantler, 2004: 377).

Critiques of UR are complex and multi-layered, commingling practical and philosophical objections specific to the underground model, and wider issues within the DA sector such as complicity with structural violence and inattention to intersecting axes of marginalisation. There are practical concerns that UR locations are often only notionally ‘secret’, giving workers and victim-survivors a false sense of security (Haaken & Yragui, 2003; van den Brink, 2008; Shimmin, 2011; Goodman et al, 2020) or that the behavioural restrictions associated with concealed refuges further isolate victim-survivors and constrain their space for action (Haaken, 2010; Goodman et al, 2020). Philosophically, critics argue that UR reinscribe a ‘behind closed doors’ mentality about VAWG (van den Brink, 2008; Shimmin, 2011) and minimise the power dynamics between women (Haaken & Yragui, 2003). Disentangling these critiques illustrates several fronts on which an alternative model could benefit victim-survivors and society: increased autonomy for those staying in refuges, maintaining ties to local community and support systems, a greater sense of

1 public accountability and 'ownership' of gendered violence as a social issue, and a  
2 challenge to cultural stigma around DA. The open or Dutch model is one approach  
3 which proponents argue can address these concerns without sacrificing safety.  
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5

## 6 **Open or Dutch model**

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8 While the underground model seems historically or logically inevitable from a  
9 contemporary perspective, some of the earliest grassroots refuges in England and  
10 the US operated from a published location: Chiswick Women's Aid in England, and  
11 Bradley Angle House in Oregon, US (Haaken & Yragui, 2003; Haaken, 2010). With  
12 notable exceptions<sup>i</sup>, the underground model predominates across England, but in the  
13 Netherlands, there is an emerging model known as the Oranje Huis/Orange House  
14 (OH) which is gaining traction as a complementary approach.  
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17  
18 The OH was developed by the Blijf Groep, a specialist DA umbrella  
19 organisation which covers the Dutch provinces of North Holland and Flevoland. The  
20 historical trajectory of the Blijf Groep shares broad parallels with the DA refuge  
21 movement in England. The earliest refuges were independent and operated with few  
22 paid staff, founded by activists in the 1970s as part of a grassroots movement to call  
23 "attention to a problem denied by society" (van den Brink, 2008: 169). Over the  
24 ensuing decades, these independent refuges became increasingly professionalised,  
25 joining forces to form the Blijf Groep. During this period, DA moved from the margins  
26 to the centre, becoming a "national political priority" and attracting significant funding  
27 from government and healthcare sources (van den Brink, 2008: 173).  
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30  
31 The first OH was built in 2009, forming part of a strategic move away from  
32 concealing victim-survivors in "closed, secret strongholds" (van den Brink, 2008:  
33 172) and towards "engaging and connecting a range of stakeholders" (Blijf Groep,  
34 2019: 2). There are now several OH operating in the Netherlands, each of which is  
35 based in a secure but "open and visible setting" where visitors are permitted,  
36 enabling women and children subject to DA to live safely without being forced into  
37 "social isolation" (Blijf Groep, 2019: 3). Within the OH, each family has their own  
38 separate living space, which staff only visit when invited (de Jong, 2011).  
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41  
42 While independent outcome evaluations and academic literature examining  
43 the risks and benefits of the OH available in English are lacking, monitoring and case  
44 study data from practitioners involved in programme delivery suggests that the OH  
45 fulfils core principles of the UR - safeguarding women and children from DA and  
46 supporting their ability to flourish and regain autonomy after experiencing abuse. All  
47 OH residents are risk assessed on arrival and, in cases where the client is  
48 considered to be at high risk from the perpetrator even within protected  
49 accommodation, are referred to conventional or high-security refuges with concealed  
50 locations (de Jong, 2011). To achieve a safe environment for residents and refuge  
51 workers, OH work closely with police and are protected by round-the-clock security  
52 staff (de Jong, 2011). Internal monitoring data from the Blijf Groep suggests that this  
53 approach has proven successful, with residents reporting feeling secure in the OH  
54 despite its public location (de Jong, 2011).  
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1 Operating from a published address is not the only difference between the  
2 underground model and OH approach: while UR focus on safeguarding victim-  
3 survivors from perpetrators and working with women and children, the OH model  
4 supports women and children to engage in whole family work, including with  
5 perpetrators if it is safe to do so (Blijf Groep, 2019: 3). While a potentially  
6 controversial approach, this shift to involving perpetrators was grounded in  
7 pragmatism and an evidence base emerging from practice: seeing that around 40%  
8 of women staying in their refuges left early and often “furtively” to return to their  
9 partner, the developers of the OH model recognised that many women subject to DA  
10 “want the violence to end, not [their] relationship” (Blijf Groep, 2019: 3). If this desire  
11 is tabooed or shrouded in stigma, this will increase the barriers to women and  
12 children accessing support.  
13  
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15

16 Extending the vision of what a successful stay in refuge can look like to  
17 include “a safe – or safer – return home” for some women and children works along  
18 harm reduction principles, enabling women who are unwilling or unready to end their  
19 relationships to access safety and support sooner (van den Brink, 2008: 172).  
20 Counterintuitively, since implementing this model OH developers observed a  
21 *reduction* in the number of women returning to their abusive partner, dropping from  
22 40% of clients staying in their UR to just 19% of women staying in the OH.  
23 Programme developers suggest this could be due to insights gained during the  
24 structured and supported engagement with the perpetrator, which “help[s] women be  
25 realistic in their expectations. Because the perpetrator is directly involved in making  
26 the family plan, the client is confronted with the positive and negative sides of her  
27 relationship” (de Jong, 2011: 4).  
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33 Women staying in the OH get a tailored programme including the perpetrator,  
34 centring parenthood with specific attention on children, with access to classes on  
35 “anger management, parenting skills, and coping strategies to deal with  
36 consequences of abuse”, and planning for a violence-free future (de Jong, 2011: 1-  
37 2). This programme also works to mobilise support from victim-survivors’ familial and  
38 social networks.  
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41 The OH’s benefits include an increased sense of connection and autonomy,  
42 with residents free from the behavioural restrictions and secrecy associated with the  
43 UR, and able to draw on external support from friends and family members. This  
44 focus on restoring agency extends to the separate living spaces for women and  
45 children.  
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48 These accounts indicate the OH represents a viable complement to the  
49 underground model. However, in the absence of more in-depth outcome and  
50 longitudinal data, comparisons between the OH and UR models are inevitably  
51 lopsided, on the one hand invoking decades of theoretical and empirical literature  
52 and on the other pointing to a still-emerging ‘ideal type’ with promising but currently  
53 limited evidence of outcomes. Available evidence on the OH supports the claim that  
54 refuges can safely function without the secrecy and strictures surrounding the UR.  
55 However, it does not support the argument that the prevailing practice of  
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1 confidentiality is rooted in excessive “paranoi[a]” (Haaken, 2010: 112), nor that open  
2 refuges are appropriate for all victim-survivors.

3 One notable aspect of the OH which complicates some theorists’ (e.g.,  
4 Haaken & Yragui, 2003) positioning of open refuges as a liberatory alternative to the  
5 UR is the degree of police involvement. In descriptions of the OH, the spatial and  
6 organisational proximity of police functions as an imprimatur of safety, assuaging  
7 concerns about the unconcealed location: “Because of the open environment, co-  
8 operation with the police is very important. Security should be provided in which the  
9 police are visible and aware of the importance of their response.” (de Jong, 2011: 5).

10 While police visibility may alleviate the concerns of some victim-survivors,  
11 research on institutional racism in the Netherlands suggests “strong evidence” of  
12 bias against migrants and racially minoritised communities, which problematises the  
13 conflation of police presence and safety from violence/harm (European Commission,  
14 2021). In a UK context, contextual evidence from victim-survivors of gendered  
15 violence shows that Black, Asian, and racially minoritised women are often subject to  
16 ineffective, ignorant, and potentially retraumatising responses from police and other  
17 statutory services: “Black Caribbean women in particular said the responses were  
18 sluggish and stereotypically cast them as aggressive rather than ‘victims that needed  
19 help’” (Imkaan, 2020: 6).

20 UK migrant victim-survivors also face considerable barriers to reporting DA  
21 because of punitive ‘Hostile Environment’ policies designed to make remaining in the  
22 UK as uncomfortable as possible for undocumented migrants, with a decentralisation  
23 and ‘deputisation’ of border enforcement (Griffiths & Yeo, 2021). Victim-survivors of  
24 gendered violence and other serious offences are not exempt from this deployment  
25 of “discomfort as a political strategy” (Coddington 2021: 1711). Liberty and Southall  
26 Black Sisters lodged a super-complaint about police sharing information about crime  
27 witness/victims with the Home Office for immigration purposes (HMICFRS, 2020).  
28 Any refuge model which necessitates a high degree of police collaboration and  
29 visibility is likely to have a chilling effect on marginalised victim-survivors accessing  
30 support, unless it is preceded by, and founded on, the dismantling of the “ongoing  
31 legac[ies] of colonialism, neoliberalism, structural inequality, and state violence” that  
32 endanger and revictimise migrant and minoritised victim-survivors (Imkaan, 2021: 1).

### 33 **Implications for policy and practice**

34 In England, the UR has until recent years functioned as the default model of crisis  
35 accommodation for women and children fleeing DA. With the emergence of the  
36 Whole Housing Approach and the introduction of the Domestic Abuse Act, there is  
37 increased policy emphasis on funding an array of accommodation options and  
38 initiatives tailored to the needs of a range of victim-survivors, including sanctuary  
39 schemes which enable women and children to safely remain in their own homes or  
40 dispersed accommodation (Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance, 2020). Available  
41 evidence suggests that the open model could be a beneficial addition to this range of  
42 options, extending women’s space for action without imposing a particular vision of  
43 safety upon them.

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Currently, statutory guidance on the Domestic Abuse Act (Home Office, 2022) explicitly acknowledges the importance of providing a range of options to meet victim-survivors' needs, and provides a list of "relevant safe accommodation", including UR, specialist accommodation for victim-survivors with protected characteristics, dispersed and second stage or 'moving on' accommodation, and Sanctuary Schemes (Home Office, 2022: 102). However, the statutory guidance defining safe accommodation types largely adheres to the expectations established by UR, including a presumption of separation from the perpetrator and/or a withheld address (Ibid). Meanwhile, the statutory guidance features no references to the open model as a viable form of safe accommodation. This absence represents a gap in the refreshed policy response to DA, and potentially limits the autonomy of Tier 1 authorities seeking to commission open refuges to meet assessed local needs.

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Considering the wider evidence base on DA as a contributor to internal migration, and Local Authorities' historic underfunding of the expert by and for sector (Imkaan, 2018), there is a risk that increased localist commissioning of specialist DA accommodation will result in services tailored to the needs and interests of the "settled majority" (Bowstead, 2015: 329). When conducting needs assessments and commissioning services, it is therefore imperative that Local Authorities look beyond the local and remain in touch with evidence from the VAWG sector, supporting the development of a more robust safety net with fewer cracks for marginalised women to fall through.

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There are also implications for practice, with the reviewed literature highlighting areas where conventional refuge working practices diminish residents' sense of agency. While, as discussed, it is untenable for all refuges to relinquish their confidential addresses and attendant behavioural restrictions, the literature points to a need for further evidence-gathering on how security can be maintained while maximising autonomy. Participatory research with victim-survivors may shed further light on elements of current practice that are experienced as disempowering, and identify potential avenues for addressing these.

## Conclusion

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While UR act as an invaluable safe harbour for women and children, the evidence suggests that some victim-survivors find them isolating and disempowering, chafing at the secrecy mandate and imposition of rules (Haaken & Yragui, 2003; Øverlien, 2010; Bracewell *et al*, 2021). Although these restrictions are not motivated by a desire to subordinate or isolate victim-survivors, on an experiential level they may reproduce controlling dynamics and cut victim-survivors off from local ties and social support. Meanwhile, the OH is built on an extended concept of safety, eschewing the view that secrecy is a necessary condition of security, and embracing the "social context of the family and the environment", including behavioural change work with the perpetrator (Blijf Groep, 2019: 3).

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One limitation of this review is the sparsity of English-language literature on the open model, and the different cultural context in which available studies regarding the OH take place. Therefore, these conclusions are grounded in a persuasive, but as yet preliminary, evidence base.



1 With this limitation in mind, authors conclude that available literature does not  
2 support the 'strong' position that the behavioural restrictions of the UR are  
3 unnecessary or driven by an overstated sense of threat by refuge providers.  
4 However, findings do support the more moderate claims that open refuges can be  
5 safe and effective for some victim-survivors, and that there are model-specific issues  
6 associated with UR and its defining characteristic of secrecy.  
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8 Available evidence also provides preliminary support for whether the open model  
9 can address the model-specific issues associated with the UR, and therefore should  
10 be considered as part of a wider suite of responses to DA. Notably, it constitutes  
11 'proof of concept' that operating from an unconcealed location, supporting victim-  
12 survivors in maintaining local ties, and even engaging perpetrators, can be  
13 compatible with safety for a subset of victim-survivors. It also affirms the need for a  
14 range of approaches to meet the needs of diverse victim-survivors; even proponents  
15 of the OH note that there are victim-survivors for whom open refuges are unsafe due  
16 to the magnitude of risk from the perpetrator(s) (de Jong, 2011), while defenders of  
17 the UR recognise there are philosophical and ethical compromises associated with  
18 maintaining secrecy (Chester-James, 2004). There is no 'one size fits all' option  
19 because different women have different needs and vulnerabilities, which may  
20 sometimes conflict. The accommodation and support needs of a Muslim woman with  
21 young children will differ from those of a childfree woman with alcohol dependence  
22 or a trans woman with limited mobility. All have a right to access safe, supported and  
23 specialist DA accommodation, but this right can only be honoured if there is  
24 significant and evidence-informed investment in a range of refuge and  
25 accommodation-based services.  
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28 Equally, the opportunity to promote safer outcomes for women who are unwilling  
29 or unready to cut all ties with the perpetrator resonates with a sharpening policy and  
30 practice focus on tackling perpetration (Kelly & Westmarland, 2015; Drive  
31 Partnership, 2020). Although 'whole family' interventions which engage the  
32 perpetrator will not be appropriate for all families, there is emerging evidence within  
33 the UK that these programmes can support practitioners in "meeting families where  
34 they are at" and non-judgementally working with victim-survivors who do not want to  
35 end their relationship with the perpetrator (Stanley & Humphreys, 2017: 99). This  
36 approach is also grounded in the recognition that separation is not always protective,  
37 particularly when it occurs in wider legal and socioeconomic contexts that  
38 marginalise women and children, rendering them vulnerable to ongoing coercion and  
39 abuse. For example, while mothers face immense pressure to respond to DA  
40 'correctly', or risk being blamed for "failure to protect", a victim-survivor ending her  
41 relationship with the perpetrator may instead be the catalyst for children being forced  
42 into "extensive, unsupervised, court-ordered contact with fathers who use violence"  
43 (Stanley & Humphreys, 2017: 112).  
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46 From its grassroots origins, the DA refuge sector in England has been keenly  
47 attuned to the "perfect storm" of societal and structural forces that drive gendered  
48 violence, combining a needs-led approach to service provision with a politicised  
49 understanding of VAWG (Hague, 2021: 63). Women and children experiencing DA  
50 are not only constrained or harmed by perpetrators. From the chilling effect of Hostile  
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1 Environment policies or institutional racism in the criminal justice system to the  
2 housing crisis or “mother-blaming” by social services (Stanley & Humphreys, 2017:  
3 112), there are a range of factors that deter reporting and trap victim-survivors in  
4 dangerous situations. To meaningfully address these wider forces, a whole system  
5 approach is needed: one that encompasses a range of sustainably funded DA  
6 accommodation and community-based service options, transformation of the policies  
7 and wider culture that marginalise migrant and minoritised victim-survivors, and  
8 greater investment in targeting perpetration.  
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*Redefining safety: a narrative review of literature on the underground and open or 'Dutch' models of refuge*

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*Redefining safety: a narrative review of literature on the underground and open or 'Dutch' models of refuge*

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*Redefining safety: a narrative review of literature on the underground and open or 'Dutch' models of refuge*

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<sup>i</sup> Amber House is a community refuge located in Littlehampton, Sussex, which opened in 2017. The refuge  
20 forms part of the local DA organisation Safe in Sussex, and is modelled on the OH approach (Butler, 2019). Due  
21 to a lack of publicly available outcome data or evaluation reports, researchers will not discuss this refuge in  
22 depth.  
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