

FINDING LEGAL OPTIONS FOR WOMEN SURVIVORS

FLWS

IMPACT AND LEARNING

RCJ ADVICE - CITIZENS ADVICE & LAW CENTRE
RIGHTS OF WOMEN

2025

FOREWORD: LORD JUSTICE PETER JACKSON



Whether domestic abuse happens behind closed doors or in plain sight, it is often easier to look away. But we cannot and must not.

As a judge who has worked in family law for many years, and as Chair of RCJ Advice Citizens Advice and Law Centre, I have seen the devastating effects of domestic abuse, as well as the courage it takes to seek help.

That is why I am proud of the work being done through FLOWS and CourtNav, two services that are transforming the way survivors can access protection, support, and justice.

This report sets out the real and lasting impact of these services. It highlights how FLOWS, Finding Legal Options for Women Survivors, runs in partnership with Rights of Women, and helps survivors and frontline professionals find effective legal routes to safety. It also connects people with the wider support they need at a critical time.

CourtNav, our digital tool, plays an equally vital role. It simplifies the process of applying for protective orders and is accessible to anyone across England and Wales. These services empower people in frightening and vulnerable situations to take the first step towards regaining control of their lives.

The findings in this report make clear not only the difference these services are making, but also the growing need for them. Demand is increasing, and support must continue to grow if we are to meet it.

We are deeply grateful to our partners, supporters, and funders. Their commitment helps make this work possible.

This report is a call to action. I hope you will read it, reflect on it, and join us in ensuring this vital support continues. RCJ Advice stands fully behind this work.

Thank you.

Lord Justice Peter Jackson.
Chair of RCJ Advice

FLOWS

FLOWS (Finding Legal Options for Women Survivors) is a national legal support service that helps women facing domestic abuse access urgent protection through the family courts. It is jointly delivered by RCJ Advice and Rights of Women, alongside a wide network of partners and law firms.



RCJ Advice is an independent charity tackling inequality and poverty by ensuring fair access to justice. For more than 45 years, it has grown into a nationally accredited Citizens Advice and Law Centre. It empowers people to assert their rights through information, advice, and representation. RCJ Advice is the only free legal advice service based at the Royal Courts of Justice, now delivering innovative services across England and Wales.



Rights of Women is a women's legal rights charity, founded in 1975 to improve women's access to justice. Its services are targeted at women at risk of or experiencing Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). It provides specialist advice in family, criminal, employment, immigration and asylum law, alongside legal education and policy influencing. It combines frontline advice and advocacy to make the legal system more accessible, fair and responsive.

Tribute to Alison Lamb

This report is dedicated to the memory of Alison Lamb, whose vision and leadership were central to the creation of FLOWS (Finding Legal Options for Women Survivors). Alison recognised with great clarity the gaps in support available to women experiencing domestic abuse and with determination, insight and compassion she brought together organisations, professionals and communities to build something truly transformative.

It was her ability to connect people, to see beyond barriers and to nurture collaboration that enabled FLOWS to move from an ambitious idea to a nationally recognised and trusted service. Under her leadership, FLOWS and CourtNav became a vital part of the national response to domestic abuse, particularly during the pandemic, by providing innovative, accessible pathways to justice and safety for thousands of survivors.

Alison's legacy is one of courage, integrity and kindness. She showed us that systemic change can be achieved with humanity at its heart and she leaves behind a project that continues to protect lives and expand access to justice. FLOWS stands as a testament to her vision and we remember her with gratitude and respect.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FLOWS ensures survivors of domestic abuse are not left to navigate the legal system alone, especially at moments when their safety is at risk.

Established in 2018, FLOWS (Finding Legal Options for Women Survivors) enables timely, secure access to justice. Urgent protections such as non-molestation or occupation orders are often critical for immediate safety and long-term stability.

A partnership between RCJ Advice and Rights of Women, FLOWS strengthens the legal response by making the survivor journey safer, quicker, and more efficient. It combines digital tools, expert advice, and trauma-informed support so survivors can access justice swiftly and effectively.

In the last four years, FLOWS has reached 59,442 survivors directly and more than 345,000 people through its digital systems. Its trusted network of 138 accredited law firms and over 1,977 frontline professionals ensures survivors are never left without a route to protection. Evidence reflects this impact: 97% of law firms and 95% of frontline workers would recommend FLOWS, citing its professionalism, speed, and humane approach.

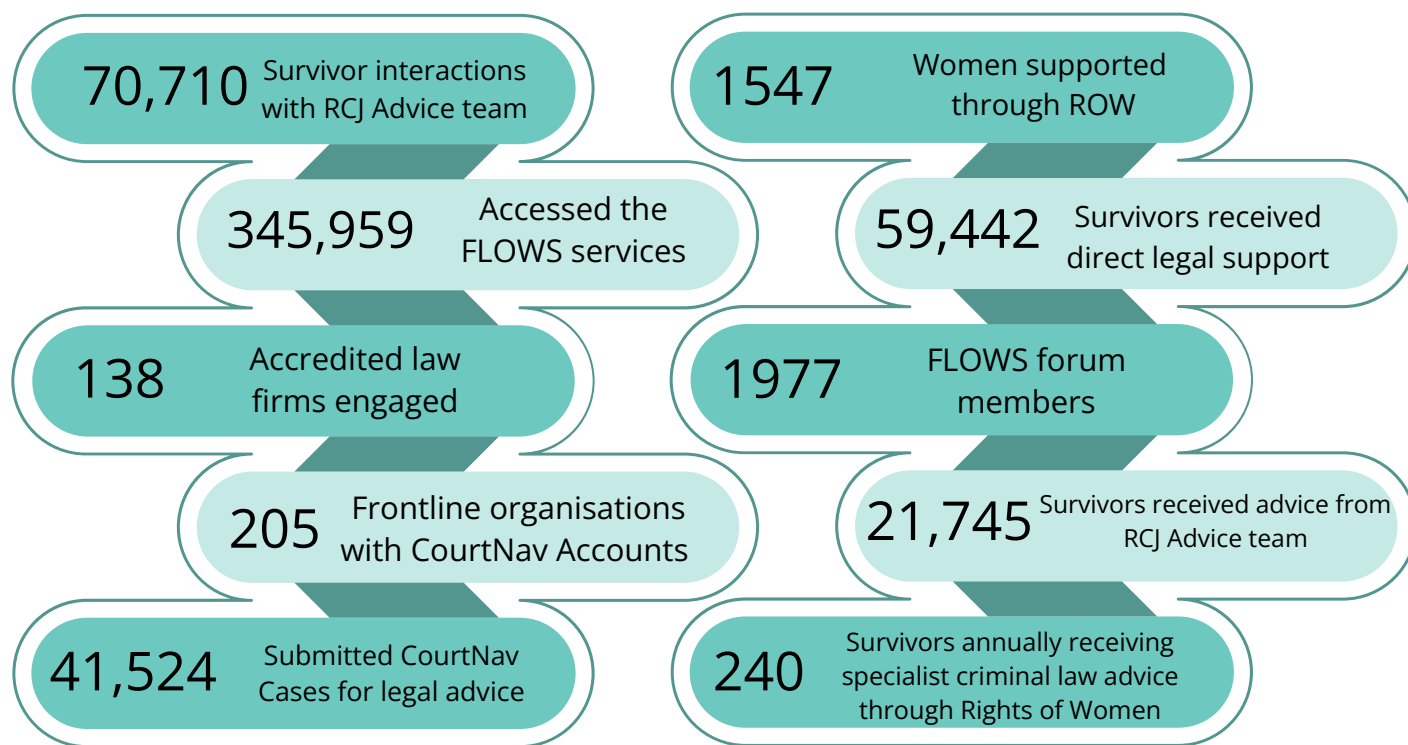
The model works by blending technology and person-centred support: scalable access via CourtNav with specialist advisers who listen, guide, and stand alongside survivors. Collaboration across the system, frontline organisations, solicitors, courts, students, and volunteers underpins faster, safer outcomes.

Early legal advice is central to an effective response. Evidence shows that when survivors enter the legal process quickly, applications are stronger, outcomes safer, and unnecessary costs avoided. FLOWS provides the mechanism to deliver this at scale, saving money as well as lives.

Most powerful are survivors' own words: FLOWS is ***“the difference between giving up and finding safety”*** and ***“I don’t think I’d be here without FLOWS... it wasn’t just the forms, it was someone believing me, standing with me, when I felt like I had no one.”*** For many, it is the reason they and their children are safe today.

Looking ahead, the question is not whether FLOWS is effective, the evidence demonstrates clear impact, but how that impact can be sustained. The model is designed to adapt to legal reforms, such as piloting Domestic Abuse Protection Orders (DAPOs), showing how digital tools and specialist advice can strengthen prevention, system efficiency, and access to justice.

FLOWS HEADLINE IMPACT 2021-25



While FLOWS has been operating since 2018, this report draws on the past four years of data (April 2021- March 2025) providing a recent, consistent and comprehensive record of activity and outcomes. This allows for the most reliable assessment of the service's scale and impact.

WHO FLOWS ARE & WHY THEY EXIST

The legal system can be hard to navigate, especially at what may be the most difficult point in a survivor's life. FLOWS (Finding Legal Options for Women Survivors) was established to ensure that women facing domestic abuse can access legal protection swiftly, safely, and effectively, regardless of geography or income.

Delivered by specialist legal advice providers RCJ Advice and Rights of Women, FLOWS combines expert legal support with a national network of partners and user-friendly tools that make urgent legal processes understandable and actionable. Its role is to complement existing domestic abuse services, not replace them: frontline organisations can focus on safety, housing, and emotional/practical support, while FLOWS provides the legal pathway.

Since 2020, FLOWS has been primarily funded by the Ministry of Justice. Earlier support came from the Tampon Tax Fund, trusts and foundations. It is also supported by DARA (pro bono legal support).

FLAWS in Action: An End-to-End Support Package

FLAWS is a system of tools and partnerships that together provide a complete legal support pathway, from the first step of disclosure through to resolution:

- **CourtNav** – an award-winning, high-quality FL401 digital application platform. An average of 22,000 people register each year, with more than 11,000 submitting cases for legal advice and assistance. CourtNav is an independent tool run by RCJ Advice and can help all survivors of domestic abuse.
- **SupportNav** – an expert online guidance tool hosted by RCJ Advice that helps survivors navigate legal information and connects them to other relevant services.
- **Legal Aid Network** – a partnership of 138 legal aid firms across England and Wales, responding to on average 9,500 CourtNav cases annually, usually within 24 working hours.
- **Survivor Support** – a network of 205 advice centres with CourtNav accounts able to support survivors in making applications.
- **FLAWS Forum** – an expert advice forum run by Rights of Women with 1,977 members, building capacity among practitioners to support survivors.
- **RCJ Advice In-House Legal Advice Team** – delivering helplines and advice services to around 5,500 survivors annually, with over 17,500 annual interventions and contacts, including support for those ineligible for legal aid.
- **Criminal Legal Advice** – a specialist line run by Rights of Women supporting 240 survivors annually with criminal law advice.
- **FLAWS Answers** – an online platform run by Rights of Women providing one-off written legal advice, assisting 300 survivors each year.

Who are the service users?

Reaching Diverse Groups

The majority of survivors supported through FLOWS identify as White (66.7%), with 33.3% from minoritised ethnic backgrounds (higher than the overall population average at 18% - Census 2021). National data suggests lower reporting of domestic abuse among Black and minoritised communities, yet higher representation in the most serious cases of domestic homicide. Against this backdrop, FLOWS' reach into diverse groups is significant, suggesting it provides an important pathway where other barriers to justice exist.

Reflecting the Psychological Impact of Abuse

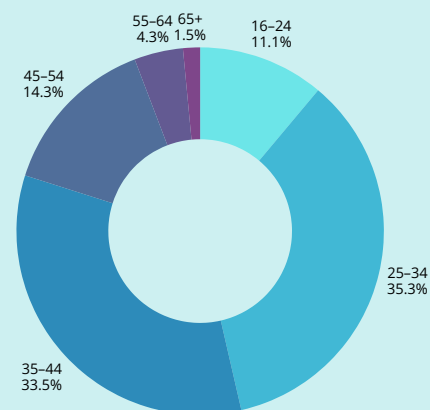
Around 14% of FLOWS users reported a disability, most commonly relating to mental health (33%), mobility (30%), or chronic illness (13%). Disability status is self-reported and likely to be underrepresented. The relatively high proportion of mental health disabilities reflects both the psychological impact of abuse and the fact that survivors often present in crisis.

Older survivors: closing the gap

SafeLives research shows that adult family members perpetrate 44% of abuse against people aged 61+, yet many do not recognise it as abuse, especially when it is emotional, ongoing, or non-physical.

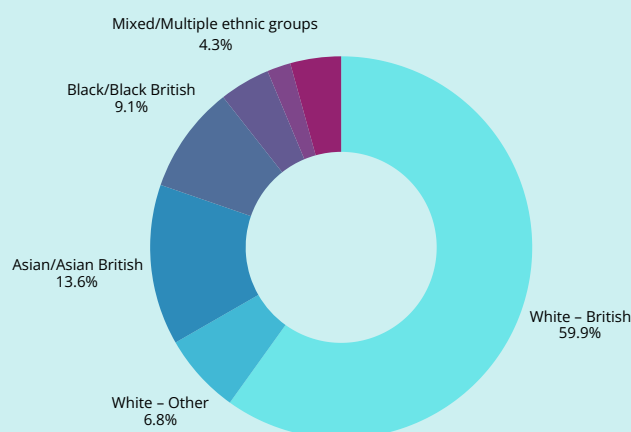
Digital exclusion, privacy concerns, and generational attitudes can also limit engagement with online services like FLOWS. This under-representation highlights the need to ensure older survivors feel seen, supported, and able to access protection.

Age of Survivors Supported (2021–2025)



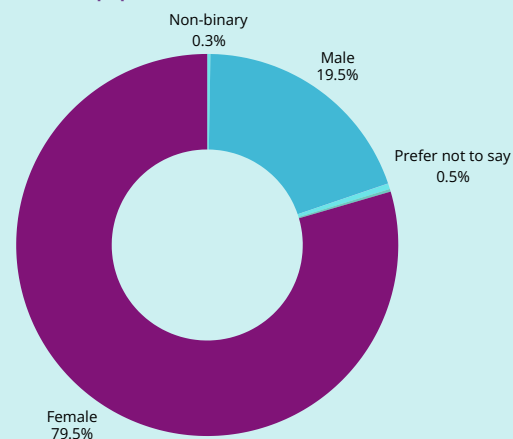
Age (n = 32,835 disclosed, 13,412 not disclosed) taken from CourtNav records

Ethnicity of Survivors Supported (2021–2025)



Ethnicity (n = 38,662 disclosed, 7,585 not disclosed) taken from CourtNav records

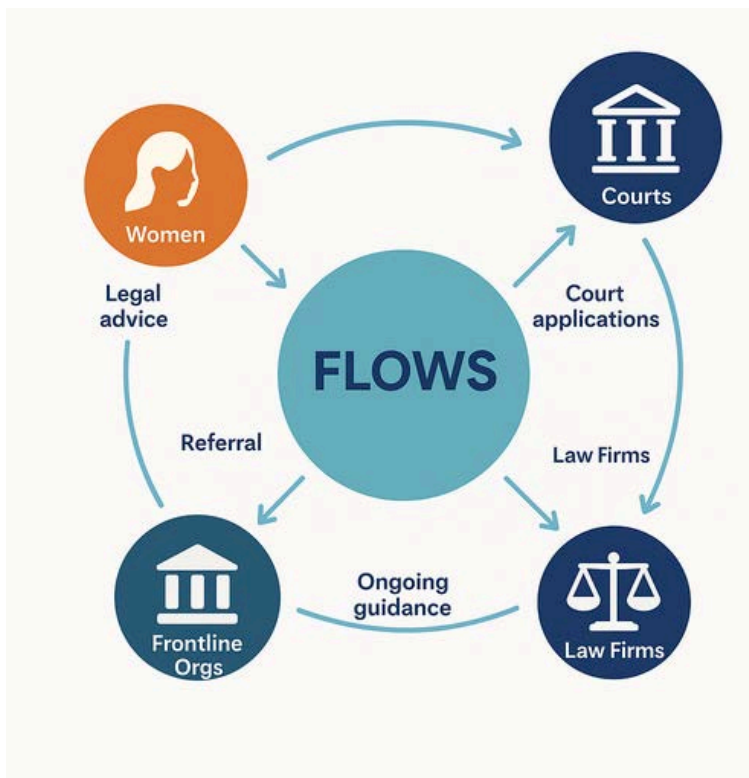
Gender identity of Survivors Supported (2022–24)



Gender (n = 28,941 disclosed, 135 not disclosed) taken from CourtNav records

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

FLAWS does not work alone. Its impact depends on close partnerships with frontline organisations and legal firms. These partnerships are built on trust and selected for quality, ensuring that survivors are supported by reliable and professional services through the FLOWs network. In turn, FLOWs values these partnerships, which are essential to delivering accessible, trauma-informed support consistently across England and Wales. Recent partner surveys highlight the strength of these relationships and confirm that they enable survivors to receive support that is both timely and of high quality.



What our Partners say...



Frontline & Voluntary Sector Partners
(including refuge staff, IDVAs, housing teams, CAB, women's services, advice agencies)

83%

of Front-line and Voluntary Sector Partners said FLOWs strengthens the wider voluntary sector response

"It makes an enormous difference to say: yes, I know where to send you, and they will be in touch soon"

Domestic Abuse Support Worker

95%

of Frontline & Voluntary Sector Partners would recommend FLOWs to other services

77%

said FLOWs made their job easier.

84%

of service users rated FLOWs' professionalism highly (4 or 5 out of 5)

88%

felt FLOWs fits well alongside existing voluntary sector services



Law Firms / Solicitors

92%

Of the law firms and solicitors surveyed said that FLOWs reduced wasted effort by filtering incomplete cases.

With FLOWs, we receive cases that are ready to act on straight away. It saves time, it saves money, and most importantly, it gives women a real chance of protection."

Partner at a pro bono law firm

96%

reported that FLOWs saves time and resources, particularly for pro bono teams with limited capacity

97%

highlighted FLOWs' professional and well-informed approach

These figures are underpinned by the voices of partners themselves, who describe how FLOWs has changed the way they work and the speed and quality of support survivors receive.

Partner Voice: Frontline and Voluntary Organisations

Frontline and voluntary organisations told us that FLOWS has transformed how they refer and support survivors. Staff described it as a clear and trusted route that allows earlier, more confident referrals, with advisers praised for being relational rather than transactional. Many noted that FLOWS eases pressure on overstretched agencies, while ensuring survivors receive expert, trauma-informed support. Though systemic gaps remain in housing, statutory services and engagement with older survivors, partners emphasised that FLOWS is already bridging significant divides.

"FLOWS gives women the confidence to move forward. It has changed everything about how we can support survivors."

Domestic Violence Safety Officer, Wales

Partner Voice: Law Firms and Solicitors

Law firms highlighted how FLOWS improved both the speed and quality of legal support. Referrals arrive better prepared, enabling firms to triage cases far faster than traditional routes. Survivors come into the system more confident and emotionally supported, allowing solicitors to focus on effective representation rather than repairing paperwork gaps. Pro bono partners in particular emphasised that FLOWS makes their limited capacity meaningful and manageable by filtering out incomplete or inappropriate cases.

"With FLOWS, we receive cases that are ready to act on straight away. It saves time, it saves money, and most importantly it gives women a real chance of protection."

Partner at a pro bono law firm

User-led design

Service user feedback and consultation has always helped shape and lead the design and development of the FLOWS digital package from the outset. A recent example of this is the FLOWS Answers online tool. Run by Rights of Women, it provides criminal legal advice to individual women via a free and confidential online written service that complements the criminal law advice line also offered within the FLOWS package. FLOWS Answers widens accessibility through providing advice through a different medium (in writing, rather than over the phone) that also allows users to send their query at a time convenient to them. The service was developed by the 'Voices of Women' panel of 16 women survivors who are experts by experience to review and develop content to ensure that the platform is driven by the lived experience of women survivors and responds to their needs. It supports around 300 survivors annually.

SURVIVOR STORIES: THE HUMAN IMPACT

Behind the data are real women, each facing moments of fear, disruption and uncertainty. Numbers show the scale of FLOWS' reach, but stories reveal its true impact — the difference between facing the legal system alone and having expert, compassionate support at the most critical time.

Case Study 1: "I felt like someone was finally on my side."

When Amira (not her real name) fled her abusive partner with her two children, she faced an impossible situation: either return home or try to navigate the family court system alone. She had no access to legal aid and could not afford representation. Through FLOWS, she was guided step-by-step using CourtNav, with an adviser who explained the process and checked her application for a non-molestation order.



What difference FLOWS made:

Amira's application was successful, giving her and her children immediate legal protection. Without FLOWS, she would likely have faced weeks of delay or abandoned the process altogether. The speed and clarity of support prevented her return to an unsafe home environment.

"The paperwork was overwhelming. FLOWS made it simple and gave me the confidence to carry on. I felt like someone was finally on my side."

Survivor supported by FLOWS

Case Study 2: "I didn't have to do it alone."

Sophia, an older survivor, had lived with abuse for many years before she felt able to leave. She feared the court process and had significant health challenges that made travelling and filling out complex forms difficult. FLOWS worked with her local women's service and GP to ensure her application was submitted safely and with the right medical evidence included.

"I'd stayed because I didn't think I could face it. FLOWS gave me the strength to take that step. I didn't have to do it alone."

Survivor supported by FLOWS

What difference FLOWS made:

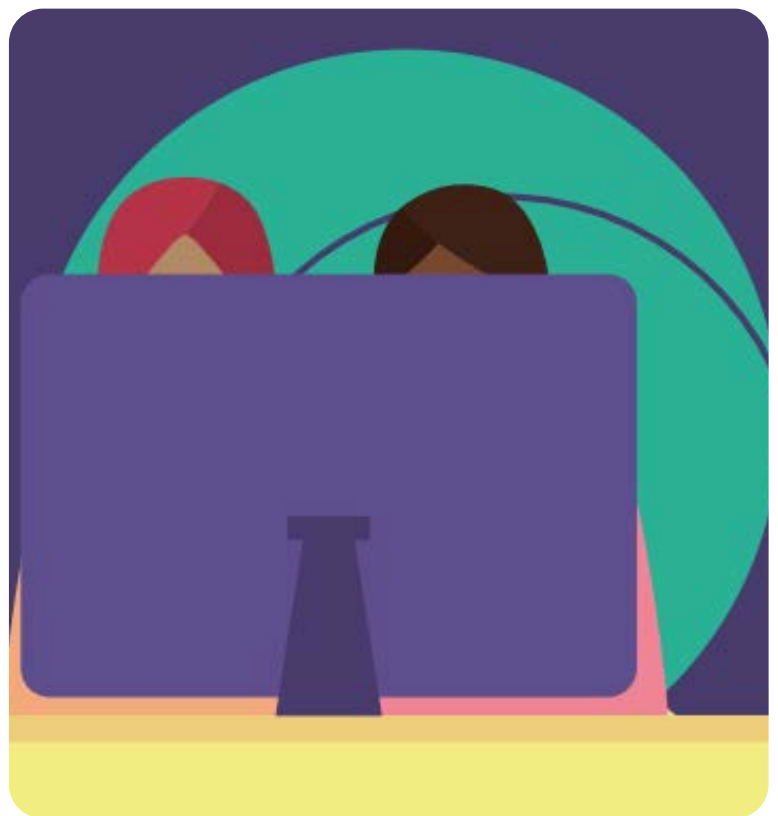
Sophia received an occupation order that allowed her to remain in her home while her abuser was required to leave. FLOWS' ability to coordinate with frontline and medical professionals meant her circumstances were properly understood and respected by the court.

Case Study 3: "They explained everything in words I could understand."

Leila, a young woman with limited English, was unsure of her rights and terrified of making a mistake that might put her at greater risk. FLOWS advisers used interpreters and trauma-informed practice to explain her options clearly. She described how every step was explained in "normal words, not lawyer words," which gave her the confidence to continue.

What difference FLOWS made:

With FLOWS' support, Leila obtained a protective order and was connected to a local advice agency for ongoing support. Her story highlights how FLOWS adapts for survivors facing language and cultural barriers, ensuring equal access to justice.



"They explained everything in words I could understand. I was scared, but I knew exactly what was happening."

Survivor supported by FLOWS

SUPPORTING THE SYSTEM: PROFESSIONAL PERSPECTIVES

While FLOWS' primary mission is to support survivors, its work is inseparable from the wider system that surrounds them. The programme operates in partnership with solicitors, courts, frontline and voluntary services, recognising that these organisations are themselves under significant pressure and stretched for resources. By ensuring survivors arrive better prepared and supported, FLOWS helps partners act to their full capacity, saving time and reducing strain across the system. FLOWS is also forward-looking: by engaging students and volunteers, it helps cultivate the next generation of legal professionals who understand domestic abuse from the outset of their careers. In this way, FLOWS strengthens both the immediate response for survivors and the long-term resilience of the justice system.

Solicitors and Courts

FLOWs reduces the burden on courts and solicitors by ensuring that survivors' applications are complete, accurate, and appropriately prepared before they reach the system. Legal firms report that FLOWs referrals are easier to act on, as survivors arrive with clearer paperwork and stronger supporting evidence. This avoids delays, reduces inappropriate submissions, and saves valuable time at every stage of the process.

The impact is particularly visible in urgent cases: many firms now triage FLOWs referrals quicker and report that FLOWs allows them to do this far faster than traditional methods alone. Courts also benefit, as fewer incomplete or misdirected applications reach them, enabling judges to focus on substantive issues rather than administrative errors.

Frontline Services

For frontline and voluntary organisations, FLOWs provides a reliable referral pathway that ensures survivors do not fall through the cracks of a complex system. Workers describe FLOWs as a trusted partner that gives them confidence when guiding survivors through daunting legal processes. By providing quick access to legal expertise and practical support, FLOWs allows frontline staff to focus on what they do best — safeguarding survivors and addressing immediate risks — rather than navigating court forms or legal procedures.

These organisations are often stretched to capacity. FLOWs lightens that burden, offering both speed and quality in a system where delays can have serious consequences. Survivors are supported more effectively, and frontline workers know that the referrals they make will lead to timely, trauma-informed assistance.

"FLOWs makes our job easier — we receive referrals that are clear, detailed and ready to progress. That means we can focus on protecting clients rather than fixing paperwork."

Solicitor, participating law firm

FLOWS Forum

An example of the comprehensive FLOWS support package for professionals is the FLOWS Forum, facilitated by Rights of Women.

This online community enables legal professionals and frontline domestic abuse services to share expertise, seek advice, and stay at the forefront of conversations on improving law and policy for survivors.

The forum had **1,977 members** from 2021-25. They engage regularly with the forum. A 2024 survey found that **94% of members were regularly reading posts**, over **96% rated posts as accessible**, and more than **98% said posts were helpful for practice**.

Posting activity doubled since 2021, and **82% of respondents said they had recommended the forum to colleagues** — reinforcing its role as an invaluable, national peer-support network. Users can post and find answers to everyday and complex legal queries, engage with a message board, sign up to regular e-newsletters, and attend online events — all of which connect professionals nationally through peer support and shared learning.



"I have posted questions about Non Molestation Orders and other legal orders which have been answered quickly. I look at the FLOWS Forum at least twice a week. I find all the posts very helpful as sooner or later whatever questions have been posted I will then have the answer to the situation a client is in."

FLOWS Forum
member feedback,
Feedback Survey 2024

Students and Volunteers

FLAWS also invests in the future of the legal system by engaging students and volunteers in its work. Through partnerships with university law clinics and volunteering programmes, FLOWs provides opportunities for aspiring legal professionals to learn how to work with survivors of domestic abuse at the earliest stage of their careers. Students gain direct experience of trauma-informed practice, access to expert supervision, and an understanding of how legal processes affect people in crisis.

This approach creates a ripple effect. By building skills and awareness among tomorrow's solicitors, barristers, and advisers, FLOWs ensures that future generations of legal professionals will enter the workforce better equipped to respond to survivors' needs. Volunteers also extend FLOWs' capacity, bringing commitment and fresh perspectives that enhance the service today while building resilience for tomorrow.

Mini Case Study – Shaping the Future Legal Workforce

Priya, a final-year law student, joined FLOWs through her university's law clinic. Supporting survivors directly transformed her outlook. One case — helping a woman prepare for a non-molestation order — gave her confidence and showed her the emotional complexity of legal work.

"It wasn't just academic — it was meaningful," she reflected. Priya now plans to specialise in family law, saying FLOWs shaped her future.

Her experience echoes wider feedback: students involved with FLOWs describe the work as something no classroom can teach. They learn empathy, resilience, and real-time decision-making, while seeing first-hand how overwhelming the legal process can be without support. In this way, FLOWs not only supports survivors today but also shapes a future legal workforce that is more skilled, compassionate, and survivor-centred

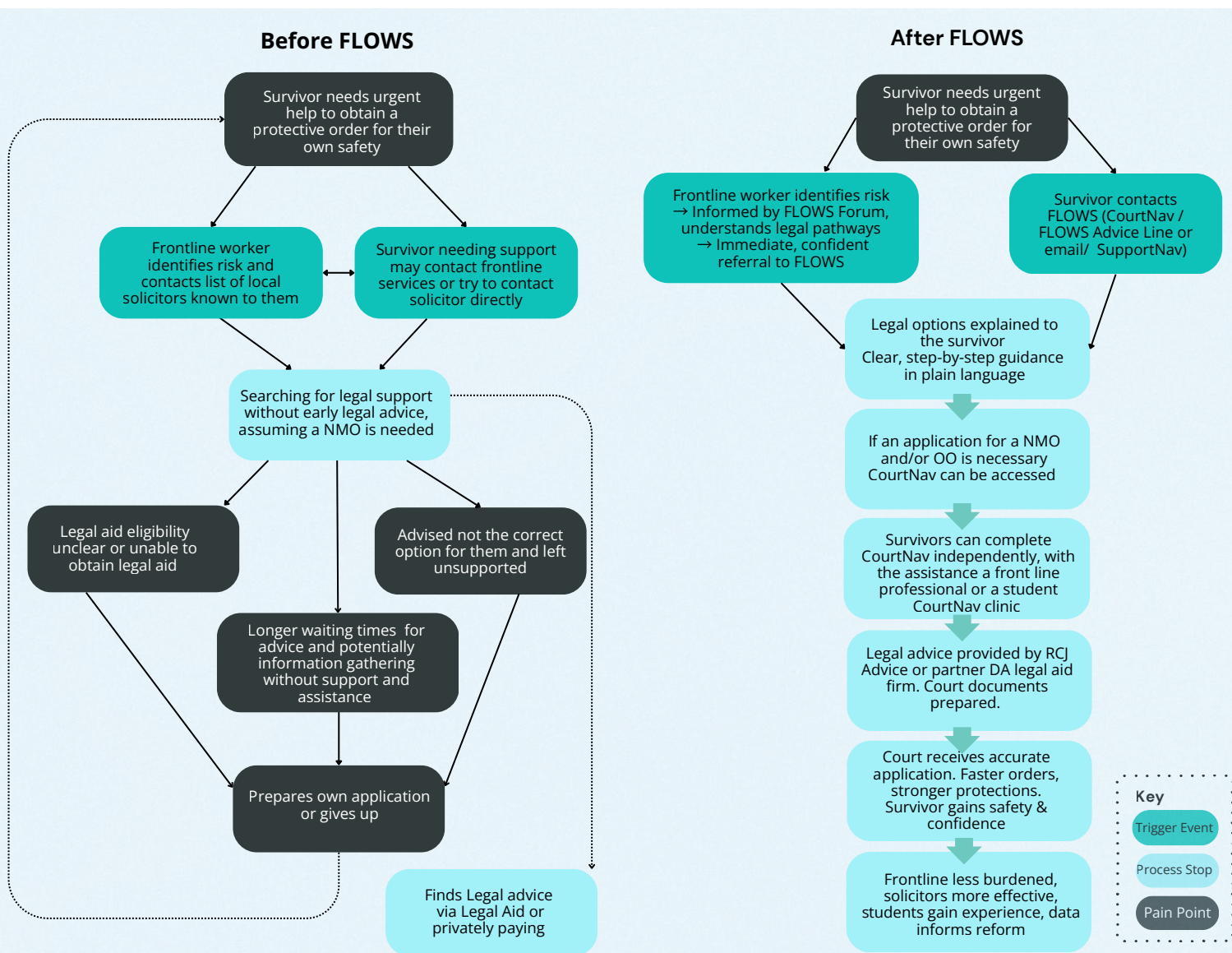
"Working with FLOWs has changed the way I think about law. It's not just about the paperwork — it's about the person. I will carry that with me throughout my career."

Law student, university legal clinic

FLOWS BUILDS A COLLABORATIVE SYSTEM - EFFECTIVE TODAY, RESILIENT FOR TOMORROW

FLOWS shows that when each part of the system is supported, outcomes for survivors are stronger. Courts benefit from clear applications, frontline services connect survivors quickly and confidently, and students gain formative experience of trauma-informed working at a foundational point in their careers.

The diagram below illustrates a possible survivor pathway before and after FLOWS, highlighting common pain points the service helps address.



FLOWS strengthens not just individual responses but the system as a whole. It creates a collaborative, high-quality network where survivors encounter expertise and professionalism at every stage, frontline workers are not left to carry the burden alone, and students and early-career professionals gain formative experience of trauma-informed practice. In doing so, FLOWS builds more than a service — it contributes to a resilient system that can meet survivors' needs today while laying the groundwork for future justice and protection.

IMPACT AND LEARNING

1. Survivors need both technology and specialist support

Access to justice must be both timely and personalised to meet needs. FLOWS shows how technology can open doors that were previously closed — **CourtNav enables survivors across England and Wales to begin protective proceedings from anywhere**, breaking down geographical and logistical barriers.

Survivors stressed that the turning point came when technology was paired with human connection: trauma-informed advisers who could listen, explain, and guide them step by step. FLOWS ensures that people are not left to navigate automated forms in isolation, but are supported by expert legal practitioners and frontline workers who understand the complexity of each survivor's situation.

This combination is FLOWS' unique strength. Technology makes the system quicker, and more efficient, while human expertise ensures that each case receives the tailored guidance necessary for success. Survivors' journeys are deeply personal and diverse; what works for one person may not be right for another. FLOWS allows for both: scalable digital reach and relational care that builds confidence and trust.

The presence of dedicated FLOWS staff in Wales and the North East has significantly increased local usage of the service, showing how regional posts expand access by making support more trusted and visible.

Crucially, FLOWS is future-ready. CourtNav has been designed to be adaptable to legal reform with a framework that can be expanded and grown. This will allow the system to react to new legislation and policy, such as the Domestic Abuse Protection Orders currently being piloted, so survivors will continue to benefit from both the efficiency of technology and the assurance of human expertise as the system evolves. At the same time, by enabling those who can self-navigate to do so, FLOWS frees up limited frontline capacity to focus on survivors in greatest need.

FLOWs has extended the availability of legal support for survivors of domestic abuse particularly in areas with limited or no local access to legal aid providers. Its remote, nationally accessible model enables survivors to engage with legal processes without needing a face-to-face service. This is particularly significant given ongoing gaps in Legal Aid provision across England and Wales.

Supporting Insights:

The Law Society's report on technology and access to justice concludes that innovation must be accompanied by human understanding to truly succeed in increasing access to justice. Technology on its own cannot replace expert, empathetic support.

CourtNav: Innovation with Humanity

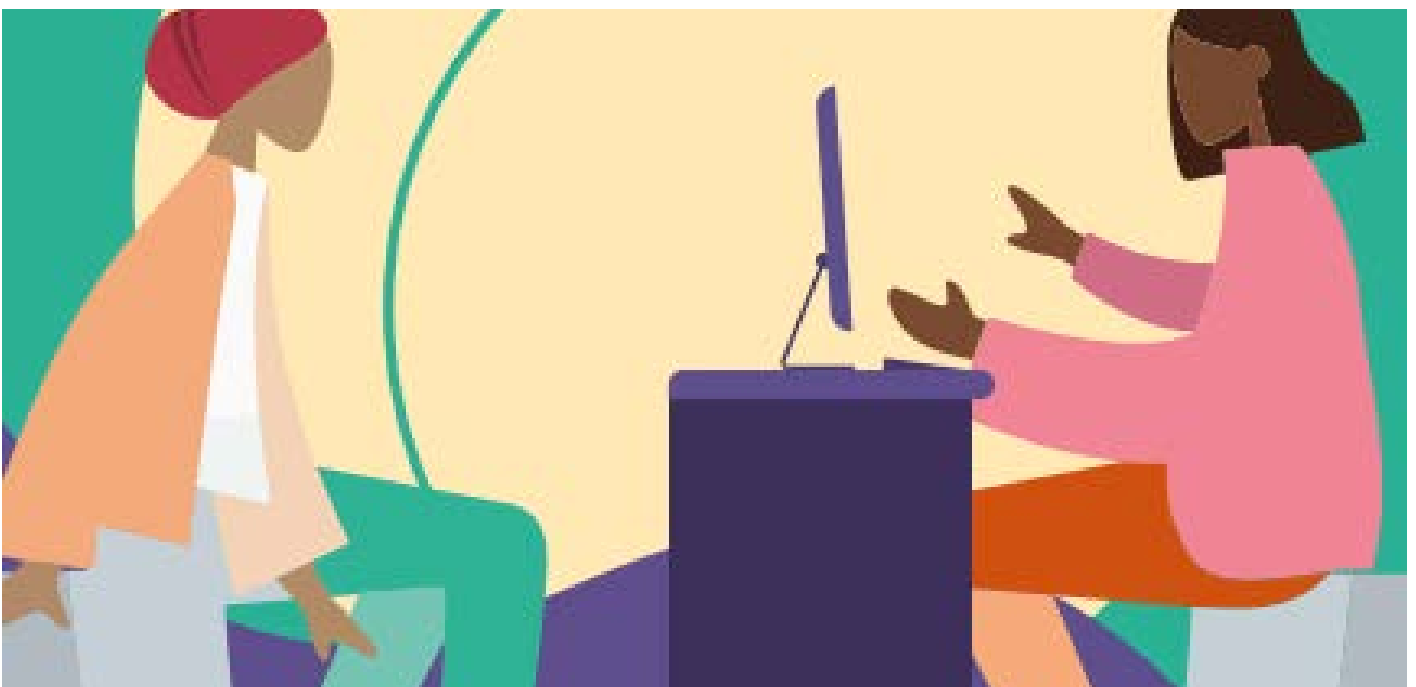
CourtNav is the tool that underpins the support for FLOWS' users, simplifying and streamlining access to urgent protective orders for survivors of domestic abuse. It allows survivors to begin applications from anywhere, breaking down geographical and logistical barriers.

But technology alone isn't enough. CourtNav is deliberately designed to work hand-in-hand with expert legal support. FLOWS advisers and frontline professionals ensure that survivors' applications are complete, accurate, and compelling — making success far more likely in court.

CourtNav is also future-ready. Built to adapt to legal reform, it can evolve in response to changes such as the introduction of Domestic Abuse Protection Orders. This ensures survivors and frontline staff will always have a trusted, effective route to urgent legal protection.

Why it matters:

- Expands reach by enabling those who can self-navigate to do so.
- Frees frontline staff to focus resources on survivors in greatest need.
- Builds survivor confidence by combining accessible digital tools with tailored human support.
- Provides a foundation that is adaptable, responsive, and resilient for the future.



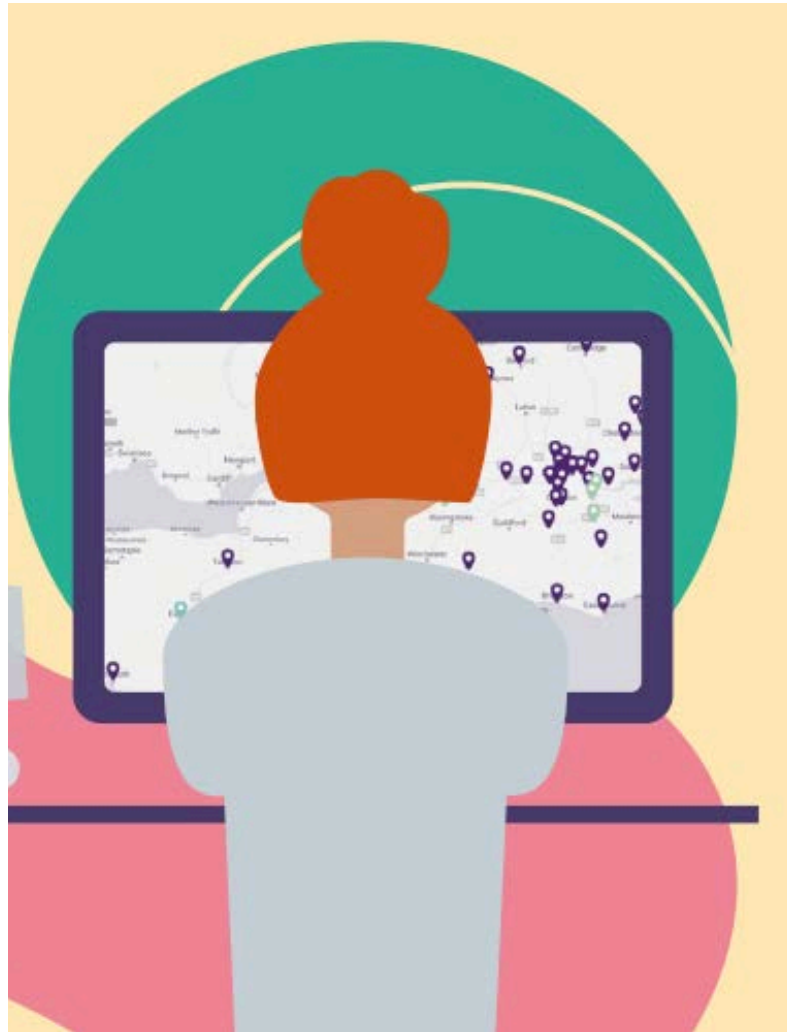
2. Collaboration makes the system work

FLOWS connects frontline experts, legal professionals, and digital tools so each plays to their strengths. This shared pathway reduces wasted effort, gets protection faster, and builds trust.

The true strength of FLOWS lies in the expertise of the people it connects. Survivors are supported first and foremost by skilled frontline professionals — Independent Domestic Violence Advisers (IDVAs), voluntary sector workers, and others — who bring deep knowledge and commitment to their roles. FLOWS was not designed to replace that expertise but to support it: simplifying processes, linking frontline services to solicitors, and providing digital tools that make referrals seamless and applications stronger.

This design ensures that professionals can work at their best capacity. Frontline workers refer survivors with confidence, and solicitors receive a wealth of information upfront that helps focus their legal advice.

Survivors often feel more comfortable disclosing details through CourtNav than in a first meeting, which can enrich applications and, when combined with solicitor expertise, increases the likelihood of protection orders being granted. FLOWS acts as the connective tissue, but the power and effectiveness comes from the whole system working together.



Supporting insight:

The Nuffield Family Justice Observatory has highlighted that frontline professionals are essential in helping families navigate legal processes, and that “system-wide collaboration is critical to securing better outcomes in family justice”

Nuffield Family Justice
Observatory 2021 report on
supporting families in the
justice system

3. Legal processes must be understandable to non-lawyers.

For survivors of domestic abuse, legal protection is often the difference between safety and continued danger. But these protections are locked behind complex forms, legal terminology, and evidential requirements that can be challenging to non-lawyers.

Survivors who approach the system without specialist help may abandon their applications or submit incomplete forms that do not reflect the urgency or seriousness of their situation.

When this goes wrong, the consequences can be significant. A failed application for a non-molestation or occupation order does not mean that abuse did not occur, but it may later be interpreted that way in the family courts. Survivors have reported, and independent reviews have confirmed, that failures to secure protective orders can be used by abusive partners to undermine credibility, particularly in child arrangements proceedings.

In practice, this means that a survivor's inability to navigate legal paperwork can be used against her in decisions about her children's safety and future.

This is not an isolated issue:

- **The Ministry of Justice Harm Panel Report (2020)** found that the failure to respond to domestic abuse earlier in proceedings appropriately could later disadvantage survivors with the implication that their allegations lacked substance. It also noted the benefit to the court of early identification of domestic abuse in the papers.
- **Women's Aid (2020)** documented survivors' experiences where the inability to secure an injunction was later cited in family courts as "evidence" that abuse had not occurred.
- **The Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (2021)** noted that "procedural and evidential hurdles" in early protective applications placed survivors at a disadvantage in subsequent child arrangements cases.

Complexity in the legal process does not just potentially block access to immediate protection — it has ripple effects that can shape survivor outcomes for years. FLOWS' model, combining technology with expert human support, matters: it allows survivors to make their case clearly, to be heard fairly, and to avert long-term consequences caused by inaccessible processes.

***"Before FLOWS I tried to do the forms on my own.
I gave up twice because I didn't understand the language.
If they had been submitted like that, I would have lost everything.
With FLOWS, someone explained what it meant and helped me say
what had really happened."***

Survivor (Questionnaire 2025)

4. Supporting professionals to support survivors

Survivors are — and must remain — the centre of FLOWS' work. But effective support for survivors depends on the skills, capacity, and confidence of the professionals around them. Frontline workers, solicitors, volunteers, and students all play vital roles in ensuring that survivors can access protection quickly and safely.

By providing training, guidance, and a clear pathway into the legal system, FLOWS enables professionals to act with confidence and speed. This does not replace their expertise — it enhances it. An IDVA who knows she can connect a client immediately into a trusted legal route can focus on safety planning; a solicitor with access to well-prepared applications can spend time giving quality advice rather than correcting paperwork.

In this way, support for professionals is not an end in itself but a means of ensuring survivors receive the best possible protection, delivered by practitioners who are able to work at their best capacity.

“FLOWS gives me confidence that when I refer a client, she will get the right legal help straight away. It means I can focus on keeping her safe instead of worrying about the forms being rejected.”

Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (Survey 2025)



5. Future proofing: adaptable and resilient

FLAWS is not a short-term project but a platform that has been built over years of sustained investment, learning, and collaboration. From the outset, it was designed by people who understand the system from all perspectives — survivors navigating trauma, lawyers seeking legal accuracy, and frontline workers who know the system well. This breadth of insight shaped its foundations. That design choice means FLOWs can adapt with survivor input and legal expertise as new challenges or reforms arise. CourtNav, for example, has the flexibility to evolve in line with forthcoming changes (such as the roll-out of Domestic Abuse Protection Orders DAPOs). This adaptability reassures both survivors and practitioners that the system will remain relevant and effective, providing a reliable infrastructure for urgent legal protection well into the future.

Policy strategies increasingly emphasise digital transformation, prevention, and resilience in public services. FLOWs meets all three: it reduces pressure on courts by streamlining applications, supports earlier legal advice (reducing risk and preventing escalation), and integrates digital tools with frontline expertise in a way that strengthens the system as a whole.

FLows has been designed from the ground up to remain trauma-informed and relational. Survivors are not left alone with a form; instead, they are guided through a digital pathway supported by legal specialists who ensure accuracy, context, and emotional safety. This hybrid model, blending scalable technology with trusted human support, reflects wider government priorities on embedding resilience into public services, while ensuring that those most at risk are not excluded from protection.

Supporting Insight:

The Government response to the “Shifting the Scales” report

In March 2025, the Home Office and Ministry of Justice responded to the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's “Shifting the Scales: Transforming the Criminal Justice Response to Domestic Abuse” report. They acknowledged that the criminal justice system was not designed to cope with domestic abuse and committed to strengthening police response “using all the tools at their disposal”—implicitly including technological tools and innovations—in order to protect victims and hold perpetrators to account.

Insights drawn from Interviews and Data

The lessons from FLOWS' first years are consistent and clear. Survivors have shown that access to justice must be both technically accessible and humanly supportive. Partners have demonstrated that when the system works together, frontline services, solicitors, students, and volunteers, survivors can be guided safely and quickly to protection.

The evidence has underlined that legal processes must be understandable to non-lawyers, not just because of immediate barriers but because failures in early applications can have profound consequences in family law proceedings. Professionals, too, need support to give their best; when FLOWS enables them to act with confidence, survivors benefit directly. And finally, the wider system gains most when prevention is prioritised, embedding both savings and long-term cultural change.

Taken together, these findings show that FLOWS is more than a service. It is a pathway that transforms individual experiences, strengthens the work of professionals, and contributes to a more resilient justice system. What has emerged so far is not only evidence of reach and impact, but a set of insights that can inform how justice is delivered more widely — humane, accessible, and collaborative.

Policy Alignment



Domestic Abuse Act: FLOWS supports access to protective orders and a transformative approach to domestic abuse.



Digital Transformation: CourtNav and standardised intake improve speed, quality and visibility of access to justice.



Prevention & Early Intervention: Earlier, clearer legal routes reduce harm escalation and downstream system pressure.



Levelling Up Access: National, remote-first reach helps address geographic and capacity gaps ("legal deserts").

WHAT'S NEXT: PROTECTING AND GROWING THE IMPACT

FLAWS has reached a point of maturity, a proven model that survivors, frontline services, and the legal profession trust. But its strength lies in the fact that it is not static. The programme was designed to adapt, integrate, and grow from the outset. FLOWS already has the infrastructure in place to develop, ensuring survivors and practitioners are never left behind by legal reform, with Domestic Abuse Protection Orders (DAPOs) a likely forthcoming change. This adaptability means FLOWS is not only a current solution but a future-ready system, capable of meeting both survivor needs and the changing legal landscape.

The government has committed to halving violence against women and girls within a decade. Ministers have called for earlier intervention and stronger survivor support. FLOWS already demonstrates what this looks like in practice.

Enabling survivors to secure urgent legal advice at the very first stage of crisis widens access to justice. By streamlining applications through CourtNav and ensuring they are complete and accurate, FLOWS reduces delays in court and supports the ambition of fast-tracked justice. And by combining digital tools with trauma-informed advisers, it reflects the growing emphasis on putting specialists at the frontline meaning that survivors are heard, guided, and protected, not left to navigate the legal system alone.

Crucially, FLOWS is preventive as well as responsive. FLOWS supports frontline staff to spot legal need and can connect survivors quickly, preventing harm and reducing long-term costs. In this way, FLOWS is not just delivering urgent protection, it is helping to reshape the system in line with national strategy with earlier advice, quicker outcomes, and resilience built into every stage.

Protecting and growing this impact, therefore, means investing not only in the digital tools but in the collaborative ecosystem that sustains them: CourtNav clinics, the FLOWS Forum, specialist advice lines, and training. Together, they allow frontline organisations to do what they do best while FLOWS supplies the legal expertise. It provides a mature, adaptable, and collaborative system that can both scale and sustain change, delivering on commitments while transforming outcomes for survivors.

This report has been produced independently by the Curiosity Society. We would like to thank the law firms, frontline services, and survivors who generously shared their time to take part in this research. For any questions, comments, or further information, please contact us via our website: www.curiositiesociety.org.

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