

# Tower Hamlets Community Advice Network

## Network Led Referral System, Context and Purpose 2025

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### 1- Introduction

Tower Hamlets Community Advice Network (THCAN) is a partnership of local advice centres that provide a wide range of free advice and representation to borough residents. The borough's advice centres have worked together since they established THCAN in 2010, to ensure that people in Tower Hamlets have access to free, high-quality advice on welfare benefits, debt, housing and other areas of social welfare law.

This proposal seeks funding to continue the maintenance, development and crucial infrastructure support for THCAN referral platform and the information and training system. The co-ordinating, referral and development role of THCAN is critical to supporting the integration of welfare advice with health and social care services and ensuring residents are supported to address the wider social determinants of health.

The need and demand for social welfare advice, is at its highest ever and increasing in volume and complexity whilst the capacity of the advice sector is diminishing. THCAN referral and co-ordination role helps to reduce demand pressure on advice services by: promoting early intervention and supporting front line non advice staff to deal with basic welfare benefits, money and housing issues before they escalate and co-ordinating a more seamless referral and access system.

Significant progress has been made in the past year in promoting the THCAN referral system, upskilling front line staff and engaging and collaborating with key statutory and voluntary sector stakeholders at borough, neighbourhood and locality level as highlighted in the summary below.

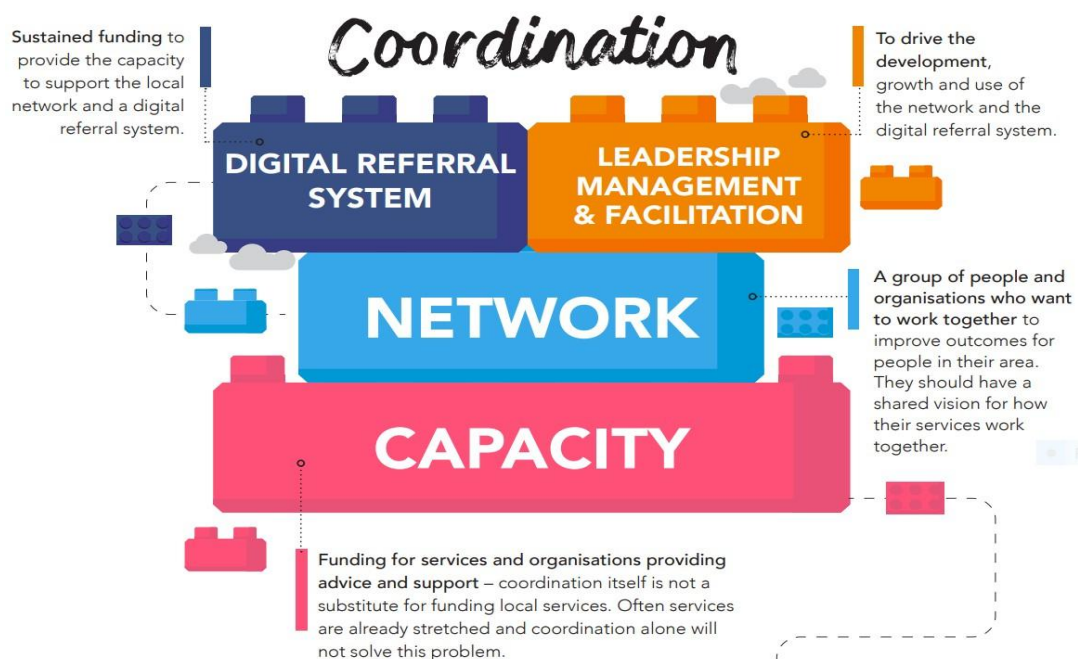
The role and contribution of advice services in tackling poverty and health inequalities is recognised and valued by local authority and healthcare systems leaders and providers.

The 10 Year Health Plan recognises social welfare advice as a critical part of integrated care and neighbourhood health services.

The role of THCAN co-ordination and referral systems provides a firm base to support and develop this integration.

## What does THCAN do?

1. **Coordinate cross organization referrals** - THCAN successfully implemented a referral network within Tower Hamlets which includes 53 diverse organisations and 546 registered individual users supporting people all over the borough
2. **Share information and updates** to ensure front line workers are kept up to date including a monthly newsletter, workshops, facilitation of forums & network meetings, maintenance of the THCAN website activities
3. **Developing the Advice Sector Work Force** through the volunteer project



## 2- Developing & coordinating a borough wide referral system

In 2021 THCAN launched a pilot of a direct referral system modelled on the Norfolk Community Advice Network (NCAN), in collaboration with The Children’s Society’s Community Support Programme,

The system has been funded by NEL NHS during the year 2024

Over the last 4 years, the system and network have gone from strength to strength and currently host **over 58 diverse organisations which includes 604 individual** registered professionals supporting people all over the borough with over 20 different types of social welfare advice issues.

**In the last year, the following new organisations joined the network including:**

• <a href="#">APASEN</a>
• <a href="#">Barts Health NHS Trust - Renal</a>
• <a href="#">Barts Health NHS Trust - THCNT (Neuro Team)</a>
• <a href="#">Barts Health Social Prescribing</a>
• <a href="#">Bow and Poplar Neighbourhood Mental Health Team</a>
• <a href="#">Bromley by Bow Centre - Grey Matter (over 65s only)</a>
• <a href="#">Community Navigators</a>
• <a href="#">Create Hub</a>
• <a href="#">Cubitt Town Primary School</a>
• <a href="#">E14 Billy's Pantry (@Island House Community Centre)</a>
• <a href="#">Family Action Fuel Your Finances</a>
• <a href="#">ICM Foundation CIC</a>
• <a href="#">IOD Neighbourhood Mental Health Team</a>
• <a href="#">Ocean Regeneration</a>
• <a href="#">THCVS</a>
• <a href="#">The Start for Life Social Prescribers - Bright Beginnings</a>
• <a href="#">Tower Hamlets Resident's Hub</a>

Details of all partner organisations in the THCAN network and the support they offer can be found in **Appendix 1**

## Benefits of the THCAN network and Referral System

One of the beneficial outcomes of access to the referral system is the facilitation of a move from a signposting to a referrals mindset, within and across organisations. Robust, accountable referrals are more effective than signposting, particularly when supporting clients who may lack the confidence, knowledge and tools to access help themselves. The burden is removed from the service user and they no longer have to repeat their story several times to get support.

THCAN plays a pivotal role in supporting agencies with referrals, ensuring residents can access the full range of support available to them in the easiest way possible ([London Borough of Tower Hamlets: Tower Hamlets Community Advice Network | Local Government Association](#))

THCAN's combination of a strong network and referral mechanism also plays a pivotal role in supporting agencies in Tower Hamlets with improved efficiency and consistency of the referral process.

The system is flexible and easy to use, it empowers agencies to manage their capacity, raise the profile of the support they can offer, and direct people elsewhere when their needs can be best served by another organisation.

The THCAN referral system remains the primary direct referral system in the borough for organisations to refer people to advice providers and allows the organisations registered on it to cross-refer between each other; **losing it would represent a real setback in coordination and delivery of crisis support for Tower Hamlets organisations and residents.**

- *THCAN is a great platform for accessing and linking in with various advice centres across the VCSE sector via a referral pathways to access to vital services. **Senior Practitioner (THEIS)***

By bringing referrals across agencies into one space, the network and system not only increases awareness of the breadth of services available, increasing access, but also allows referring agents to track their referrals, preventing clients from slipping through the net.

The system also allows for insight development through top level analysis of referral data, illuminating emerging issues, trends and resident needs in a measurable way. There is significant scope for borough-wide reporting linking together teams and providing whole-system insight into how to best support residents.

- *Tower Hamlets is so dense with support but it can feel so scattered and disparate. THCAN fulfils an amazing and vital role of pulling everything together in one space, making supporting people so much easier and faster, and also helping us to build stronger and long standing connections, networks and familiarity between services, which is so important for me and my work. **DH Connector - Safe Connections Community Suicide Prevention Hub***

## THCAN referral platform statistics since beginning till September 2025

The following figures illustrate numbers of referrals made since the system launch.

Referral Data	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025/26 (6 monthly)	Total
No of referral	885	1645	1742	2351	1192	7815
no of issues	1038	1940	2983	3257	1609	10827

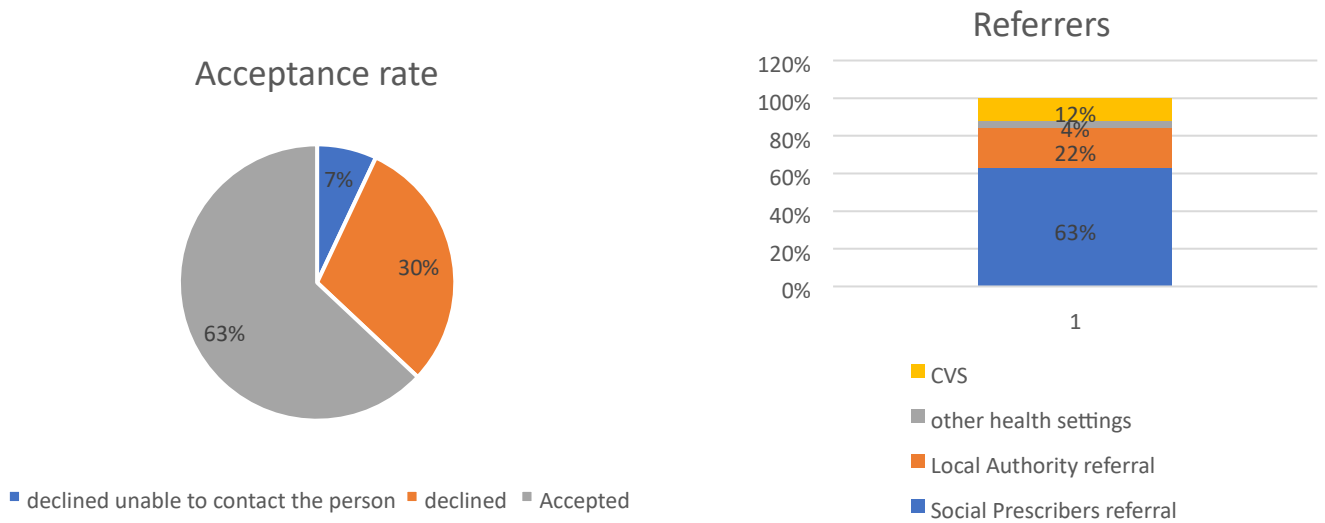
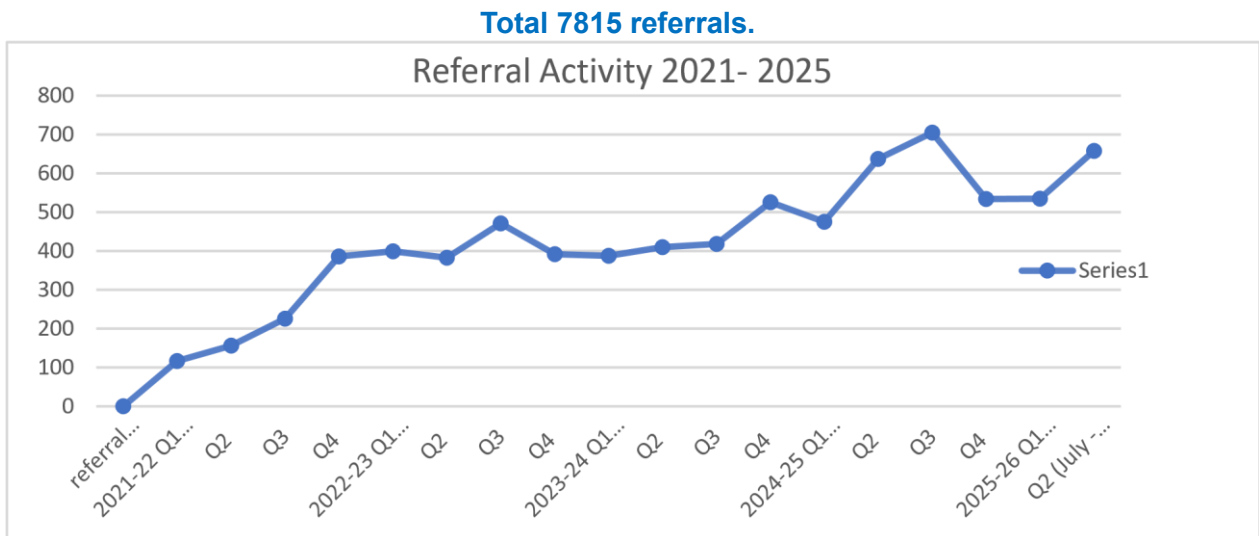


Figure 1. Quarterly referrals made via the THCAN system since launch.



Referrals continue to **increase** and often referrals are for **multiple issues** highlighting the **complex need** of residents but also the need for collaborative and accountable work across different services to ensure **holistic support** for residents with complex underlying issues

Figure 2 referrals and issues referred via THCAN system since launch.(10827 issues)

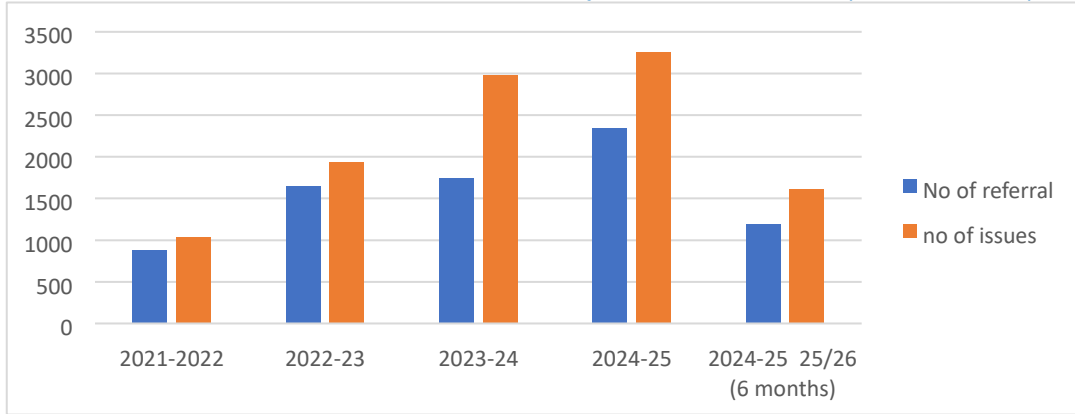
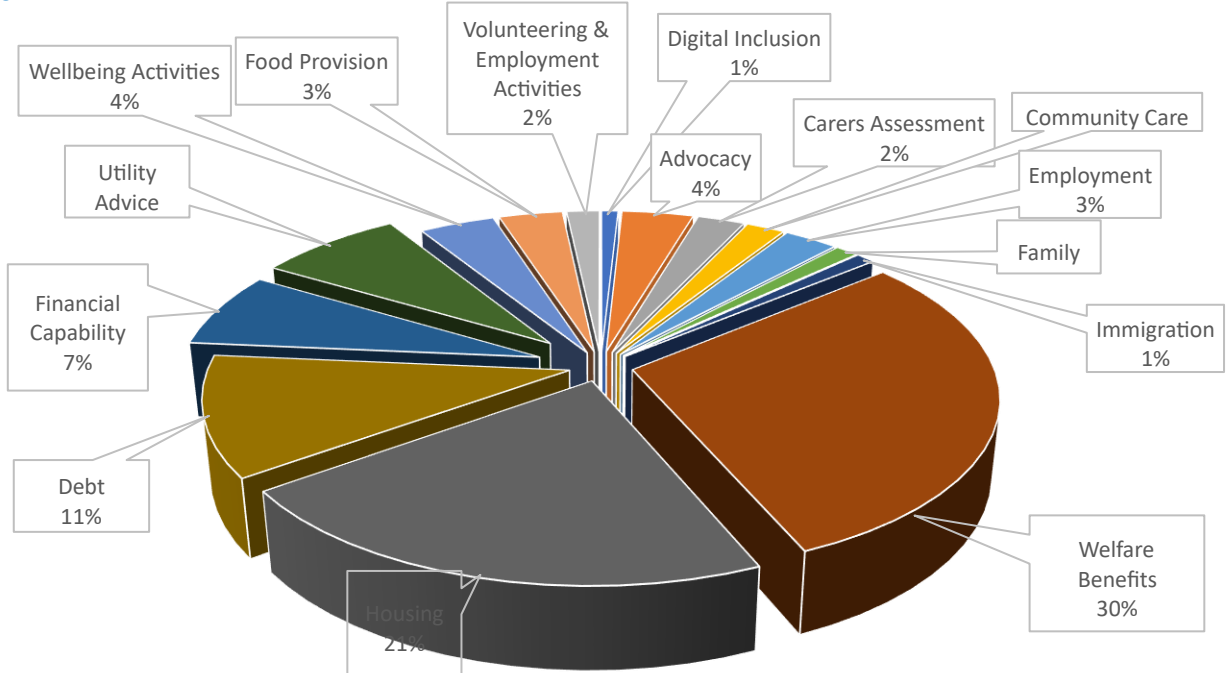


Figure 3 Breakdown of Issues referred across the network



There is a clear demand for Welfare rights advice, closely followed by housing and then financial matter (debt, utility and financial capability) identified by front line workers. These are the main area of social welfare advice and demands for advice in these areas have risen steadily over the life span of the project:

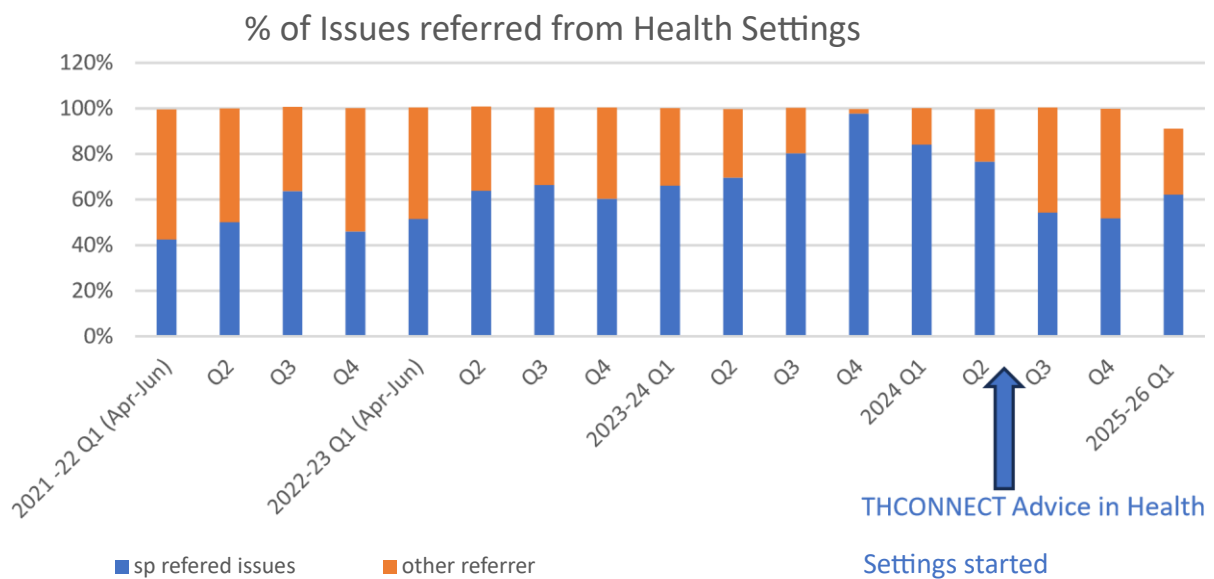
## THCAN referral platform and Health Settings

The advice provided by THCAN receiving partners helps to improve people’s social determinants of health (e.g. income, housing, employment etc) leading to relatively immediate improvements in short-term mental health and well-being, reducing financial strain and generating considerable financial returns (Woodhead, Khondoker, Lomas & Raine, 2017)

The THCAN referral system has helped these front-line healthcare workers ensure legal matters across a wide range of areas of law are advised on and addressed, and that clients are able to access their full benefit entitlement by making trackable and accountable referrals via this system

Over the lifespan of the referral network, referrals originating from health settings accounts for approximately **60% of all referrals activities** (figure 5)

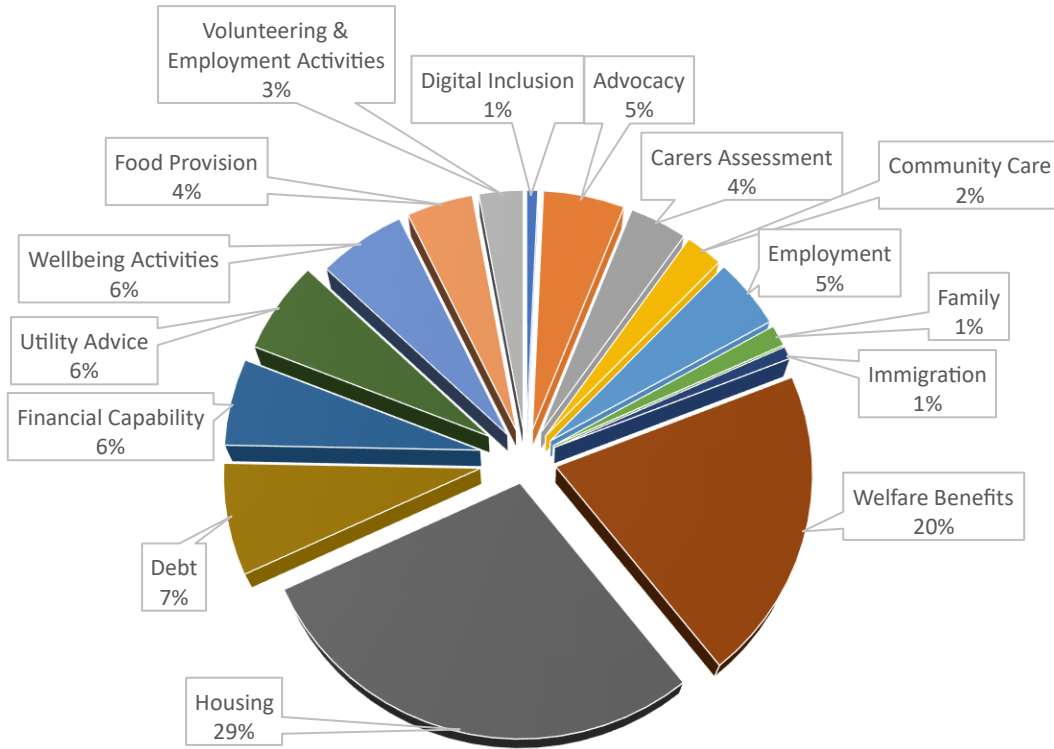
Figure 5. Referrals sent by Social Prescribing Link Worker



The National Social Prescribing Network states that social prescribing “involves empowering individuals to improve their health and wellbeing and social welfare by connecting them to nonmedical and community support services”. It is a way for healthcare services to refer people to a link worker who is trained to use a **holistic approach to support people’s health and wellbeing** (in its broadest sense), by giving people time to focus on ‘what matters to me’. They then connect or refer people to community groups and statutory services for practical and emotional support.

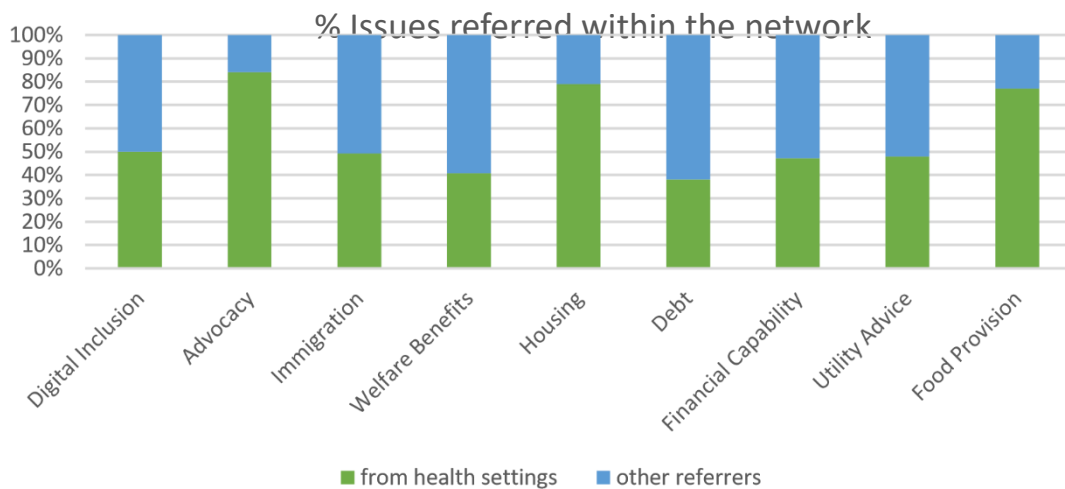
The THCAN referrals shows referrals originating from health settings are for multiple support varied as shown in figure 6

Figure 6. Issues referred into THCAN from health settings



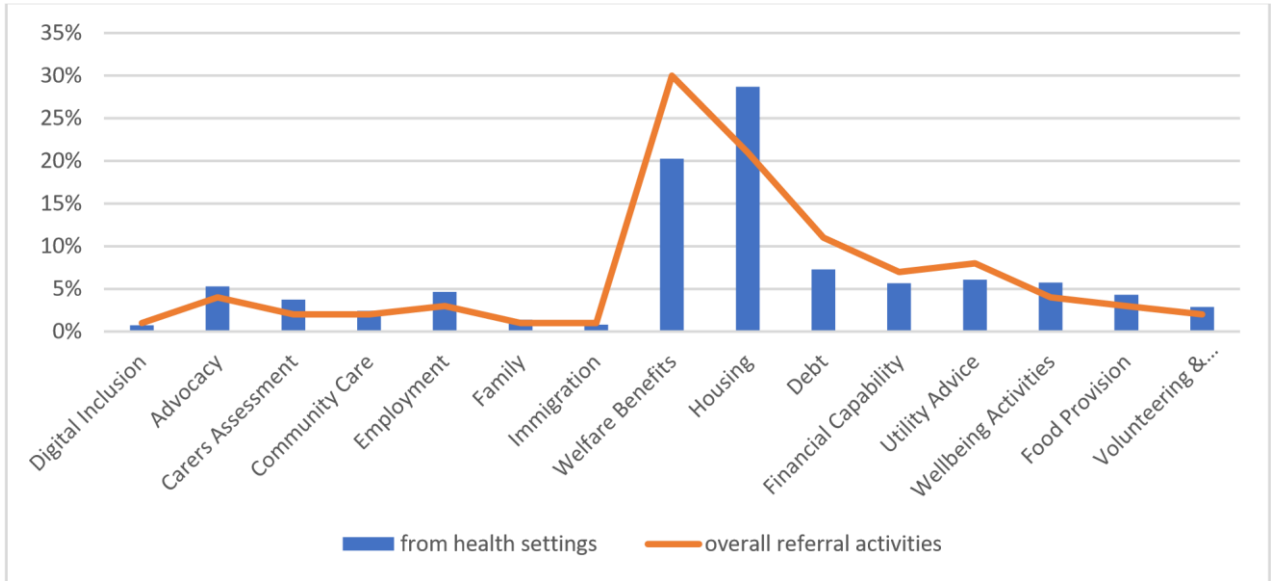
When breaking down referrals per issues, it becomes evident front line workers in health settings have to deal with people in need of ongoing support to access services (**Advocacy: 84%**) followed by residents having housing issues affecting their health (**80% of all referrals for housing originates from health settings**) and then food poverty (**77%**).

Figure 7. overall % of Issues referred into THCAN from health settings

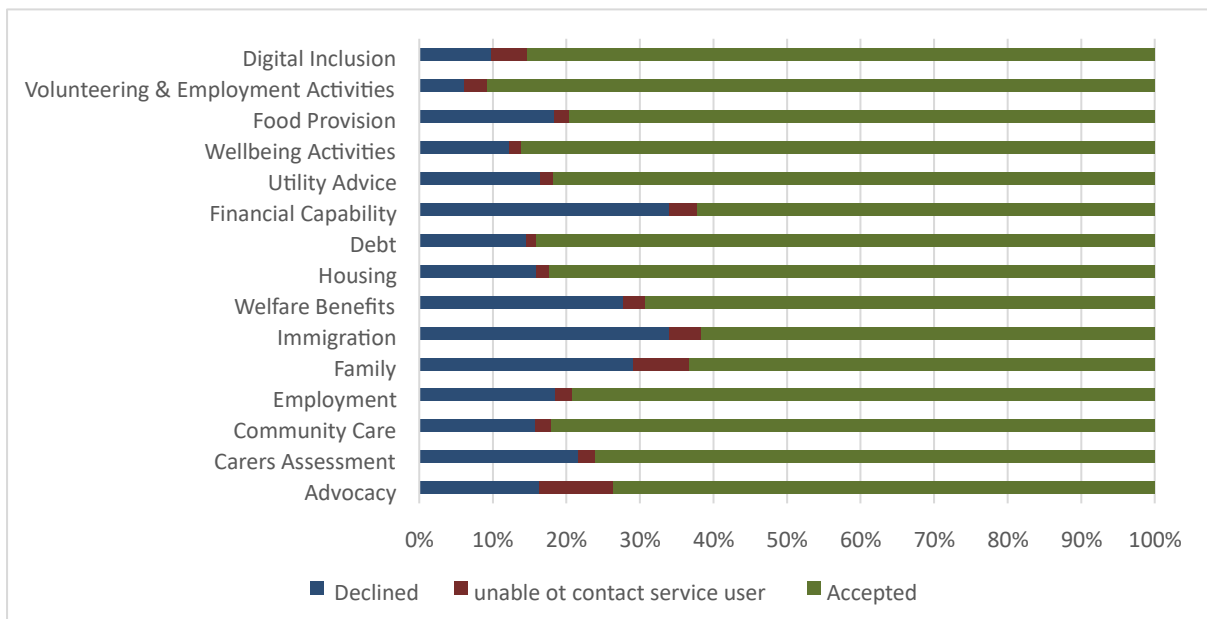


Despite identifying residents facing food poverty (77% of food provision referrals originates from health settings), referral to social welfare support to address poverty (ie. **welfare benefits, debt, financial capability**) is below the average rate of referral compared to the whole network – this might be a learning need from health settings front line workers to identify social welfare issues when identifying food poverty.

**Figure 8. Comparison of THCAN referral from health settings to whole network**



**Figure 9. Acceptance rate of THCAN referrals from health settings per issue**



## THCAN referral platform and the Local Authority

In Tower Hamlets, the council’s Tackling Poverty team are using the THCAN system since June 2021 accepting and making referrals.

In June 2024, the LBTH resident hub also joined the THCAN referral platform as a referrer only organisation. This led to the numbers of referrals rising considerably.

Figure 10. Referral Activity between Local Authority and VSC sector

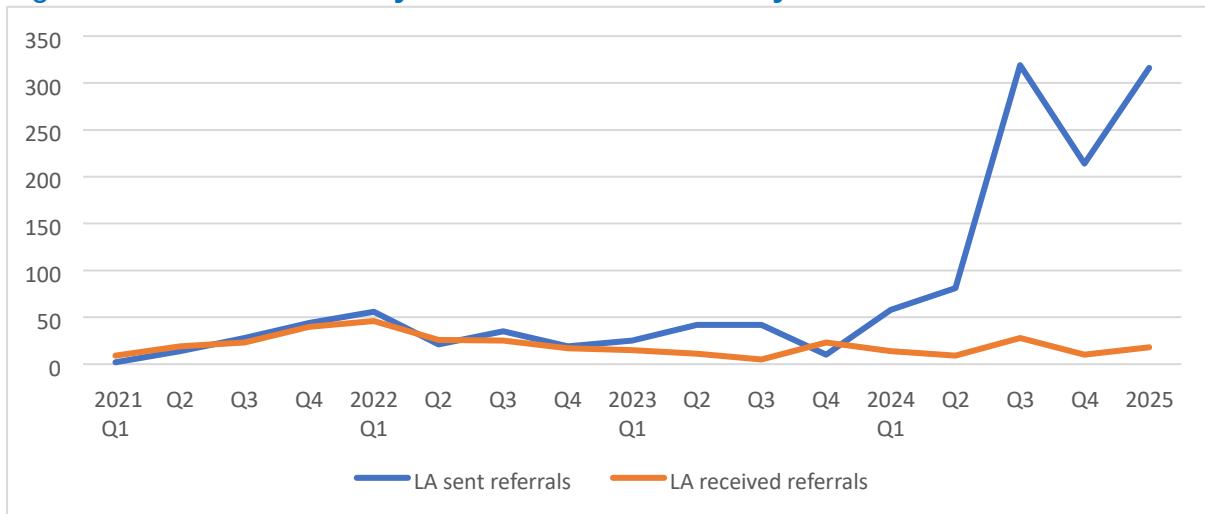
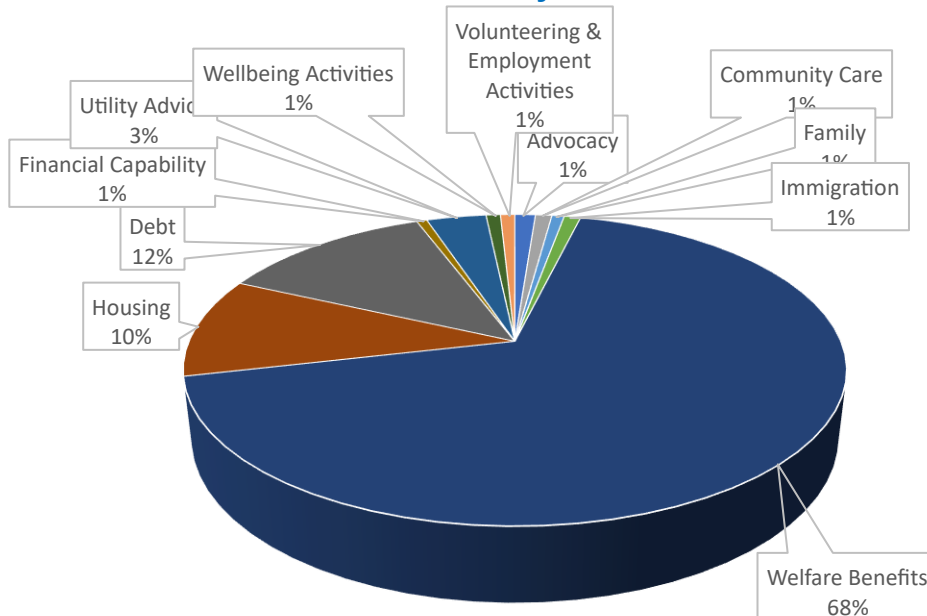


Figure 11. Breakdown of referred issues by LA

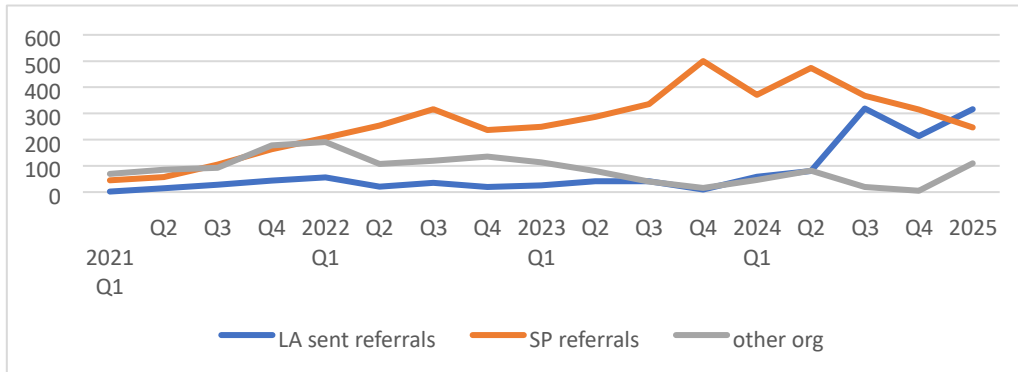


Engagement across the council is advantageous, as increased use of the system across teams yields greater coordinated impact. Evidence from THCAN referral activities evidences a need from the statutory to refer into the voluntary sector.

## THCAN, Health Settings & the Local Authority together

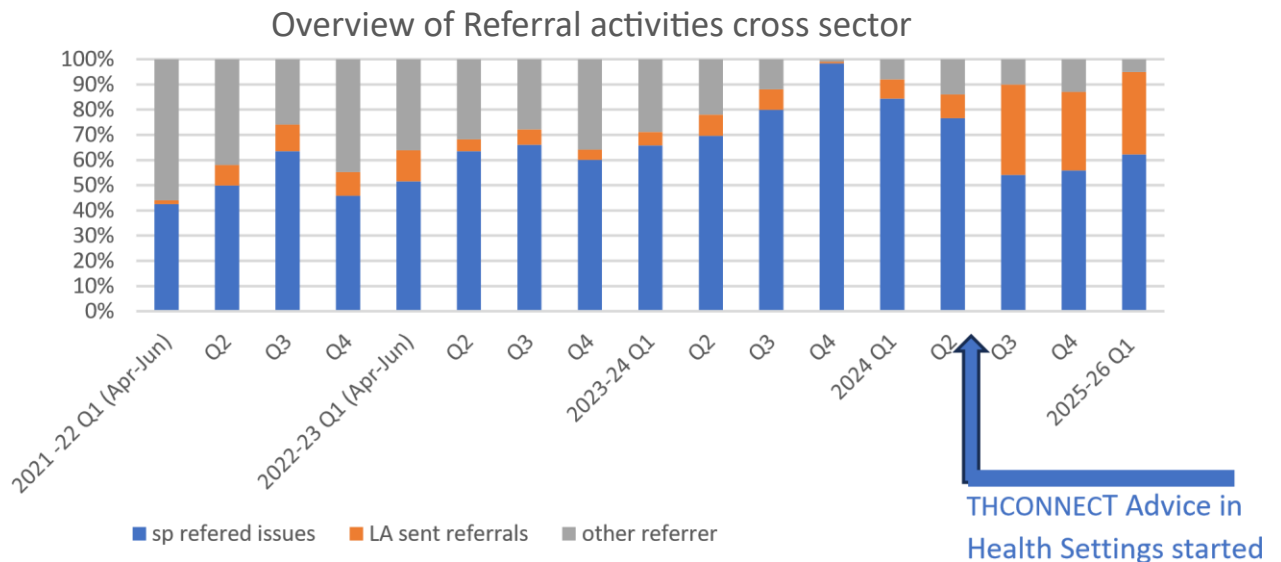
**Resources for organisations accepting referrals are key** to ensure collaboration and coordination of support between the statutory and voluntary sector.

Figure 12. Referral demand across sector



For the Referral network to expand, accepting organisation need to have resources to meet the growing demand from referrers.

Figure 13. Overview of referral activities cross sector



The demand for the services needs to be balanced with the resources available as **slicing the cake doesn't make it bigger**. Ultimately, increasing the number of referrer will impact on the overall availability of referral acceptance from receiving organisation.

In Tower Hamlets, the increase of advice in health settings enabled the THCAN referral to meet the additional demand from the Local Authority.

### 3- Information Sharing, training and updates

THCAN has continued to share information and social welfare updates to ensure front line workers are kept up to date.

THCAN produces a **monthly newsletter** which has over **800** subscribers, facilitate quarterly welfare rights forums & network meetings and maintains the **THCAN website** which was viewed more than **9000 views** in the last year.

In 2025, THCAN continue to deliver training to front line worker on social welfare issues including

- 2 Advice First Aid 2 days training to 43 to non-advice front line worker, 63% of which work in health settings.
- 5 Introductions to Social Welfare Sessions to social prescribers;
- 3 housing training session : Medical priority and Housing tenure,
- 2 Learning to Advice Accredited Course cohort (49 participants)
- 12 NVQ workshops for City and Guilds NVQ Level 3 in Advice And Guidance

THCAN has continued to facilitate **quarterly welfare rights forums** where front line workers as well as DWP and Local Government can discuss social welfare right issues faced by residents in view of improving communication, policy and procedure

THCAN has also been highly in strategic meetings with the Local Authority, Family hub and Public health to give **a voice to the Social Welfare Advice providers** in the borough.

### Benefits of the THCAN network and Training & Information Sharing

Training and information sharing is key to develop and maintain front line workers' knowledge and understanding of social welfare issues and the local support available. This in turn strengthens the network and improve effective referrals across the network

- **Increase the capacity** of community, voluntary and statutory partners to:
  - Spot advice issues,
  - Provide accurate and useful information, and signposting - Know how, and when, to refer to specialist advice providers.
- **Develop local networks**; building stronger links between groups and agencies and reduce the risk of residents falling between the cracks in services as well has been a voice for the VSC sector
- **Improve Referrals and collaborative work**

## 4- Developing the Advice Sector Work Force through the volunteer project

THCAN aims to address the skills shortage and lack of experience in the advice sector of trained, qualified advisors through volunteer training and placement .

THCAN Volunteer project has been running for decades. We recruit volunteers and link them with voluntary work placements in an advice centre in LBTH (THCAN partners). Candidates are offered a 9-month placement and are required to participate for a minimum of two days per week.

This involves carrying out work experience one day a week in an advice centre and attending a class based Social Welfare advice training course one day a week. Following completion of the accredited course, candidates have the opportunity to complete a funded NVQ Level 3 in Advice and Guidance from City & Guild in their placement in an advice provider setting. During the year 2025, THCAN Volunteer project

- Enrolled 40 participants (2 cohorts – Jan to September / Sept to February 2026))
- 16 NVQs candidates from Cohort 1
- Facilitated placement in 12 different organisations including Bromley by Bow Centre, Real, Apasen, Island House, Tower Hamlets Law Centre, Island Advice Centre, Middlesex University, Stifford Centre, Wapping Bangladeshi Association , Neighbours in Poplar

### Benefits of the THCAN Volunteer Project

By training volunteers, THCAN increases the resources for advice providers to deliver social welfare issues to residents while skilling up local people who have lived in experience and developing a new work force for the advice sector.

Last year Volunteer project increased the provision of advice workers by 2.2 FTE

- *Taking Age UK East London as an example, we have **three advisors and two volunteers working in our services who came into the sector as volunteers trained by Island Advice under the aegis of THCAN.** I can honestly say that we would **not have been able to continue to deliver our advice service throughout the pandemic and during the cost-of-living crisis without THCAN** previously having supplied us with **motivated, skilled advice volunteers** who often go on to become **paid employees and long-serving community champions.** The numbers of people supported and the income they have generated for our most vulnerable residents is huge and often **life changing.** (AP Age UK)*

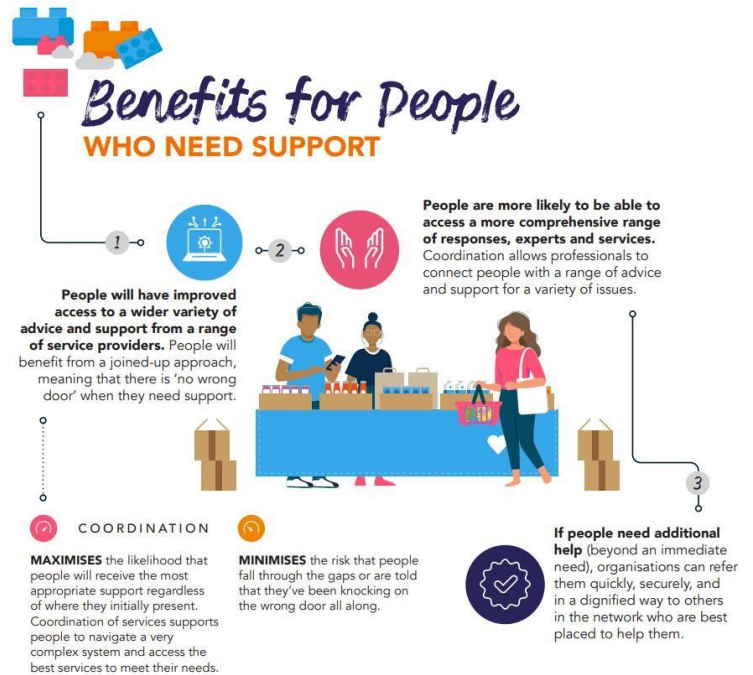
## 5- Plans going forward within Tower Hamlets:

Over the past 4 years THCAN, and its lead, Island Advice Centre has successfully launch and embedded the referral system in the borough.

As more partners join it, it will deliver **increased benefits to support both providers and residents.**

However, in times when demand is high, and resources are stretched, it is essential that the local authority and health settings demonstrate a commitment to a network led referral system **to avoid its suspension and potential ending.**

For the referral network to continue to develop and function, the need for coordination and sustainability is essential. A network of agencies with a strong track record of communication is the foundation to effective coordination.



Improving coordination takes time and resource – there is a cost involved. But, as the points above illustrate, professionals report improved efficiencies and a good return on investment.

For the referral network to continue successfully, **key members** (especially referral receiving organisations) need to continue to **engage** and promote the use of the system.

Furthermore for the referral system to continue successfully, it is essential that front line workers' **understanding of social welfare is developed and maintained** so that they become **problem noticers and effective referrer.**

For a cross organisational referral network to be effective, it is essential to be able to provide a **supportive environment** to fro line workers to develop and maintain their **knowledge** and understanding of social welfare issues and the **local support available.**

## Appendix 1 - Registered Organisations

Organisations currently registered to use the THCAN referral portal, approximately two organisations join each month

	<u>Organisation</u>	<u>Status</u>	<u>Registration date</u>
1.	Account3		Aug-21
2.	Age UK		Oct-21
3.	Aishah Help		Aug-21
4.	APASEN		Jul-24
5.	Bangabandhu Primary School	referrer only	Feb-22
6.	Barts Health NHS Trust - Renal	referrer only	Mar-24
7.	Barts Health NHS Trust - THCNT (Neuro Team)	referrer only	Oct-24
8.	Barts Health Social Prescribing	referrer only	May-25
9.	Bow and Poplar Neighbourhood Mental Health Team	referrer only	Oct-24
10.	Bow Food Bank	referrer only	Jan-23
11.	Bromley by Bow Centre		Mar-21
12.	Bromley by Bow Centre - Grey Matter (over 65s only)		Jun-25
13.	Carers Centre Tower Hamlets		Aug-21
14.	Chisenhale School	referrer only	Feb-22
15.	Clean Slate		Dec-21
16.	Community Navigators	referrer only	Aug-24
17.	Create Hub	referrer only	Jul-25
18.	Cubitt Town Primary School	referrer only	Aug-25
19.	Deaf Plus		Apr-21
20.	DeafPlus Health & Wellbeing		Jan-22
21.	Debt Free Advice (Toynbee Hall)		Sep-21
22.	E14 Billy's Pantry (@Island House Community Centre)		Mar-24
23.	East End CAB		Oct-21
24.	Family Action		Aug-22
25.	Family Action Fuel Your Finances		Jul-25
26.	First Love Foundation		Aug-22
27.	Gateway Housing Association	referrer only	Feb-22

28.	ICM Foundation CIC	referrer only	Jul-25
29.	IOD Neighbourhood Mental Health Team	referrer only	Sep-24
30.	Island Advice Centre		Mar-21
31.	Island House SKILLS		Apr-22
32.	LEAP	referrer only	Oct-22
33.	Limehouse Project		Mar-21
34.	LinkAge Plus		Sep-23
35.	Look Ahead ILCS	referrer only	May-22
36.	Manorfield School	referrer only	Feb-22

37.	Mind in Tower Hamlets, Newham & Redbridge		Jun-22
38.	Neighbours In Poplar		Mar-23
39.	Ocean Regeneration		Jun-24
40.	Positive East		Jul-23
41.	Praxis		Aug-22
42.	REAL Advocacy		May-22
43.	Rooted Finance ( formerly Fair Money Advice)		Mar-21
44.	Social Prescribers Tower Hamlets	referrer only	Nov-21
45.	Social Prescribers Tower Hamlets - Network 1 - The Mission Practice	referrer only	Nov-21
46.	Social Prescribers Tower Hamlets - Network 6 - Bromley by Bow HC	referrer only	Nov-21
47.	Social Prescribers Tower Hamlets - Network 6 - St Andrews HC	referrer only	Nov-21
48.	Social Prescribers Tower Hamlets - Network 6 - St Paul's Way MC	referrer only	Nov-21
49.	Social Prescribers Tower Hamlets - Network 6 - Wellington Way HC	referrer only	Nov-21
50.	Social Prescribers Tower Hamlets - Network 6 - XX Place	referrer only	Nov-21
51.	Social Prescribers Tower Hamlets - Network 9 - City Square group	referrer only	Nov-21
52.	Social Prescribers Tower Hamlets - Network 9 - Goodmans Field	referrer only	Nov-21
53.	Social Prescribers Tower Hamlets - Network 9 - Harford HC	referrer only	Nov-21
54.	Social Prescribers Tower Hamlets - Network 9 - Jubilee Street	referrer only	Nov-21

55.	Social Prescribers Tower Hamlets - Network 9 -St Katharines Dock	referrer only	Nov-21
56.	Social Prescribers Tower Hamlets - Network 9 -The Wapping Group	referrer only	Nov-21
57.	Social Prescribers Tower Hamlets - Social Prescribers Network 1	referrer only	Nov-21
58.	Social Prescribers Tower Hamlets - Social Prescribers Network 2	referrer only	Nov-21
59.	Social Prescribers Tower Hamlets - Social Prescribers Network 5	referrer only	Nov-21
60.	Social Prescribers Tower Hamlets - Social Prescribers Network 7	referrer only	Nov-21
61.	Social Prescribers Tower Hamlets - Social Prescribers Network 8	referrer only	Apr-21
62.	Spitalfields Housing Association	referrer only	Jan-22
63.	St Hilda's Advice Services		Nov-21
64.	St Hilda's Programmes		Nov-21
65.	Stifford Centre		Apr-22
66.	St Margaret's House		Dec-22
67.	TH Connect partnership		Mar-22
68.	TH Connect partnership - AGE UK		Mar-22
69.	TH Connect partnership - Apasen		Mar-22
70.	TH Connect partnership - Island Advice Centre		Mar-22
71.	TH Connect partnership - Limehouse Project		Mar-22
72.	TH Connect partnership - Positive East		Mar-22
73.	TH Connect partnership - REAL		Mar-22
74.	TH Connect partnership - Tower Hamlets Law Centre		Mar-22
75.	THCVS	referrer only	May-24
76.	THEIS	referrer only	Sep-23
77.	The Start for Life Social Prescribers - Bright Beginnings	referrer only	Jan-25
78.	Tower Hamlets Council		Jun-21
79.	Tower Hamlets Law Centre		Jun-21
80.	Tower Hamlets Resident's Hub	referrer only	Jun-24
81.	Toynbee Hall		May-21
82.	Working Well Trust Upskill Project		Nov-21
83.	WorkPath		Mar-23

## Appendix 2. Other References

- For short videos of the system, user handbook etc: [THCAN Referral System - THCAN](#)
- Privacy Notice: [THCAN-Referral-System-Privacy-Notice.pdf](#)
- Policy and Procedures: [Policy-and-Procedure-for-use-THCAN-referral-system-Feb-21.pdf](#)
- THCAN Annual Review 2022: [THCAN-Referrals-Annual-review-2022-.pdf](#)
- THCAN Annual Review 2023 [Annual-Review-2023.pdf](#)
- THCAN Annual Review Quarter 1 to Quarter 3 [Microsoft PowerPoint - Presentation1\( THCAN Quaterly Data Q1-Q3\)](#)
- [London Borough of Tower Hamlets: Tower Hamlets Community Advice Network | Local Government Association](#)
- [CCL slides \(childrenssociety.org.uk\)](#)
- [content.adviceuk.org.uk/advice-works-report](#)

## Appendix 3 – Hut 42 - A Secure Online Referral System

Island Advice Centre (lead on THCAN) currently has an SLA with Hut 42 Services Ltd for a licence to the online referral system.

### The Supplier: Hut 42 services limited

Hut 42 Service Ltd have been working alongside advice networks since 2018 to create a white label referral system which can deliver operational success for advice agencies who are looking to simplify their referral process.

Hut 42 take their Corporate Social Responsibility seriously, and have maintained an approach that is flexible, generous and offers realistic solutions. They clearly understand the voluntary sector and why access to advice is so important.

The Referral System has been built to encompass the Cloud Security Principals outlined by the **National Cyber Security Centre**.

### Data Security

Hut 42 fully understands the importance of Data security and take their customers' data security seriously. They build their platform using best practices for highly available, scalable, and secure cloud applications.

### Data Ownership

The Supplier (Hut 42 Service Ltd) accepts that all names and addresses and other personal data accruing from the Project are the sole property of the Client (Island Advice Centre, lead of THCAN)

The Supplier undertakes that they will not be used for any other purpose whatsoever, other than the proper fulfilment of the Project in accordance with the license agreement, or as otherwise directed in writing by the Client.