



Federation Northern Ireland

RESPONSE TO

**COMMITTEE FOR SOCIAL
DEVELOPMENT**

HOUSING (AMENDMENT) BILL

August 2009

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24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline - 0800 917 1414

Core work of Women's Aid: Background information & statistics

1. Introduction

Women's Aid is the lead voluntary organisation in Northern Ireland addressing domestic violence and providing services for women and children. We recognise domestic violence as one form of violence against women. Women's Aid seeks to challenge attitudes and beliefs that perpetuate domestic violence and, through our work, promote healthy and non-abusive relationships.

2. Core Work of Women's Aid

The core work of Women's Aid in Northern Ireland, including Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland and the 10 local Women's Aid groups is:

- To provide refuge accommodation to women and their children suffering mental, physical or sexual abuse within the home.
- To run the 24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline.
- To provide a range of support services to enable women who are leaving a violent situation to rebuild their lives and the lives of their children.
- To provide a range of support services to children and young people who have experienced domestic violence.
- To run preventative education programmes in schools and other settings.
- To educate and inform the public, media, police, courts, social services and other agencies of the impact and effects of domestic violence.
- To advise and support all relevant agencies in the development of domestic violence policies, protocols and service delivery.

- To work in partnership with all relevant agencies to ensure a joined up response to domestic violence.

3. Women's Aid Statistics (2007 - 2008)

- 12 refuges with 300 bed spaces, playrooms and facilities.
- 1102 women and 896 children sought refuge.
- 15 resource centres for women seeking information and support; group work and training.
- 24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline managed 24,153 calls.
- 2,205 women and 1,831 children accessed the Floating Support enabling women to access support whilst remaining in their own homes and communities.
- 2,767 children and young people accessed protection and support services.
- Move-on houses for women and children leaving refuges.

4. **Statistics: Domestic Violence & Violence Against Women**

- Domestic violence is a violation of Article 5 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights – that “no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”;
- Domestic Violence is a crime. PSNI statistics for 2008/09 indicate that there were more recorded crimes with a domestic motivation (9,211) than the combined total of all the following crimes (9,155). These include all recorded sexual offences

(1,943), robbery (650), armed robbery (508), hijacking (125), theft or unauthorised taking of a motor vehicle (2,954), arson (2,002) dangerous driving (746), handling stolen goods (220) and offences under anti-terrorism legislation (7).

- PSNI Statistics for 08/09 indicate that they responded to a domestic incident every 22 minutes of every day of the year.
- The number of all recorded offences of murder in Northern Ireland in 08/09 total 24. Those classed as having a domestic motivation total 7. Therefore, 29.2% of all murders in Northern Ireland in 08/09 had a domestic motivation.
- There were 381 rapes and 23 attempted rapes in Northern Ireland in the period 2008/09.

(Source: PSNI Statistics 2008/09)

- Official sources (NISOSMC) estimate that up to 80% of sex crimes are not reported.
- The joint NIO, DHSSPS Strategy “Tackling Violence at Home” estimates that the cost of domestic violence in Northern Ireland, including the potential loss of economic output, could amount to £180 million each year.
- UNICEF research released in 2006, showing per capita incidence, indicates that there are up to 32,000 children and young people living with domestic violence in Northern Ireland.

- Where the gender of the victim was known, 76% of adult victims of domestic crimes recorded by the PSNI in 2007/08 were female.*
- Over 30% of all domestic violence starts during pregnancy.**
- Violence Against Women is not limited to domestic violence, it includes amongst other crimes murder, rape, sexual assault, sexual exploitation, trafficking, sexual stalking and sexual harassment.

(*NIO Statistics & Research Branch Bulletin 16/2008 “Experience of Domestic Violence: Findings from the 2007/08 Northern Ireland Crime Survey, 2008, pg.2. N.B. “Adult” defined as aged 17 and over)

(** Women’s Aid Federation NI)

Women’s Aid Federation NI welcomes the introduction of the Housing (Amendment) Bill in the Northern Ireland Assembly on 9 June 2009 and the opportunity to comment upon the Bill on behalf of our members.

We would wish to endorse the following comments and observations by the Council for the Homeless in Northern Ireland.

Clause 1: Statutory requirement to produce a Homelessness Strategy

Women’s Aid welcomes the stipulation that ensures a statutory duty for the NIHE to formulate and publish a homelessness strategy every 5 years (6A; 6A(5)). Homelessness has increased in recent years in Northern Ireland and this has been a major cause for concern for all those with an interest in housing issues. However, homelessness is not an isolated problem, but part of a broader

phenomenon of social exclusion. Promoting the inclusion of people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness requires a co-ordinated approach from Government departments (6A(5); 6B; 6B(2,3,5,8)). This has been clearly specified in 'Including the Homeless – a strategy to promote social inclusion (PSI) of those homeless or at risk of homelessness in NI'¹. This strategy specifically states that Government Departments will work in partnership and collaboratively, together with other social partners to

'promote the social inclusion of the homeless and those at risk of becoming homeless as a top priority (or appropriate priority) within the context of Lifetime Opportunities and adopt a cross departmental, cross-sectoral approach, forging joint working partnerships with others to promote dialogue and facilitate better strategic planning'.

To effect the Strategy, a cross-departmental, cross-sectoral Steering Group has been established². This remains the best placed vehicle for ensuring focused, collaborative working. Women's Aid shares CHNI's opinion that the elements of the bill that outline the statutory requirement of the NIHE to produce a homelessness strategy be strengthened to include the mandate of this working group. Inter-departmental working has ensured success in tackling homelessness elsewhere in the UK, and through flexible use of resources, measurable outcomes, and shared accountability, has had significant impact on the reduction and prevention of homelessness. In order for partnership working of this type to be both accountable and effective, ongoing monitoring and evaluation, mandated at Executive level, is a necessity. This would necessarily include a review of the progress made in implementing joint working arrangements, ensuring all relevant agencies were able to fulfil their agreed responsibilities. In light of these comments, as with CHNI, we would like to see article 6B(4) omitted, as its inclusion will potentially serve to act against any agreed responsibilities being met.

¹ Including the Homeless. DSDNI, July 2007.

² PSI (Homelessness) Steering Group

Women's Aid also welcome the strategy as it applies to persons in Northern Ireland seemingly without exclusions based on nationality or immigration status (6B (1)). On this basis, we anticipate that the homelessness strategy will focus on all those at risk of homelessness or assessed as homeless in Northern Ireland. Whilst welcomed in principle, serious consideration regarding practical implementation and funding is required in order for this to successfully apply to A10 citizens and those of similar status. Further clarification is also required with regards to the definition and interpretation of key terms such as 'sufficient accommodation' and 'satisfactory provision of advice and assistance', particularly in reference to these groups.

Eligibility for housing assistance (j22a)

Women's Aid agrees with the amendment of the rules regarding the allocation of housing, replacing 'applicant' with 'person'.

Introductory tenancies (j41)

We accept the elements in the Bill regarding introductory tenancies.

Relating to clauses outlining prescription of advice and assistance and a right to review of decisions.

We join with CHNI in welcoming the steps taken in the Bill to ensure all persons are furnished with appropriate advice and information, and informed of decisions in writing (6D; 3-5.; 11A-11D). We also welcome clause 5 outlining the statutory right of review of NIHE decisions and a right of appeal on points of law, and the requirement for NIHE to publish its policies and procedures in relation to anti-social behaviour. To ensure that information about, and mechanisms for, eligibility, rights, review and appeal are accessible to all, it is important that the format and content of all materials, including correspondence, are appropriate in terms of language and understanding.

Changes in definition of a HMO (j75)

Women's Aid welcomes the revision of the definition of a HMO ('miscellaneous', 14.), and its implications in regard to large extended family occupation (as in case of migrant workers).

Power to obtain information from registered housing associations / Disclosure of information to the Department (6.-9.)

We are not in a position to comment on strengthening measures for the Department's regulatory role in respect of the Housing Associations, as it is outside our remit.

Anti-social behaviour (j218A); Increase in Housing Council representation (js1); miscellaneous (12.-16.)

Women's Aid accepts the elements in the Bill regarding Anti-social behaviour, Housing Council representation, as well as other miscellaneous comments stated in the Bill. However we are extremely alarmed by reported incidents of women having their tenancy agreements terminated as a result of "noise nuisance" consequent to incidents of domestic violence and abuse and would urge that cases are thoroughly investigated.

For further information about this response contact:

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