



The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

A Response to: The Draft Rural White Paper – Action Plan

June 2011

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24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline - 0800 917 1414

Core Work of Women's Aid: Background Information & Statistics

1.0 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.

2.0 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.

3.0 Women's Aid Statistics (2009 - 2010)

- 12 refuges with 300 bed spaces, playrooms and facilities.
- 1077 women and 854 children sought refuge.
- 15 resource centres for women seeking information and support; group work and training.
- 2,938 women and 3,617 children accessed the Floating Support service enabling women to access support whilst remaining in their own homes and communities.
- Move-on houses for women and children leaving refuges.
- In 2009/10 the 24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline, open to anyone affected by domestic violence, managed 32,349 calls. This represented an increase of 17% on 2008/09.

4.0 Additional Women's Aid Statistical Data

- Since 1999, Women's Aid across Northern Ireland gave refuge to 13,656 women and 13,602 children and young people.
- During the last 15 years Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland managed 244,564 calls to the 24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline.

5.0 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”;
- 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, 75% of adult victims of domestic crimes recorded by the PSNI in 2009/10 were female.*
- Over 30% of all domestic violence starts during pregnancy. **

6.0 Domestic Violence: Crime Statistics

- Domestic Violence is a crime. PSNI statistics for 2010/11 indicate that there were more recorded crimes with a domestic motivation (9,546) than the combined total of all the following crimes (9,471). These include all recorded sexual offences (2,120), robbery (622), armed robbery (562), hijacking (122), theft or unauthorised taking of a motor vehicle (2719), arson (1884) dangerous driving (699), handling stolen goods (194) and offences under anti-terrorism legislation (19).
- PSNI Statistics for 10/11 indicate that they responded to a domestic incident every 23 minutes of every day of the year.
- The total of 9,546 crimes with a domestic motivation in 10/11 represents an average of approximately 1 domestic crime every 60 minutes in Northern Ireland.
- The number of all recorded offences of murder in Northern Ireland in 10/11 total 20. Those classed as having a domestic motivation total 7. Therefore, 35% of all murders in Northern Ireland in 10/11 had a domestic motivation.
- There were 550 rapes (including attempted Rapes) in Northern Ireland in the period 2010/11.

(Source: PSNI Statistics 2010/11)

- Official sources (NISOSMC) estimate that up to 80% of sex crimes are not reported.
- 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.

(*Findings from the PSNI Crime Statistics Report 2010/11 N.B. "Adult" defined as aged 18 and over)

(** Women's Aid Federation NI)

7.0 Comments

- 7.1 Women's Aid Federation NI welcomes the publication of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's Draft Rural White Paper Action Plan and the opportunity to comment upon the document on behalf of our ten local groups. The following comments reflect their collective views.

8.0 Questions:

1. **The consultation document sets out a *vision* for rural areas and associated key *policy priorities*.**

- a. Do you think the *vision* for rural areas reflects how you would wish to see the future of rural area? Please comment as appropriate.

Women's Aid sees the publication of the Rural White Paper Draft Action Plan as a very positive development, particularly in light of the extensive engagement and investment by stakeholders throughout the planning stage. We sincerely hope that the Rural White Paper will continue to be a Ministerial and Departmental priority going forward.

We fully support the stated vision, "of a fair and inclusive rural society where rural dwellers enjoy the same quality of life as all others in the region." (Pg.5) However, it is essential that the terms "fair" and "inclusive" are not merely aspirational concepts but have a genuinely meaningful application to the lives of those living in rural communities. As such, what is meant, in a practical sense, by these statements, should be carefully detailed and supported by positive actions.

Our organisation welcomes the reference contained in the Draft Action Plan, to maintaining within rural communities, a "strong community infrastructure which can avail of economic, social and cultural opportunities." (Pg.5)

- b. Do you think there are other *policy priorities* which should be included? If so, please specify which and explain why.

We commend the policy priority to support the development of an efficient transport and infrastructure system, which in addition to expanding opportunity and mobility generally, is essential, particularly for more vulnerable, isolated and at risk members of the community, including women and children who have experienced domestic violence and who may require access to

vital support services both within their local communities and beyond.

However it is extremely disappointing to note that there is no mention of initiatives designed to bring services to rural areas. Rather the focus appears to be on providing transport to allow those living in rural communities to commute to urban areas. Further, in the context of Access to Services (Pg.6) Women's Aid would seek greater clarification as to what is meant by the term "key services." It is also extremely disappointing to note that there is only one policy priority in this context. In addition, we would suggest that rather than seeking merely to "promote" fair and equitable access to key services for all rural dwellers, there should be a stated commitment to working to "deliver" in this regard. We are also somewhat concerned that the focus on services for "all" may fail to recognise the differing experiences and needs of individual rural people. A failure to acknowledge this complexity of need and the reality of multiple identities represents a serious omission.

We would also question who will ultimately determine what constitutes "fair and equitable access to key services" and how this will be evaluated.

The stated policy priority of promoting tolerance, health, well-being and inclusion for rural dwellers, should be matched by the stipulation of some key measures of success. Similarly, it is the strongly held opinion of Women's Aid, that any initiatives designed to address health and well-being for rural dwellers must address the issue of domestic violence and its impact upon women and children in rural communities across Northern Ireland. This is equally applicable in respect of the policy priority of seeking to minimise disadvantage, poverty, social exclusion and inequality amongst those living in rural areas and particularly amongst vulnerable groups.

In addition to physical, emotional, psychological and sexual violence and abuse, the experience of women living with domestic violence is frequently that of systematic isolation and of financial abuse and exploitation, often resulting in poverty and debt. Therefore any initiatives designed to address poverty and social inclusion in rural areas must address underlying barriers to economic participation and social engagement, including domestic violence, if it is to make a meaningful and demonstrable difference to the lives of women and children living in these communities.

It is of general note that the language utilised throughout the plan is distinctly non specific, using terms such as "seek to minimise" and "to promote". Women's Aid is concerned that this

is not language commensurate with an Action Plan, which should have measurable outcomes and be capable of both qualitative and quantitative evaluation.

- c. Do you think any of the *policy priorities* should be omitted? If so, please specify which and explain why.

No, however, as discussed, several policy priorities require to be expanded upon in much greater detail.

2. The draft Rural White Paper Action Plan sets out the actions to which Departments have committed. Please consider how realistic and meaningful the proposed actions are and comment on how effective you think they will be:

Women's Aid views Action 5 as a very positive and productive step (Pg.14) specifically, the joint commitment by NISRA and DARD to ensure that appropriate definitions of "rural" are available to policy makers where required. Additionally, training in rural proofing could potentially be very beneficial.

We further welcome Actions 7&8 (Pg.15) which stipulate the development of a new Community Safety Strategy in conjunction with DOJ which will ensure the needs of rural communities are taken into account. In addition to liaising with Community Safety Partnerships in this regard, Women's Aid would request that a wider engagement should take place with organisations such as our own, during the development of the strategy to ensure that key issues such as domestic violence are fully explored.

Further, we would strongly recommend the addition of the Tackling Violence at Home Strategy, under Action 46 (Pg.25), designed to take account of the needs of rural communities in the implementation of health improvement and promotion strategies and attributed to the DHSSPS. The failure to make any reference in the draft action plan, the key cross-departmental, multi-agency Government strategy addressing domestic violence in Northern Ireland, represents a serious omission.

Another significant omission is the absence of any reference in the draft action plan to the OFMDFM Gender Equality Strategy. The strategy has cross-cutting applications and is particularly relevant in the context of a draft plan designed to address issues including poverty, inequality and social exclusion in rural communities.

In respect of Actions 28-32 (Pg.20-21), our organisation would wish to see greater 0-6 Early Years commitments from the Department of Education in respect of rural children and their families. There should also be recognition of the need for preventative education programmes in schools in rural areas, such as those developed by Women's Aid to address domestic violence.

It is essential that pro-active steps are taken to improve access to affordable and social housing in rural areas in Northern Ireland. The commitment contained in Action 37 (Pg.24) to continuing to improve housing conditions in rural areas (subject to funding) is extremely weak and non-specific.

Similarly, Action 39 (Pg.24) which states that, "We will better identify and tackle the causes of poverty and disadvantage in rural areas and to promote social inclusion," offers no detail as to how the process of identification will be carried out and what criteria will be used.

3. Please consider what you think are the key challenges or priorities for rural areas over the next five years?

- Developing a diverse and sustainable economy in rural areas.
- Addressing poverty and social exclusion in rural communities.
- Improving the availability of and access to vital health, social care and support services.

4. What further measures do you think should be included in the draft Rural White Paper Action Plan to help address these key challenges/priorities?

In the context of economic participation and in particular women's engagement in the economy, the absence of any focus on childcare provision is extremely disappointing. There is also a requirement for clear and concise targets for service delivery.

The draft action plan should also stipulate measures to ensure equality of access to services for those living in rural communities, including adequate refuge spaces and support for children and young people experiencing domestic violence.

5. Do you think that the draft Rural White Paper Action Plan needs to focus more on particular issues? If so, please

indicate which issues you think it should focus more on and give reasons for your views.

Women's Aid supports NIRWN's suggestion that greater focus should have been given to working with DHSSPS to develop a specific rural health strategy that concentrated on ensuring equitable access to health services including GPs, Hospitals and Screening Services.

6. What do you think are the main strengths of the draft Rural White Paper Action Plan?

The document does clearly identify a number of important areas which require to be addressed going forward. It also consolidates a wide range of existing projects and initiatives and highlights the necessity for a multi-agency, cross-departmental approach to be taken to address the wide range of needs identified.

7. What do you think are the main weaknesses of the draft Rural White Paper Action Plan?

One of the most disappointing aspects of the document is that the absence of fresh initiatives, innovation and SMART targets makes it appear to be neither a White Paper nor a viable Action Plan. The majority of the actions outlined are not measurable and whilst an aspirational approach can be seen as positive in some respects, it should not be at the expense of practical application otherwise the overall process is rendered redundant.

Similarly, Women's Aid is of the opinion that the use of generic short, medium and long-term timeframes are inadequate for the purposes of thorough evaluation.

It is particularly disappointing that there is no reference in the draft document to gender and wider diversity within rural communities. This is particularly stark considering the breadth of the stakeholder groups. Women's Aid also shares NIRWN's concern that what has been produced bears little resemblance to the lengthy and time consuming work of the stakeholder sub-groups.

8. How should the success of the Rural White Paper Action Plan be measured?

There is a fundamental necessity for the policy priorities contained within the Action Plan to be clear, concise and targeted rather than generic, loosely constructed and aspirational. In their present format accurate assessment and

evaluation is likely to be problematic as commitments are intangible and timescales are flexible

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