



Federation Northern Ireland

## Department for Social Development

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# Response to: Department for Social Development Draft Budget 2011 – 2015

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## February 2011

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24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline - 0800 917 1414

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## **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 2009/10 indicate that there were more recorded crimes with a domestic motivation (9,903) than the combined total of all the following crimes (9,864). These include all recorded sexual offences (1,944), robbery (600), armed robbery (557), hijacking (119), theft or unauthorised taking of a motor vehicle (2975), arson (1980) dangerous driving (865), handling stolen goods (226) and offences under anti-terrorism legislation (7).
- PSNI Statistics for 09/10 indicate that they responded to a domestic incident every 21 minutes of every day of the year.
- The total of 9,903 crimes with a domestic motivation in 09/10 represents an average of approximately 1 domestic crime every 53 minutes in Northern Ireland.
- The number of all recorded offences of murder in Northern Ireland in 09/10 total 18. Those classed as having a domestic motivation total

7. Therefore, 38.9% of all murders in Northern Ireland in 09/10 had a domestic motivation.

- There were 461 rapes (including attempted Rapes) in Northern Ireland in the period 2009/10.

(Source: PSNI Statistics 2009/10)

- 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 2009/10 N.B. "Adult" defined as aged 17 and over)

(\*\* Women's Aid Federation NI)

## **7.0. Comments**

7.1 Women's Aid Federation NI welcomes the publication of the Department for Social Development's consultation on the Department's Draft Budget 2010 and the opportunity to comment upon the document on behalf of our ten local groups. The following comments reflect their collective views.

## **8.0. Budget Context**

8.1. Our organisation acknowledges and supports the Department's proposed strategic objectives for the next four years as outlined in the draft budget document.

8.2. Specifically, to contribute to tackling levels of poverty and social needs experienced by the most vulnerable in society, bringing divided communities together and encouraging social responsibility; creating urban centres which are sustainable, welcoming and accessible to all to live, work and relax in peace; and to building the foundations for a shared future through access to decent, affordable, sustainable homes and housing support services.

8.3. We note the recognition by the Department in point 4 of the draft budget document that delivery against these strategic objectives within the proposed budget, needs to take full account of a number of factors crucial to the economic and employment environment faced by Northern Ireland.

- 8.4. In particular, the Welfare Reform agenda being taken forward by the Coalition Government at Westminster, the accompanying increased demands placed on the Social Security Agency in respect of planning and implementation, the Department's need to take steps to protect the most vulnerable in our society from the adverse effects and consequences of the reforms, the increasing demands placed on the social welfare system as a result of the current economic environment, continuing and increasing housing pressures arising from affordability, fuel poverty, poor housing conditions and the risk of homelessness; and the need to maximise opportunities to develop and regenerate disadvantaged areas and communities.

## **9.0 Supporting People**

- 9.1 We welcome the commitment by the Minister, as stated in point 5 of the draft budget document, that there must be no reduction in vital support programmes which target the most vulnerable households, including revenue and capital programmes to address fuel poverty (Warm Homes), supported housing (Supporting People), new build housing and disadvantaged communities (Neighbourhood Renewal).
- 9.2 Supporting People is the primary and vital source of funding for our Women's Aid groups across Northern Ireland and fundamentally underpins our refuge provision and Floating Support / outreach services. Without this support it would be impossible to sustain our emergency/crisis accommodation and outreach support to women and children to remain in their own homes which is a key dimension of the services we provide.
- 9.3 Without Supporting People funding, the 1,077 women and 854 children who accessed our refuge services between the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2009 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2010 would have faced little choice but to remain in a dangerous, abusive and intolerable home environment. Equally the 2,938 women and 3,617 children who were supported through our Floating Support service to remain in their own homes could not have been helped.
- 9.4 In welcoming the on-going commitment to Supporting People contained in the draft budget document, it is important to highlight however that the absence of an annual inflationary uplift since 2007, has had a very significant financial impact on our local groups.
- 9.5 The increased and increasing cost of food, fuel and other utilities has meant that our groups are effectively being forced to do more with less. There is no indication in this draft budget that this situation is likely to improve going forward which will undoubtedly continue to place considerable strain on the resources available to our local groups.
- 9.6 This further highlights a fundamental underlying problem with the budget itself, namely that it fails to take into consideration the impact of inflation, so that whilst undertakings may be given to protect specific services, the economic reality on the ground is that of increasingly limited financial resources.

## **10.0. Welfare Reform**

- 10.1. An additional source of on-going and significant concern to Women's Aid is the programme of welfare reforms proposed by the Coalition Government at Westminster. It is the opinion of our organisation that many of these changes will have a potentially highly detrimental impact both upon the women and children who use our service and on our ability to continue to deliver the level of service provision which we currently offer.

### **Housing Benefit**

- 10.2. Of particular concern are changes in respect of Housing Benefit which, for example, could see an individual who has claimed Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) for 12 months or more, losing 10% of their Housing Benefit entitlement.
- 10.3. Our refuges depend upon the receipt of Housing Benefit to maintain our services. They already sustain a loss of income from the removal of pre-existing rent arrears from the Housing Benefit supplied to women in receipt of benefits, staying in refuge. An additional 10% cut would have an enormously detrimental impact on the income available to our refuges.
- 10.4. <sup>1</sup>The TUC estimates that these changes alone will directly affect 194,000 people across the UK, including 68,000 lone parents who will be moved to JSA from other benefits and 24,000 disabled people who will be moved from Incapacity Benefit to JSA. The average loss is estimated to be £489.06 per year.
- 10.5. We acknowledge and welcome the Minister's recent comments in respect of these proposed cuts and his stated determination to oppose them. We further support his announcement of 4<sup>th</sup> February 2011, that Housing Executive rents will be struck below the inflation rate.
- 10.6. However, in addition to cuts in Housing Benefit, our groups have also identified other welfare reforms which will represent significant hardship for the women and children who use our services.

### **Income Support/JSA**

- 10.7. Changes in respect of the requirement for unemployed lone parents with a youngest child of 7 years or older to move from Income Support to Job

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<sup>1</sup>TUC Press Release: "Housing Benefit Cuts for Long-Term Unemployed to Hit at least 194,000 Vulnerable People," 5<sup>th</sup> September 2010  
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Seekers Allowance (JSA), requires them to actively seek work or to face benefit sanctions.

- 10.8. These changes are taking place in the context of a currently limited jobs market in Northern Ireland which offers few suitable sources of employment for lone parents. Additionally there appears to be a fundamental failure to address the wider implications of childcare provision here, which is frequently, expensive, inaccessible and inadequate.
- 10.9. This is likely to be further compounded by the cut in the childcare element of Working Tax Credit which will result in a fall in the percentage of costs covered by Tax Credits from 80% to 70%.
- 10.10. Similarly, there is the on-going absence of a much needed childcare strategy for Northern Ireland to address these pressing matters.
- 10.11. Women's Aid acknowledges the provision contained in the Welfare Reform Act 2009, to allow victims of domestic violence, for a period of 13 weeks, to start or continue to claim JSA, without being available for employment, entering into a job seeker's agreement, or actively seeking employment.
- 10.12. However, the figure of 13 weeks appears not only to be arbitrary but to lack any degree of flexibility. Individuals who have experienced domestic violence do not recover at the same pace. They are also engaged in a lengthy process of recovery, rebuilding and often re-locating their lives, which requires time, space and support.

### **Employment & Support Allowance**

- 10.13. The women who use our services have also reported significant difficulties with Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and in particular the assessment for this benefit.
- 10.14. Meeting the criteria for ESA is proving particularly difficult for those who are experiencing trauma and mental health conditions such as post-traumatic stress and depression. Many women who have experienced domestic violence suffer from post-traumatic stress and depression for many years. We note similar difficulties with learning disabilities, Autism and relapsing/remitting conditions.
- 10.15. Some of these medical conditions are often particularly problematic to evidence during generic suitability for work assessments.
- 10.16. In the context of women who have experienced domestic violence, they are often adept at concealing their trauma and giving the appearance of functional normality. As a direct result of the perpetrator's behaviour, they have found

themselves required to engage in concealment in order to survive during a protracted period of violence and abuse.

- 10.17. Similarly, it is our strong opinion that the increasing emphasis on the use of telephone assessment severely disadvantages individuals presenting with the types of conditions outlined above.

### **Disability Living Allowance**

- 10.18. We are equally concerned that proposed changes to the assessment and payment of Disability Living Allowance will further disadvantage women who have experienced domestic violence and there is a very real danger that some of the most vulnerable individuals in our society will find themselves unable to access the financial support they need to sustain themselves and their families.

### **Community Care Grants**

- 10.19. Women's Aid has also observed significant problems for women attempting to access Community Care Grants during the process of moving from refuge into their new homes. In some cases women are finding they are exceeding the financial criteria by pennies. This is preventing them from obtaining basic but essential items for their new homes.

### **Child Benefits**

- 10.20. Our organisation is deeply concerned by the freeze in Child Benefits for all families for three years from April 2011 and the likely effect this will have on family incomes. This is particularly troubling when coupled with the likely financial consequences of the move from linking benefits to the Retail Price Index to linking with the lower Consumer Price Index. Similarly mothers in homes where one adult member is a higher rate tax payer will not be entitled to Child Benefit at all from January 2013, resulting in lower and less stable income.

### **Sure Start Maternity Grant**

- 10.21. Cuts in the Sure Start Maternity Grant and the abolition of the Health in Pregnancy Grant from January 2011 are likely to have an equally damaging impact. Evidence demonstrates that more than one third of cases of domestic violence begin during pregnancy. Between April 2009 and March 2010, Women's Aid in Northern Ireland supported 33 women during their pregnancies and 11 babies were born to mothers staying in refuge during the same time period.



## **Centralisation and Staffing Cuts**

- 10.22. Women's Aid would also wish to draw attention to the potential consequences of the increasing centralisation of services in Northern Ireland. This is likely to require women to travel increasing distances in order to access Social Security Offices. This is not always a ready option for many women, particularly for those living in rural areas, taking into consideration childcare requirements and the cost of transportation.
- 10.23. Our organisation has previously identified problems with delays in the current system of assessment and payment and are deeply concerned that possible cuts in staffing levels, when coupled with changes in respect of Universal Credit, which is likely to be personnel intensive and the process of migration from Incapacity Benefit to ESA, are likely to result in further delays, complications, mistakes and overall confusion in the process.

## **11.0. Child Maintenance Provision**

- 11.1. Additionally, we welcome and fully support the Department's recognition of the important contribution that child maintenance makes to tackling poverty and to improving life chances.
- 11.2. It is in this context that our organisation is deeply concerned by the proposals contained in the Green Paper, "Strengthening Families, Promoting Parental Responsibility: The Future of Child Maintenance."
- 11.3. We share the view expressed by other organisations and bodies, that the emphasis on diversion and deterrence contained in the document and specifically the efforts to direct separating couples towards the voluntary sector, with financial implications for those who wish to seek the assistance of the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Division (CMED), are wholly inappropriate in the context of a voluntary sector in Northern Ireland which does not currently have the network or capacity to address these needs.
- 11.4. Further, in the current economic environment, the voluntary sector is struggling to retain existing levels of service provision in the face of increasing demand. To place an additional strain on the sector in these difficult times is in our opinion, utterly unacceptable.
- 11.5. In noting that re-designing delivery models is considered by the Department to be a potentially beneficial approach to savings, it is the view of Women's Aid that the proposed changes to CMED, including the potential reduction in staff numbers, have the potential to be enormously damaging both to the ability of parents with care to access appropriate levels of financial support for their children and to the on-going improvements in the working relationship between CMED and the Voluntary and Community Sector in Northern Ireland.

- 11.6. For women leaving an abusive relationship who may wish to seek the support of CMED, the proposed changes will also place an additional financial burden upon them at a particularly difficult and vulnerable time in their lives and the lives of their children.

## **12.0 Conclusions**

- 12.1. Finally, we would wish to conclude by citing recent research which identifies the likely impact of the proposed cuts.
- 12.2. <sup>2</sup>The TUC report, “The Gender Impact of the Cuts” cites research carried out by economists Howard Reed and Tim Horton which indicates that lone parents, 90% of whom are female will be hardest hit by the cuts, losing 18.5% of their household income.
- 12.3. <sup>3</sup>Additionally, a recent response to Northern Ireland’s draft budget issued by The Northern Research Team for Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK (PSE UK) which cites the Institute of Fiscal Studies, as identifying that except for London, “households in Northern Ireland are worst off as a result of the changes for two reasons, Northern Ireland has a relatively high proportion of households with children and a higher proportion of household income is sourced from welfare benefits.” (Pgs. 2-3)
- 12.4. Women’s Aid is deeply concerned that the Coalition Welfare Reforms are likely to have an enormously damaging impact on the women and children who use our services and on the wider community in Northern Ireland.
- 12.5. It is essential that in these challenging economic times Government in Northern Ireland take a cohesive, cross-departmental, multi-agency approach to the planning, implementation and delivery of budget proposals.
- 12.6. It is imperative that the impact of any proposed cuts are fully assessed and that Government take steps to ensure that the most vulnerable in our society are protected and have access to the vital support services they and their families need.

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<sup>2</sup>TUC Women and the Cuts – December 2010

<sup>3</sup>Tomlinson, M & Kelly, G (2011) “Response to Northern Ireland’s Draft Budget,” PSE UK, NI Research Team, Queen’s University Belfast

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