



Federation Northern Ireland

RESPONSE TO

The Local Government Reform Establishment of Transition Committees in Statute

May 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 service supporting women in their own home.
- 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 publication of this consultation on the Local Government Reform, Establishment of Transition Committees in Statute and the opportunity to comment upon it. To this end, we wish to endorse the following comments by the Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WRCP) which are consistent with our organisations views on this issue.

Composition of Transition Committees

We are extremely conscious of the low level of representation of women in local government and disappointed that the Consultation Document on the Establishment of Transition Committee, in considering the composition of the Transition Committees, asks questions concerned solely with numbers on the committees and with proportionality in political representation.

At the present time there are 125 women out of a total of 582 councillors. Many councils have less than 20% representation of women and there are six councils which have one or two women only.

This gender imbalance has been compounded by the overwhelmingly male composition of the Transition Committees. The consultation document regarding arrangements for the establishment of these committees completely ignores issues regarding some parity of representation at a period when vital decisions will be made that will have a long-lasting impact on the future of our public administration.

No consultation has been carried out prior to EQIA screening and no consideration has been given to the potential adverse impact that such under-representation will have on women.

We are aware that the Women in Local Councils initiative of the Local Government Staff Commission made recommendations designed to ensure greater gender parity amongst

political representatives and council staff. Political parties have not considered mechanisms to ensure that women councillors are fairly represented on Transition Committees and this is regrettable. This will have implications for how the women's sector is able to engage in relationship building with the new committees and it will impact on how women's issues are represented when community planning begins.

International Obligations to Improve the Representation of Women

The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), to which the UK government is a signatory, recommends more use of 'temporary special measures, such as positive action, preferential treatment or quota systems' in order to improve the representation of women. In July 2008, following the Periodic Review of the UK government, the Concluding Observations of the CEDAW Committee recommended that the UK government 'accelerate the realisation of women's de facto equality with men in all areas' (para 22) by instigating positive action measures, including the use of time-bound goals and quotas.

In 2000 the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1325 'Women, Peace and Security', which urges Member States to increase the number of women at decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions involved in preventing, managing, and resolving conflicts. Northern Ireland is a country still emerging from conflict and the recommendations contained in UNSCR 1325 should be implemented.

Achieving a more proportionate system of representation

Given the arguments we have presented and the necessity to comply with international standards, we believe it is incumbent on the Department of the Environment to take every step necessary to ensure compliance with Section 75 by carrying out a full EQIA on the Transition Committees and on the likely impact of the work they are tasked to

carry out if they remain unrepresentative of women, who constitute over 50% of the population but who currently form only 16% of the Transition Committees.

In addition, we call on the Minister for the Environment to take a pro-active approach and request each existing council area to nominate at least one female representative to its Transition Committee.

Appointment of staff for the new councils

We agree that the Northern Ireland Code of Local Government Conduct should extend to members of Transition Committees and that where practicable meetings should be open to the public.

In terms of the appointment of the Chief Executive and Senior Team Designate of the new councils, we would again draw attention to the gender deficit within senior levels of local government staff and urge that recruitment procedures are proactive, including positive action measures and the adoption of the principles of proportionality and fair representation. We would advocate that any selection panel has an appropriate gender representation. We would also welcome a commitment to Section 75 training for selection panels.

Community Planning

We welcome the proposal that the Transition Committees be empowered to undertake 'trailing of initial Community Planning arrangements' . At present the community and voluntary sector have no voice at the decision making table in the proposed structures, and we would look for assurances that the sector will be an integral part of the community planning process. We therefore recommend the following:

- A firm date by which trialling will begin.

- The inclusion of representatives of community and voluntary groups in Community Planning partnership structures and a commitment that the interests of women will be represented within these structures.
- Consultation by the Transition Committees with the community and voluntary groups in their area on structures and processes for Community Planning.
- Resources to be made available in order to enable community involvement in the trialling of Community Planning.

Communication

Voluntary and community groups need to be informed of the processes involved in the transition period before there can be any meaningful engagement. For this to happen we recommend that the Transition Committees work with community development networks and infrastructural support organisations to organise events that will bring together members of the Transition Committees and community and voluntary groups.

Transparency

We welcome the proposal that meetings of Transition Committees be open to the public. For this to be meaningful there needs to be a communications strategy that will inform communities when meetings are taking place and will provide regular information on progress being made. Community stakeholders should be involved in the development of proposals regarding the transfer of functions to local government.

Conclusion

Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland supports the view that the Review of Public Administration has the potential to provide the citizens of Northern Ireland with governance that more fully reflects the diversity of our society. However, this can only be achieved if there is a commitment to positive action. Evidence from Scotland and Wales shows us that where women form 40% - 50% of the political forum, policy

priorities change, new perspectives are added, patterns of outreach and involvement are more inclusive and the culture of the body is transformed.

The arrangements proposed by this consultation are insufficient and constitute a missed opportunity. We strongly urge consideration of the issues raised in this response so that there can be greater equality of representation in terms of women's interests and we call on the Department of the Environment to respond to the issues raised in this response to its consultation, explaining the measures it will take to ensure a more proportionate representation of women in this important stage in the reform of our local government.

For further information about this response contact:

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