



**A response to**

**Consultation on Anonymous  
Registration: Protecting Voters at Risk in  
Northern Ireland**

**Northern Ireland Office**

**25 October 2013**

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**24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline**

**Call: 0808 802 1414**

Email Support: [24hrsupport@dvhelpline.org](mailto:24hrsupport@dvhelpline.org)

Text **support** to 07797 805 839

Freephone from all landlines and mobiles. Translation service available.

Open to *all women and men* affected by domestic & sexual violence

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## 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 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.

Throughout this consultation response, the term "Women's Aid" is used to reflect the overall Women's Aid movement in Northern Ireland, which is made up of our local Women's Aid groups and Women's Aid Federation. All local Women's Aid groups are members of Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland. Each Women's Aid group offers a range of specialist services to women, children and young people who have experienced domestic violence.

### **3.0 Women's Aid statistics (2011-2012)**

- 12 refuges with 300 bed spaces, playrooms and facilities.
- 831 women and 586 children sought refuge.
- 15 resource centres for women seeking information and support; group work and training.
- 3,663 women and 4,152 children accessed the Floating Support service, and a further 1,909 women accessed other Women's Aid outreach services, enabling women to access support whilst remaining in their own homes and communities.
- Move-on houses for women and children leaving refuges.
- The 24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline, open to all women and men affected by domestic violence, managed 43,949 calls.

### **4.0 Additional Women's Aid statistical data**

- Since 1999, Women's Aid across Northern Ireland gave refuge to 15,545 women and 14,942 children and young people.
- During the last 17 years Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland managed 326,809 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 DOJ, 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, 72% of adult victims of domestic crimes recorded by the PSNI in 2012/13 were female.<sup>1</sup>
- Over 30% of all domestic violence starts during pregnancy.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Findings from the PSNI Trends in Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland 2004/05 to 2012/13 N.B. “Adult” defined as aged 18 and over

## 6.0 Domestic violence: Crime statistics (Source: PSNI Statistics 2012/13)

- Domestic Violence is a crime. PSNI statistics for 2012/13 indicate that there were more recorded crimes with a domestic motivation (11,160) than the combined total of all the following crimes (9,976) – all recorded sexual offences (1,948), shoplifting (5,890) and theft of a motor vehicle (2,138).
- PSNI Statistics for 12/13 indicate that they responded to a domestic incident every 19 minutes of every day of the year.
- The total of 11,160 crimes with a domestic motivation in 12/13 represents an average of approximately 1 domestic crime every 47 minutes in Northern Ireland.
- The number of all recorded offences of murder in Northern Ireland in 12/13 total 17. Those classed as having a domestic motivation total 5. Therefore, 29% of all murders in Northern Ireland in 12/13 had a domestic motivation.
- There were 533 rapes (including attempted Rapes) in Northern Ireland in the period 2012/13.

(Source: PSNI Statistics 2012/13)

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

## 7.0 Consultation response

- Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland welcomes the publication of the draft legislation on anonymous registration, and the opportunity to comment on it on behalf of our local groups.
- Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland fully supports the introduction of a scheme to introduce anonymous voter registration. This will allow victims of domestic violence to exercise their right to participate in democratic politics without fear of being traced via the electoral register by abusive former partners.
- Continued harassment and abuse after separation is a recurrent feature of domestic violence and has therefore acted as a real deterrent to women who are victims of domestic violence from registering to vote in the normal manner.
- We also welcome the availability of this scheme to others who live in the same household as the individual at risk.

## 8.0 Areas of concern

- Women's Aid has concerns that the list of qualified persons to make an attestation is far too restrictive. If it is only persons at the level listed that can make an attestation then it is very unlikely that any victim of domestic violence will ever be successful in applying through this route. We would suggest that a lower bar should be acceptable for attestation, as many women who suffer severe domestic violence and abuse do not report it to police or social services. For example PSNI Domestic Abuse Officers, a GP or a Women's Aid Support Worker.
- Given that this proposal is largely aimed at victims of domestic violence we suggest that the process is made as unbureaucratic and user-friendly as possible, whilst remaining robust.
- While we welcome that the period of anonymous registration is up to 5 years, we would suggest that the length of registration should mirror the usual Northern Ireland practice of continued registration in order to ensure no less favourable treatment for those who have to adopt this route to register.

## 9.0 Contact details

For further information about this response please contact:

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