



Response in relation to:

**Department of Justice:
Proposals to Vary Firearms Licensing
Fees & other Miscellaneous
Amendments to the Firearms (NI) Order
2004**

29 August 2014

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Contents

Section		Page
1	Introduction	2
2.	Firearms Licensing Fees	3
3.	Ten Year Firearms Licence	4
4.	Age of Young Shooters	4
5.	Women's Aid Information	5
6.	Contact Details	6

1. Introduction

1.1 Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland welcomes the opportunity to comment on the revised proposals to amend firearms legislation in Northern Ireland on behalf of our local Women's Aid groups. We have reviewed the amended proposals and have a number of concerns.

1.2 We note in Annex A that the DOJ has been involved in '*engagement with interested parties including the shooting lobby, PSNI, and the DFP.*' Apart from the opportunity to respond in writing to this and the previous consultation Women's Aid has not been asked to engage in any more in-depth meetings on this issue, which given our critical concerns on gun ownership and control and the proven link to domestic violence homicides is deeply concerning.

1.3 We welcome the recognition within Annex A that community and public safety as a primary consideration when reviewing gun laws and regulations, and that the Minister has committed "to maintain a high level of public safety." We do not believe, however, that the compromise solutions put forward in this document go far enough to ensure the safety of the public.

1.4 Our comments are underpinned by well-established knowledge of the social effects of gun ownership, and the potentially devastating consequences of the misuse or misappropriation of firearms. The link between gun ownership and domestic violence is well-established in numerous reports, statistics and studies throughout the industrialised world. For example, there is solid evidence that the presence of a firearm in the home is associated with an increase in domestic homicides.

1.5 In the USA, a country with lower levels of gun control and high levels of gun ownership, women are 3 times more likely to be murdered by a partner using a gun they own than killed by strangers' guns, knives and weaponry combined. A woman is 5 times more likely to be killed by her abuser if that abuser owns a firearm.¹ In a study conducted in domestic violence shelters in the US state of California, in nearly two thirds (64.5%) of the households that contained a gun, the intimate partner had used the firearm against the victim, usually threatening to shoot or kill her.² In GB in 2009-10, there were 44 gun murders, of which 12 appear to be domestic with 10 female victims. Many of these were carried out using legally-held guns.

1.6 These already worrying crime statistics do not include instances of abuse that are not reported. Domestic violence is a hidden crime with low disclosure rates. Many victims do not report their perpetrators to the police, or even disclose violence and abuse to family members, friends or other professional practitioners. In the Northern Irish context, this means that it is plausible, even likely, that gun licenses have been granted to applicants with a history of domestic violence of which the public, and the firearms licensors, are not aware.

1.7 Women's Aid believes that tighter gun control, and fewer guns in fewer hands, makes for a safer and less violent society. As we emerge from conflict, and seek to deal with the legacy of violence and secrecy that surrounded many family lives throughout the Troubles in Northern Ireland, we need to ensure that our gun laws are not blind to the blight of domestic violence, and the very real danger that the addition of a deadly weapon to domestic violence situations can pose.

2. Firearms Licensing Fees

2.1 Given the policy of austerity being implemented by the current Westminster government and the cuts that are scheduled to be made in Northern Ireland, it is not

¹ Jacquelyn C. Campbell et al., *Risk Factors for Femicide in Abusive Relationships: Results from a Multisite Case Control Study*, 93 Am. J. Pub. Health 1089, 1092 (July 2003).

² Susan B. Sorenson et al., *Weapons in the Lives of Battered Women*, 94 Am. J. Pub. Health 1412, 1413 (2004).

justifiable for firearms licensing to be subsidised from the public purse. It is our view that the burden of funding gun ownership, including the necessary monitoring of those who possess licences, should lie with the individuals who choose to possess firearms. It is shocking that the current system only covers 36% of the costs of providing a proper licensing service, and we would point out that the cost analysis does not account for the cost of mistreatment of legally-held firearms in terms of PSNI time, health costs for those injured by firearms, or the psychological and emotional cost of gun crime on victims and their families.

2.2 It is our view that, given the potentially devastating outcomes of gun ownership, full cost recovery must be implemented by the Department through an increase in fees which covers 100% of the costs of running the licensing service.

3. Ten Year Firearms Licence

3.1 It is essential for public safety that there is sufficiently regular oversight over who is granted a license, particularly given the well-established links between gun ownership and domestic violence.

3.2 Women's Aid welcomes that the Minister intends to reject the proposal to increase the duration of a licence to 10 years. In our view, 10 years is far too long a duration between assessments of an individual's suitability to possess a firearm. A maximum of 3 years for the duration of a licence would be preferable and result in greater safety for domestic violence victims.

3.3 Women's Aid is assuming that anyone who has been convicted of a domestic violence related crime; is subject to a Non Molestation Order or whose partner or ex-partner has been referred as a high-risk victim to a MARAC will be automatically excluded from possession of a licence, or have it removed if already in possession of one. We would request clarification on this critical point.

4. Age of Young Shooters

4.1 Women's Aid wishes to restate our concern over the lowering of the age of shooting to 12. The dangers inherent in having firearms in local households must be taken into account when considering any relaxation of gun control, including considerations on reducing the legal age of using any kind of firearm. We find these proposals, which encourage use of firearms by minors to be a potential public safety hazard. Encouraging more gun use in our society, which has an acknowledged high level of domestic violence and abuse, is highly irresponsible. This is particularly so if that encouragement is

directed at children, who may also be victims of domestic violence by virtue of their proximity to that violence and their relationship with victim and perpetrator.

4.2 The USA is a prime example of the negative impact of relaxing firearm regulation, in particular the use of firearms by children. According to the U.S Department of Justice, the proportion of family homicides that involve children killing their parents has been increasing, rising steadily from 9.7% of all family homicides in 1980 to 13% in 2008.³ Whatever the reason for each of these incidents, it is true of all of them that a shooting incident would not have taken place if a gun was not present in the household and a child was not able to use a weapon.

4.3 While the Minister's decision to limit the age reduction to use of shotguns and air rifles for sporting purposes only is a welcome step, Women's Aid reaffirms its position that there should be no change to the age of shooters at all.

5. Women's Aid Information & Statistics

Women's Aid statistical data

- Since 1999, Women's Aid across Northern Ireland gave refuge to 16,425 women and 15,488 children and young people.
- During the last 17 years Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland managed 374,406 calls to the 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline.

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”.
- 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.⁴
- Over 30% of all domestic violence starts during pregnancy.⁵

³ Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Dep't of Justice, *Homicide Trends in the United States, 1980-2008*, 20 (Nov. 2011), at <http://bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/htus8008.pdf>.

⁴ 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

⁵ Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland

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.

9. Contact Details

For further information about this response please contact:

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