



Federation Northern Ireland

## Department for Social Development

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# A Response to: Discretionary Support Policy Consultation

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11 September 2012

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*Open to anyone affected by domestic violence*

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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 (2010 - 2011)**

- 12 refuges with 300 bed spaces, playrooms and facilities.
- 1058 women and 754 children sought refuge.
- 15 resource centres for women seeking information and support; group work and training.
- 3,450 women and 3,739 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 2010/11 the 24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline, open to anyone affected by domestic violence, managed 38,296 calls. This represented an increase of 18% on 2009/10.

### **4.0 Additional Women's Aid Statistical Data**

- Since 1999, Women's Aid across Northern Ireland gave refuge to 14,714 women and 14,356 children and young people.
- During the last 16 years Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland managed 282,860 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, 76% of adult victims of domestic crimes recorded by the PSNI in 2010/11 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 2011/12 indicate that there were more recorded crimes with a domestic motivation (10,387) than the combined total of all the following crimes (10,327) – all recorded sexual offences (1,836), shoplifting (6,201) and theft of a motor vehicle (2,290).
- PSNI Statistics for 11/12 indicate that they responded to a domestic incident every 21 minutes of every day of the year.
- The total of 10,387 crimes with a domestic motivation in 11/12 represents an average of approximately 1 domestic crime every 51 minutes in Northern Ireland.
- The number of all recorded offences of murder in Northern Ireland in 11/12 total 16. Those classed as having a domestic motivation total 3. Therefore, 19% of all murders in Northern Ireland in 11/12 had a domestic motivation.
- There were 553 rapes (including attempted Rapes) in Northern Ireland in the period 2011/12.

(Source: PSNI Statistics 2011/12)

- 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 Northern Ireland welcomes the publication of the Discretionary Support Policy consultation paper, and the opportunity to comment upon it on behalf of our ten local groups.

### Summary

- ***For many victims of domestic violence, moving out of an abusive home situation and into poverty is a step towards self-dependence. The policy currently does not reflect how being supported and on benefits can, in some situations, be a sign of self-dependency as opposed to a hindrance to it.***
- ***Victims of domestic violence often rely on benefit and Social Fund support to be able to leave an abusive home situation and ensure the safety and wellbeing of themselves and their children. Women's Aid urges DSD to classify victims of domestic violence as being in "exceptional, extreme or crisis situations" automatically.***
- ***There is a disparity between the policy's aim to prevent people falling into further unmanageable debt and its admission that some people would face "the most extreme hardship as a result of the adjustment to the changes to the social security regime". We urge that this policy is reviewed to include concrete measures to reduce the number of people falling into unmanageable debt, and commits to ensuring the alleviation of poverty in Northern Ireland.***
- ***The policy in its current form lacks sufficient detail, and therefore it is not possible to make meaningful comment on most aspects of it.***

## 8.0 Do you agree with the policy purpose and focus?

8.1 Women's Aid welcomes the general aim of "addressing poverty and disadvantage" (page 7). However, we note that the overarching aims of this policy are not adequately supported with detail within the document. In particular, the document lacks detail as to who will be able to access financial support and specifically in which circumstances. Without this crucial detail, we are unable to comment fully on whether we support this policy.

8.2 We are aware that spending cuts are a significant driving factor behind this policy. This is highlighted in the policy's background (page 7), and the screening form at Appendix 2 (page 26), which states that financial factors could contribute / detract from the intended aim / outcome of the policy. If a driving purpose of the welfare reform changes, abolition of the Social Fund and move to Discretionary Support, is to save money, it is essential that the policy outlines how savings will be made without

forcing Northern Ireland's most vulnerable families and individuals further into extreme poverty and debt.

- 8.3 There are a number of questions raised by the discretionary nature of the support, which have not been answered in the document. We would seek clarification on whether a set of criteria will be developed to define who is entitled to discretionary support, and whether decisions on granting or refusal of support will be transparent and accountable. It is vital to ensure that all those who are in need and entitled to support will be granted it. We also seek clarification on whether cost-cutting targets will be in place, and seek assurance from DSD that any cost-cutting measures will not influence decisions on granting discretionary support to those who are eligible for it and in need of it.
- 8.4 Women's Aid further seeks clarification on what effect pre-existing debt will have on applicants for discretionary support. Many applicants with debt are currently able to access the existing Social Fund as an additional source of income in times of extreme need. How will this be dealt with under the new discretionary support system, and how might pre-existing debt impact on decisions?
- 8.5 We would also question the policy's definition and understanding of dependency. In the case of victims of domestic violence, dependency is manifested in a victim's financial and social dependency on their abuser, caused by systematic isolation and abuse of that victim. Women who suffer domestic violence are often deprived of their support networks, their own money, or the means to make money and lead an independent existence by their abuser. Their situation may become increasingly difficult to extricate themselves from, not only emotionally but also practically.
- 8.6 In such situations, the provision of benefit and housing support, and emergency support where needed, is a crucial lifeline. It enables victims to leave their abusive home situation and free themselves from the cycle of violence, even if they would otherwise not be financially-equipped to do so without assistance. Thus, victims are able to become self-dependent, and protect themselves and their children, despite the fact that they have taken a step into poverty. In this instance, accessing benefits is not a barrier to self-dependency, but a step towards self-dependency. Women's Aid would strongly urge that the Discretionary Support policy is refined to reflect and cater for such situations.
- 8.7 Women's Aid notes with concern that there appears to be a disparity between the policy's aim to prevent people falling into further unmanageable debt, and its admission in objective 2 that some people would face "the most extreme hardship as a result of the adjustment to the changes to the social security regime" (page 8). It is difficult to see how these two positions can be reconciled with one another, if the policy itself is conceding that welfare reform changes will be the cause of unmanageable poverty, as opposed to a means of preventing it.

Furthermore, this policy document does not appear to lay out exactly how it intends to go about preventing people from falling into unmanageable debt or poverty. It would be useful if the policy could outline exactly what will be done differently from the previous system to reduce the number of people falling into unmanageable debt. While Women's Aid supports the aim of doing so, we remain unconvinced of this policy's capability to deliver such an outcome without a concrete plan of action in place.

## **9.0 Do the policy objectives reflect the policy focus?**

**9.1 Aim 1:** Women's Aid seeks clarification on what constitutes "exceptional, extreme or crisis situations", and how "significant risk to health, safety or wellbeing" will be judged.

**9.2 Aim 2:** In our professional experience, there are some situations in which a temporary allocation of benefits would not enable people to achieve self dependency, such as those in receipt of discretionary housing benefit within the private rental sector. If it is the intention for discretionary housing benefit to eventually fall under this policy, there is a danger that the policy could place many families in dire financial straits, as although they would be in need of this support, it may not fall under the definition of "temporary" support or "major risk or life threatening circumstances". Again clarification of who will be deemed as facing the 'most extreme hardship' is required.

**9.3 Aim 3:** Advice services are vital to those in financial difficulty, and with the enormous changes taking place in the removal of Social Fund and changes to the Welfare Reform regime as a whole, this has never been more true. Advice services need to be adequately resourced and be accessible to users, and those providing it must receive training in all changes, in order to ensure that advice is being provided at the level and standard required.

## **10.0 Do you agree with the proposed range of responses to such exceptional, extreme or crisis situations?**

**10.1** The document states that responding to need requires "a responsive, flexible and joined up approach set within clearly defined boundaries" (page 11). However, the boundaries of eligibility criteria and corresponding budgets are not available within the document. It is also stated that the new discretionary support provisions will not replicate but reflect existing strengths of the Social Fund (page 13). Without specifics as to what differences there will be, however, we are unable

to meaningfully respond to the document, or ascertain whether a full analysis of the impact on section 75 groups has been carried out.

- 10.2 We note that personal responsibility and self dependency are referred to throughout the document. However, there is a lack of recognition within the document that accessing benefits and social fund payments can be a means of gaining self dependency. We would also submit that dependency is not necessarily caused by benefits and /or social fund payments *per se*, as stated at page 10. It is in fact caused by any number of the complex factors, such as high unemployment levels, comparatively low wage levels, high fuel poverty levels, rent levels within the private sector that have necessitated a discretionary housing benefit fund, a lack of childcare strategy, and issues arising out of domestic violence situations. In these instances, accessing benefits and emergency assistance can mean the difference between relative self-dependency and destitution for the unemployed and working poor.
- 10.3 Women's Aid welcomes the retention of non-repayable grants within this policy at page 13, but would question what criteria will be used to assess "extreme cases".
- 10.4 We reiterate that welfare and emergency support are crucial to help victims of domestic violence leave their abusive home situation and ensure the safety of themselves and their children. In most cases, women who leave their abusers are faced with poverty and, in the case of victims who have children, the additional challenges associated with being a single parent. It is essential that victims always have the option to extricate themselves from a domestic violence situation in the knowledge that it will not lead to destitution. If this safety net were to be removed, many victims may be forced to remain in an abusive situation for financial reasons, putting them at greater risk of trauma, injury and death. For this reason, we urge that victims of domestic violence automatically fall under the criteria of "extreme cases".
- 10.5 Women's Aid notes the document's statement at page 12 that "discretionary support in itself cannot entirely avoid such circumstances" as people being left without food, clothing, heating and housing. We appreciate that discretionary support is not a fix-all solution, however we are deeply concerned that emergency support such as this is even more necessary in the current economic climate, and will most likely become even more vital as other welfare reforms come into effect.
- 10.6 We note, for example, that the Supporting People initiative mentioned at page 12 has not increased its budget since 2009. Any reliance on pre-existing services such as this will be hampered by already stretched resources, and may lead to increased reliance on discretionary support. Our local Women's Aid groups have also reported that charities which normally provide food, clothing and other essentials to victims of domestic violence, now have less to offer due to



an increased demand across the board. We are particularly alarmed by recent reports of increasing child poverty in Northern Ireland, and statistics that see 60% of low income families cutting back on food, 29% skipping meals, and 31% saying that they 'have nothing left to cut back on' (Child Poverty in 2012, Save The Children). It is essential therefore that this policy outlines exactly how the reduced budget can be managed while continuing to support society's most impoverished people and avoiding pushing them further into poverty.

- 10.7 We would also point out that having food, clothing, heating and housing are fundamental human rights. Article 25(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which the UK is signatory, states:

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.”

The UK government has also ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and as such has committed to ensure that people in the UK have an adequate standard of living, including food, clothing and housing, and the continuous improvement of living conditions (Article 11). Therefore it is extremely alarming that this policy does not commit to guaranteeing these basic human rights, or adopting a human rights-based approach with the right to human dignity as its basis.

- 10.8 Regarding the administration of these new arrangements, Women's Aid seeks clarification on how onerous and costly the change to this new system is expected to be, and where the funding for the changeover and subsequent running costs will come from. Is it the expectation that any corresponding costs come from the block grant, and in this case will that lessen the amount of funding available to actually allocate discretionary support funding to those in need? Has an amount been ring-fenced for the provision of loans and non-repayable grants, and if so what percentage of the budget has been ring-fenced? What set up costs for issues such as IT, training and administrative work are projected?
- 10.9 We would also recommend that consideration be given to the potential negative stigmatisation that could result from the allocation of support via pre-paid cards and vouchers (at page 13). If these cards or vouchers are recognisable as being discretionary support payments, this could lead to those using them being judged or stigmatised for being in need of them. We are also of the opinion that vouchers are contrary to the ethos of this policy, as they do not encourage people to make their own financial decisions or be self-reliant.

- 10.10 We request clarification on the future of Discretionary Housing Payments. Though it appears that Discretionary Housing Payments will remain through the transitional period, we note that these payments are intended to be rolled into the overall Discretionary Support policy (page 13). If and when this is the case, there are a number of highly problematic issues that are not dealt with by this policy in its current form. The most pressing of these are the temporary nature of discretionary support and the fact that it is intended to address only a “particular and pressing need” (page 8).
- 10.11 The current system of Discretionary Housing Payments exists due to the cost of housing in the private rentals market, and the fact that housing benefit does not cover this adequately. Applicants receive support to make up the shortfall in their rent simply because a shortfall exists and they cannot afford to pay it. However, if this policy only grants payment on a discretionary basis, and only for a “particular and pressing need” and in “extreme or crisis situations”, how will this affect those who cannot afford to pay rent that their Housing Benefit does not cover? Will they be required to apply each month for the payment? Will they need to describe personal circumstances which will then be judged as meriting payment? Such a scenario could be onerous in terms of both time and the cost to administer, and any decision to discontinue Discretionary Housing Payment on an ongoing basis could be financially devastating to those in poverty who are living in private rented accommodation.
- 10.12 Finally, we seek further information on how advice provision and access to information will be improved (page 14). As advice provision is a separate aim of this policy, is the intention that training will be provided to organisations that currently provide information of this kind? How is this to be funded? Women’s Aid keyworkers routinely provide information and advice to clients on all issues pertaining to their situation, including managing finances after leaving abusive partners and taking refuge. If the system changes, and detailed information and training are not provided on the criteria and procedure for receiving discretionary support, Women’s Aid workers will be unable to advise clients accurately, and this could jeopardise the welfare of victims and their families.

## **11.0 Do you agree with these overarching policy principles?**

- 11.1 Any agreement with the overarching policy principles (page 16) is limited by the lack of operational detail as listed in the responses given throughout.

**12.0 Do you agree with the Department's approach to monitoring the impact of the Discretionary Support policy?**

12.1 The baseline information from the operation of the Social Fund (page 17) is useful but limited. Though the policy makes a commitment to retain the strengths of the Social Fund, this does not mean that the new system will be comparable to the current system. More information is required to meaningfully address this question.

**13.0 What would be the best way to obtain evidence about the longer term impacts of the Discretionary Support Policy?**

13.1 Capturing how the policy is contributing to encouraging self sufficiency and independence should not be judged purely on whether people apply for support less frequently or cease to access it altogether. Many women leaving violent relationships are forced to access benefits and the social fund at present, and this in our view does not constitute evidence of a lack of self-dependency. While there is often a cost involved in supporting women who leave abusive relationships, it is necessary to save lives of women and children and can lead to reduced spending over time in health, education and police provision.

**14.0 Do you agree that the policy does not have any adverse differential impacts for any of the Section 75 groups?**

14.1 Marital status, men and women generally, and dependents, all clearly show that in combination single women and single parent families (largely women) are most likely to require benefits and live in poverty. The working out of this policy must therefore ensure that the focus of support is aimed primarily at these women.

For further information about this response contact:

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