



Response in relation to:

**Education & Library Boards
Draft Elective Home Education Policy**

27th June 2014

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Consultation Response

- Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland welcomes the publication of the draft Elective Home Education policy, and the opportunity to comment on it on behalf of our local Women's Aid groups.
- We wish to focus our comments on issues relating to child safeguarding in the context of home education. Women's Aid acknowledges that parents have a right to home school their children, and that a child's right to education does not necessarily include a duty to attend a school. We also acknowledge that, as signatory and ratifying party to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UK government and devolved administrations have obligations under international law to uphold the rights of children, ensure their safety and act in the best interests of children.
- While many children are fortunate to grow up in safe, caring households, this is not the case for the significant number of Northern Irish children who are subjected to neglect, abuse and trauma within their homes. Women's Aid works with children who have been witnesses of domestic abuse and violence, those who have been direct victims of abuse and violence, and those who have suffered both. In 2012 – 13, Women's Aid across Northern Ireland supported 586 children in our refuges, as well as 4,152 children attached to mothers receiving community-based support. It is these children, and others like them that have not yet been identified, who stand to benefit most from robust safeguarding measures and joint statutory and non-statutory work to protect and safeguard them.
- Women's Aid welcomes the consultation proposals to better regulate elective home education. We believe that doing so will result in better education and welfare outcomes for children who receive homeschooling. The home school environment provides much less opportunity than a school environment for identifying and intervening where there is abuse of a child within the home. And while the majority of parents, homeschoolers or otherwise, provide caring and safe environments for their children, there is potential for abuse everywhere, regardless of social class, affluence or community / religious background.
- In our professional experience, home education may sometimes be used as a means of keeping children hidden from child protection services or other professionals who could potentially identify and intervene in an abusive situation. Across the UK, child welfare professionals have identified a number of concerns with unregulated home schooling, including the risk of serious abuse, domestic violence and forced marriage

going unchecked or unidentified. Our local Women's Aid groups report that in certain parts of Northern Ireland a higher percentage of home schooled children, or at least those that we know of, have been identified as being in potentially abusive situations. The numbers are small, but in our view one abused child is one child too many. We are also particularly concerned that there are children who have never been in a school setting, having always been home schooled, and therefore are not known to local ELBs at all. When children attend schools, they are in daily contact with trained education and welfare professionals, who can act to protect them and query any behaviours and incidents that could point to abuse in the home. This element of protection and scrutiny is missing when a child is home schooled, and it is therefore necessary to put in place safeguards to compensate for this and provide a layer of scrutiny within the home school setting to ensure that the best interests of the child are being met at all times. Women's Aid would therefore be supportive of mandatory registration of all home schooled children in Northern Ireland, with at least annual monitoring of the educational environment provided, in order to ensure that the best interests of the child and all their pastoral care and welfare needs are being met. This would also effectively fulfil the ELB's statutory responsibility to ensure that all children are educated.

- We would also urge that the system put in place is as effective as possible in protecting children in a home schooled environment. Any regulatory framework must be fit for purpose, and must effectively facilitate the identification of abuse where it exists. We would therefore urge that the interface between home educating parents and education welfare officers is defined in more detail, and the capacity of the education welfare officer to act if there is suspicion of abuse is codified within a robust regulatory framework. The voice of the child is also important and should be part of any monitoring process, in terms of monitoring both a child's wellbeing and their education. We recommend that this policy also includes powers to investigate any situation where there is suspicion of abuse or neglect, including educational neglect. We would echo the views expressed by Judge Mornington in England that a regulatory system for home education cannot be without 'teeth', otherwise we are failing in our obligations to safeguard and protect children.
- Women's Aid would also point out that there are a number of other disadvantages to a home school environment, one of which is potential lack of access to preventative education programmes such as our *Helping Hands* programme. The *Helping Hands* programme aims to increase children's understanding of feeling safe and to explore and promote behaviours which will contribute to a safe environment for them. The programme can teach children to express their feelings, make choices and solve problems. It can help children to develop a strong sense of self and an

ability to express their own wants and needs. We urge that this policy includes provision for offering children such preventative education, either within the home or in an external setting from a trained professional.

For further information about this response please contact:

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