



Federation Northern Ireland

Department of Justice

A Response to: Consultation on Proposals to Vary Firearms Licensing Fees and Other Miscellaneous Amendments to the Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 2004

21 September 2012

Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland

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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. **

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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 consultation on proposals to vary firearms licensing fees and other miscellaneous amendments to the Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 2004, and the opportunity to comment upon it on behalf of our ten local groups.
- 7.2 We note with disappointment that this consultation on amending gun control laws has been published without any discussion whatsoever on the social effects of gun ownership, and the potentially devastating consequences of the misuse or misappropriation of firearms. Given that the Department of Justice is also responsible for policing and community safety in Northern Ireland, it is surprising that this consultation has not highlighted the need to consider community safety issues when analysing the potential reforms, nor has it framed the debate within a community safety context.

8.0 Proposed changes to license fees (2.1 – 6.2)

- 8.1 Women's Aid notes that, when rationalising changes to firearm license fees, a number of important considerations are absent. Specifically, the cost analysis fails to 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. It is our view that, given the potentially devastating outcomes of gun ownership, license fees should be much higher than proposed here, in order to cover the costs outlined above and act as an effective deterrent to increased gun ownership in Northern Ireland.

9.0 Proposals to remove the need for the Chief Constable to issue certificates of approval for a holder of a FAC or shotgun certificate in GB travelling to Northern Ireland (8.1)

- 9.1 Women's Aid strongly opposes removing this valuable vetting process for GB-based gun owners travelling in Northern Ireland. We are appalled to discover that there are 20,600 applications per year for firearms licenses in Northern Ireland, and the prospect that more and not fewer guns might be introduced to our society, which is only now enjoying a time free of violent conflict, is simply untenable.
- 9.2 According to a memorandum submitted by the Gun Control Network to the Home Affairs Committee in 2010, gun licenses in England and

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Wales are often renewed “on the nod”, without reviewing a gun owner or any changes in circumstances that might make them ineligible for a renewed license. The requirement to obtain a certificate of approval from the Chief Constable may be a crucial filtering process to ensure that all gun license-holders who enter Northern Ireland from GB are not a danger to society. Therefore we would strongly recommend that this requirement is retained in legislation.

10.0 Proposals to Reduce the Age at which Young People can Use Firearms (12.1 – 12.7)

- 10.1 Women’s Aid is strongly opposed to the reduction of the age at which children can use firearms. It is extremely worrying that proposals are being made that further relax gun control laws, when in fact they should be tightened even further to ensure the safety of our society.
- 10.2 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.
- 10.3 In the US, 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.
- 10.4 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.
- 10.5 These already worrying crime statistics do not include threats or assaults with a firearm that weren’t reported by the victim. 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. Therefore it is plausible, even likely, that gun licenses have been granted in Northern Ireland to applicants with a history of violence of which the public, and the firearms licensors, are not aware.
- 10.6 This hidden danger, and 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

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encourage use of firearms by minors, to be ridiculous at best, highly dangerous at worst. 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.

- 10.7 We would submit that the increasingly tougher gun laws have proven to work in GB. Tighter gun control, and few 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. Therefore we strongly recommend that the age of using a firearm is not reduced from 18 to 12, as proposed in this consultation.

For further information about this response contact:

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