



A response to

**Consultation on Proposals for the
Use of Live Links in Weekend Courts**

Department of Justice

3 June 2013

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Open to all women and men affected by domestic violence

Contents

Section		Page
1	Introduction	3
2	Core work of Women's Aid	3
3	Women's Aid statistics (2011 - 12)	4
4	Additional Women's Aid statistical data	4
5	Statistics: Domestic violence and violence against women	4
6	Domestic violence: Crime statistics	5
7	Consultation response	6
8		
9		
10	Contact Details	

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 ten local Women's Aid groups and Women's Aid Federation. The ten local Women's Aid groups are all 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, 75% of adult victims of domestic crimes recorded by the PSNI in 2009/10 were female.¹
- Over 30% of all domestic violence starts during pregnancy.²

¹Findings from the PSNI Crime Statistics Report 2010/11 N.B. “Adult” defined as aged 18 and over

²Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland

6.0 Domestic violence: Crime statistics (Source: PSNI Statistics 2011/12)

- 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.

7.0 Consultation response

- Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland welcomes the publication of the *Consultation on Proposals for the use of Live Links in Weekend Courts*, and the opportunity to comment on it on behalf of our local groups.

8.0 Consultation response

- Women's Aid welcomes the proposals to extend the use of live links to weekend courts for the purposes of bail hearings and first remand hearings. In our view, it is in the interest of justice to improve access to justice, reduce delay, and make the administration of justice a more streamlined process. Providing live links on weekends to facilitate swift processing of alleged crimes that occur on weekends would enhance the efficiency of the current system, and we would therefore regard such a change as a very positive step.
- Women's Aid is also in favour of the use of live links in courts generally, as they minimize the opportunity for an alleged perpetrator to use the court setting to intimidate a victim where the crime committed has a domestic violence motivation. Due to the intimate, personal or familial relationship between the victim and perpetrator, it can be exceptionally stressful and intimidating for a victim to be in the same court room as their abuser, and this can affect the victim's ability or willingness to proceed with a case. Conducting various stages of the court process via live links serves to protect victims from intimidation, and may also encourage more victims to go to the police and proceed with criminal proceedings when a crime with domestic violence motivation has been committed.
- We would also like to take this opportunity to reiterate that, although the extended use of live links in the court setting is a very positive step, the current system of live links for victims of crime remains flawed. It has been our experience that many domestic violence victims are not informed about such special measures as giving evidence via live link, or that their application is rejected due to opposition from the Defendant. On occasion, victims have only been informed that their application to give evidence by live link has been rejected on the day of the hearing, causing a great deal of distress to the victim. Given that these women are victims of domestic or sexual violence, and are therefore vulnerable witnesses, such special measures are essential to help them give evidence and seek justice, and to minimize the risk of intimidation in court. We would therefore submit that, just as live links are being used as a default option for defendants in certain proceedings, they should also be made the default option in cases where domestic or sexual violence are alleged.

9.0 Contact details

For further information about this response please contact:

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