



Federation Northern Ireland

Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland

Response to Department for Social Development: Draft Budget 2015/16 Consultation

19 December 2014

Women's Aid urges the Department for Social Development to preserve funding to Women's Aid and the 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline, in particular the vital funding provided for refuge and Floating Support services via Supporting People. We appreciate that the Department has some very difficult choices to make regarding the 2015-16 budget. However the services provided by Women's Aid are vital frontline services, which enhance the health and wellbeing and save the lives of victims of domestic and sexual violence in Northern Ireland.

Over the course of just one day in November 2014, 1,881 women and 2,063 children and young people were supported through our refuge and Floating Support services across Northern Ireland. This snapshot shows the extent of the work carried out by Women's Aid, every day of the year, to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the many victims of domestic violence across Northern Ireland.

Pervasiveness of domestic violence in Northern Ireland

Domestic violence is not a niche issue - in the year 2013/14 alone, the 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline answered 50,335 calls, and the PSNI responded to 27,628 incidents with a domestic motivation, one every 19 minutes of every day. 999 women and 747 children stayed in our refuges - **59 of those women were pregnant while in refuge, and 325 of the women disclosed having a disability.**

UNICEF research released in 2006 showing per capita incidents indicated there are 32000 children and young people living with domestic violence in Northern Ireland.

Domestic violence occurs regardless of gender, social group, class, religion, race, age, disability. It is a crime like no other, as it describes a pattern and range of controlling and coercive behaviour which is used by one person over another with whom they have, or have had an intimate or family relationship. It is the cumulative and interlinked

physical, psychological, sexual, emotional or financial abuse that has a particularly damaging effect on the victim.

How Women's Aid services improve the lives of domestic & sexual violence victims

Organisations such as Womens Aid provide a high level of support and expertise to victims, providing a vital public service on behalf of government. Given the potential costs of not providing such a service - increased homelessness, significant healthcare costs, raised unemployment due to victims' inability to work as a consequence of abuse, a rise in homicides and serious crimes with a domestic motivation - we believe that Supporting People funding to Womens Aid represents good value for money while also saving women and children's lives.

"Experience has shown that incidents of domestic violence and abuse if not dealt with appropriately, can escalate to often very tragic circumstances"

"Domestic violence takes an enormous toll on individuals and society As such domestic violence costs both the private and public sector a substantial amount of money. There are also human costs to the health, wellbeing and future of victims /survivors and their children" (DV &A Thematic Inspection of the handling of DV&A by the Criminal justice system (NI 2010).

Positive impacts of our services on victims include:

-) Improved awareness and understanding of the options, services and support available to them
-) Increased safety and protection of women, children and young people
-) Improved levels of self-worth, confidence and capability to leave abuser and rebuild their lives
-) Increased awareness and feelings of safety and self-protection by children and young people
-) Prevention of homelessness as a result of domestic violence
-) Effective multi agency working, increased levels of safety planning and protection and a deeper understanding of domestic violence by partners
-) Effective protocols for signposting and cross referral for all victims of domestic violence across and among partners
-) Improved reporting of domestic violence
-) Reduction in repeat incidents of domestic violence
-) Effective management of high risk and safety issues

Strategic benefit of Floating Support

In an independent evaluation of the Floating Support service in 2009, a number of significant benefits of the service were identified:

-) Women accessing Floating Support were found to be better able to make informed decisions more quickly to help them get the support they needed to keep them safe.
-) Where women were finding it difficult to recognise that they were experiencing domestic violence the worker was able to aid and support the process
-) There was positive evidence of not only the managed and planned response to the *support* needs of victims but also their *safety* needs
-) There was evidence of high levels of need for advice and information as well as practical support

The evaluation concluded -

*“The strategic fit between the work of Womens Aid and the principles of Floating support resulted in **reducing homelessness** and enabling women to remain safely in their own home through the delivery of direct and immediate safety and support planning and the speedier referral to enable women victims to either remain in their own home or to be assisted with removal to crisis accommodation” (CMWorks 2009)*

The positive outcomes for those who use our services clearly prove that with the right support from the right expert organisation in the right way, as well as the committed efforts of government, it is possible for victims to break free from abusers and rebuild a new life.

Womens Aid is the only organisation with the proven track record, expertise knowledge and skill built up over many years to provide the wrap around and range of services to support victims of domestic abuse, sexual violence and human trafficking. We urge the Department to take this into consideration when finalising the budget for 2015-16 and ensuring that our vital, lifesaving service can continue to protect the lives and wellbeing of all victims of domestic and sexual violence in Northern Ireland.