



*Federation Northern Ireland*

**A response to**

**Draft Business Plan April 2016 – March 2017**

**Safeguarding Board NI**

**15 January 2016**

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24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline

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Open to all women and men affected by domestic & sexual violence

Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland welcomes the publication of the Safeguarding Board NI's draft Business Plan 2016-17 and the opportunity to comment on it on behalf of our 9 local Women's Aid groups across Northern Ireland.

As the lead voluntary organisation in Northern Ireland addressing domestic and sexual violence, Women's Aid is extremely disappointed that domestic violence has not been included in the Safeguarding Board NI's Business Plan for 2016-17. This is in spite of requests for it to be included at pre-consultation stage (see Board Development Day Summary Report pages 4-5). Women's Aid was unfortunately unable to attend the planning day, and so we were unable to raise the issue ourselves and request its inclusion. Had we been able to do so, this would have brought the total of requests for domestic violence to be included in the Business Plan to 3.

### **Impact of domestic violence on children & young people**

The stated aims of the SBNI are to "safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people in Northern Ireland". Every day, the welfare and safety of thousands of children and young people in Northern Ireland is threatened and undermined by domestic violence. Domestic violence has adverse effects on children and young people and can be traumatic. It can impact upon all areas of life, including, health, education, the development of relationships, recreation and social activities.<sup>1</sup> The effects of domestic violence on children are wide ranging and will differ for each child, and can last into adulthood.

Children may be witnesses of violence and abuse, but they can also be direct victims themselves. CAADA (now Safe Lives) research<sup>2</sup> drawing upon 877 cases of children exposed to domestic violence revealed that 62% of children were also directly harmed as well as witnessing the abuse. Worryingly only 56% knew how to keep themselves safe. Further research demonstrates that children growing up in a family where domestic abuse is present are more likely to experience **physical** abuse themselves, with estimates ranging between 30 and 66%.<sup>3</sup> These statistics demonstrate the strong link between domestic violence and child abuse and neglect.

It is also important to point out that young people can also suffer domestic violence directly in the context of their own relationships.

Effects of domestic violence on children and young people, as witnesses or direct victims, include fear, stress, trauma, confusion, loss of confidence, anger, shame, isolation, guilt and lack of trust. Research detailing the serious multiple physical and mental health

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<sup>1</sup> For further information, see Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland, Our Place - Safe Space: A Strategy for Children and Young People 2012-2017.

<sup>2</sup> CAADA (February 2014) In Plain Sight: Effective help for children exposed to domestic abuse, CAADA 2<sup>nd</sup> National Policy Report

<sup>3</sup> Hester et al (2000); Edleson (1999); Humphreys and Thiara (2002)



consequences experienced by children found that 52% of participants had behavioural problems, 39% had difficulties in school, 60% felt responsible for the negative events. Others felt unhappy (43%) worried (52%) and angry (43%).

Research<sup>4</sup> on babies living in households where domestic violence is present also shows that infants as young as one year old can experience trauma symptoms as a result of domestic violence. These include eating problems, sleep disturbance, lack of normal responsiveness to adults, mood disturbances and problems interacting with peers and other adults.

A wealth of research has identified domestic violence as an underlying theme behind social issues, such as school dropout and exclusion, youth homelessness and young people engaging in risk taking behaviour. Children and young people have varying levels of resilience and all agencies that come into contact with children and young people who experience domestic violence have a responsibility to build upon this resilience.

### **Number of children and young people affected by domestic violence in Northern Ireland**

UNICEF research from 2006, showing per capita incidence, indicates that there are up to 32,000 children and young people living with domestic violence in Northern Ireland. Ten years on, it is extremely unlikely that this figure has diminished in any way. Our professional experience of supporting children and young people affected by domestic violence demonstrates just how significantly domestic violence affects the children of Northern Ireland.

#### **In 2014-15:**

- **689 children** stayed in Women's Aid refuges with their mothers.
- **4,186 children** were supported through Floating Support Outreach services.
- Women's Aid also worked directly with children who had experienced domestic violence - last year we held **6,267 one to one sessions** with children and young people either in refuge or one of our resource centres, or in a community setting.
- **71 women** in refuge were supported during their pregnancies and **13 babies** were born to women in refuge.
- **352 women and 129 children** accessed support from a Women's Aid Women's Safety Worker while their partners or ex partners were undertaking the IDAP perpetrators programme provided by Probation Board Northern Ireland.
- **161 teachers** were trained to deliver the Helping Hands preventative education programme in primary schools.
- Women's Aid staff attended **348** case conferences.

Statistics from Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs) also show that there are a significant number of children living in a home where there is a high risk of violence.

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<sup>4</sup> Cuthbert, C, Rayns, G and Stanley, K (2011) All Babies Count. NSPCC

Between January 2010 and March 2015, 8,363 MARAC (Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference) cases have been discussed of which there were **10,856 children** living in the household.<sup>5</sup>

### **Domestic violence and child safeguarding**

The research and information above demonstrates that domestic violence is clearly a child safeguarding issue. Witnessing domestic violence constitutes significant harm, and children in a household where a parent is being abused may also suffer abuse themselves. Women's Aid has also supported women who have grown up in abusive households and have gone on to experience abusive relationships themselves. This highlights the often intergenerational nature domestic violence and the impact of normalisation of domestic violence from a young age.

There is also an inextricable link between domestic violence and several identified core priorities of the Safeguarding Board NI. As the Marshall Report reaffirmed, experience of domestic violence is a key factor in rendering children and young people vulnerable to child sexual exploitation. In our experience, the link goes even further – Women's Aid has supported young women who have been sexually exploited within an abusive relationship, or have experienced CSE and are then targeted by domestic violence perpetrators.

We would also point out that domestic violence is often a key issue in child protection cases. It is widely acknowledged that domestic violence in the household puts children at risk for a number of reasons, and as a consequence there are a significant number of children on the child protection register in Northern Ireland due to domestic abuse within their home. The magnitude of this issue was recognised by the Regional Strategic Group on domestic & sexual violence (RSG), when it agreed to roll out a non-court mandated perpetrator programme to address the issue of the number of children on the child protection register due to a perpetrator of domestic violence in their home.

### **Suggestions for addition of domestic violence to the Business Plan 2016-17**

#### Strategic Priority 1

Women's Aid urges that domestic violence is included under Strategic Priority 1 as a stand-alone Action, alongside 'Children exposed to neglect' and 'Suicide / self-harm'. We believe that the SBNI has a crucial role to play in ensuring that safeguarding practice relating to children rendered vulnerable by domestic violence is effective.

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<sup>5</sup> PSNI MARAC Steering Group Update – March 2015



## Strategic Priority 2

Women's Aid agrees that child sexual exploitation is a significant concern. We believe that preventative and early intervention approaches are vital here to protect children. As we have already outlined, domestic violence is one factor which makes a child vulnerable to sexual exploitation; therefore preventative education to build resilience and educate children and young people about the right to be safe and respectful relationships is key to protecting them from CSE and online abuse. Prevention should also be a key component of our safeguarding response. Programmes like Women's Aid's Helping Hands programme can empower and enable young people to avoid potentially harmful situations or to avail of appropriate support when if and when they find themselves in danger. We urge that SBNI includes preventative measures in this plan.

We would also note that Women's Aid frequently works with young women who may be victims of child sexual exploitation where there is a domestic violence element. We work in partnership with statutory agencies to safeguard these young women. Such cases demonstrate the cross-over between domestic violence and child sexual exploitation. We believe that this not only makes the case for the inclusion of domestic violence in the SBNI plan of work, but also the inclusion of Women's Aid on the Safeguarding Board, to ensure that the multi-agency response to CSE is truly joined up and including all those involved in this work.

## Strategic Priority 3

Regarding the review of multi-agency policies, we are concerned that excluding domestic violence from this plan would result in an incomplete assessment or review of what is being done and what needs to be improved to safeguard the children of Northern Ireland. Women's Aid supports utilising a multi-agency approach, working in partnership with voluntary sector experts in the field. However such an approach must include all relevant components of child safeguarding, including domestic violence.

Women's Aid recommends that the SBNI commissions research into the impact of domestic violence on the safety and wellbeing of children and young people in Northern Ireland, including an exercise in gathering up-to-date evidence on the number of children affected.

## Strategic Priority 4

It is not possible to examine the child protection system in the whole without including domestic violence, as it is a component in so many child protection cases. Without including domestic violence, any analysis is incomplete. A complete picture is necessary to know which improvements need to be made. Particularly in times of austerity and tight budgets, it

is absolutely crucial that the right changes are made first time round, which can only be done with all the information to hand and a complete analysis of child protection issues.

Final comments

Women's Aid requests that when the Board is reviewing its membership that we are included in the application/selection process.

## Contact Details

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