



## A response to

## Draft Policing Plan 2016-17

Northern Ireland Policing Board & Police Service of  
Northern Ireland

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**Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland**

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24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline

Call: 0808 802 1414

Email Support: [24hrsupport@dvhelpline.org](mailto:24hrsupport@dvhelpline.org)

Text **support** to 07797 805 839

Freephone from all landlines and mobiles. Translation service available.

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

### 1.0 Introduction

Women's Aid is the lead voluntary organisation in Northern Ireland addressing domestic and sexual violence and providing services for women and children. We recognise domestic and sexual violence as forms of violence against women. Women's Aid seeks to challenge attitudes and beliefs that perpetuate domestic and sexual 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 & Sexual Violence Helpline.
- To provide a range of support services to enable women who are affected by domestic and/or sexual violence 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 or sexual 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 and sexual violence.
- To advise and support all relevant agencies in the development of domestic and sexual violence policies, protocols and service delivery.
- To work in partnership with all relevant agencies to ensure a joined up response to domestic and sexual 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 our local Women's Aid groups and Women's Aid Federation. All local Women's Aid groups are 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 (2014-15)

- 932 women and 689 children sought refuge.
- 71 women in refuge were supported during their pregnancies and 13 babies were born to women in refuge.
- 3,567 women with 4,186 children accessed the Floating Support service, and a further 2,395 women accessed other Women's Aid outreach services, enabling women to access support whilst remaining in their own homes and communities.
- 2,046 women participated in a range of group work and personal development programme including *Journey to Freedom* and *You and Me, Mum*.
- 352 women 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. An additional 129 children were referred to the Women's Safety Worker.
- The 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline, open to all women and men affected by domestic & sexual violence, managed 34,420 calls.
- 161 teachers were trained to deliver the Helping Hands programme in primary schools.

### 4.0 Additional Women's Aid statistical data

- Since 1999, Women's Aid across Northern Ireland gave refuge to 18,356 women and 16,924 children and young people.
- Between 1995 – 2015, 463,855 calls were managed by the 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual 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, 72% of adult victims of domestic crimes recorded by the PSNI in 2012/13 were female.<sup>1</sup>
- Over 30% of all domestic violence starts during pregnancy.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Findings from the PSNI Trends in Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland 2004/05 to 2012/13 N.B. “Adult” defined as aged 18 and over

<sup>2</sup>Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland

## 6.0 Domestic & Sexual Violence: Crime statistics (Source: PSNI Statistics 2014/15)

- Domestic Violence is a crime. PSNI statistics for 2014/15 indicate that there were over two and a half times more recorded crimes with a domestic motivation (13,426) than drug offences (8,937).
- Domestic abuse crimes (13,426) represented 13% of the overall crime in Northern Ireland (105,072).
- Police responded to 28,287 incidents with a domestic motivation – that’s one domestic incident every 19 minutes of every day of the year.
- The number of all recorded offences of murder in Northern Ireland in 14/15 was 16. Those classed as having a domestic motivation totalled 6. Therefore, 37.5% of all murders in Northern Ireland in 14/15 had a domestic motivation.
- Between January 2010 and March 2015, 8,363 Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) cases were discussed. In 7,955 of these cases the victims were female. 10,856 children were living in the same household as these victims and their abusers.
- There were 737 rapes (including attempted Rapes) in Northern Ireland in the period 2014/15.

(Source: PSNI Statistics 2014/15; PSNI MARAC Steering Group)

Official sources (NISOSMC) estimate that up to 80% of sex crimes are not reported.

## General Comments

- Women's Aid welcomes the opportunity to comment on the draft Policing Plan for 2016-17 on behalf of our 9 local Women's Aid groups.
- The PSNI is a key player in tackling domestic and sexual violence in Northern Ireland. In 2014-15, the PSNI responded to 28,287 domestic incidents, one every 19 minutes of every day. Domestic violence crime made up 13% of the overall recorded crime. While incidence of other types of crime have fallen in the last decade, reporting domestic violence to police has steadily risen year on year since 2002. Responding to domestic violence is part of the core work of the PSNI, and is something that all officers will deal with at some point in their career. Therefore we need a Policing Plan that commits our police service to protecting victims, pursuing perpetrators, and working towards the reduction and eradication of domestic and sexual violence in Northern Ireland.
- The women who seek support from Women's Aid are often victims of a wide range of crimes at the hands of abusers, including assault, false imprisonment, criminal damage, and sexual offences. Their abuse is often persistent and carried out over a number of weeks, months or years. Some of what victims endure is not technically a crime, yet it still requires the intervention of police to disrupt the cycle of violence, put victims in touch with expert support services like Women's Aid and the 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline, and prevent the escalation of abuse to the point of serious injury or death of victims.
- Women's Aid urges that domestic violence is identified within the Policing Plan as a distinct area of focus, under Community Engagement and Reduction of Offending as well as under Protection of People and Communities. We do not advocate targets to reduce the number of reports of domestic violence incidents and crimes, as we regard increased reportage numbers as positive signs of improved confidence of victims to report abuse. However we do recommend targets to increase the number of successful outcomes and convictions for sexual crimes, increase referrals from police to specialist support services like Women's Aid, and improve follow up times where police link in with victims to update them on cases, especially if the information is necessary to enable victims to protect themselves.

### **Strategic Outcome – Increasing trust and confidence in policing**

- Women’s Aid is concerned that using the NICS crime survey and omnibus survey alone may not provide accurate information about confidence in policing for domestic and sexual violence victims. Victims tend to downplay abuse or not disclose it at all without face to face support of someone with which they have built rapport. Some victims are unwilling to label their experience as abuse or admit that this is what they are suffering. They may feel unable to disclose abuse in a survey if they are still living in the same household as the perpetrator. A knock on effect of this is that if they have not disclosed the abuse on the survey, they are unlikely to disclose information about issues with police when dealing with that abuse.
- While confidence in policing is often mapped by geographical area or community, it is also the case that certain *types* of victims may also have specific issues relating to confidence in police. Victims of domestic and sexual violence have historically reported lack of confidence in police due to domestic violence not being taken seriously, victim-blaming, domestic and sexual violence being de-prioritised in favour of policing other types of crime like terrorism or organised crime etc. While the policing response to domestic and sexual violence has improved over the years, there still remain issues with women’s confidence in police. Women’s Aid therefore urges that the plan includes a requirement of qualitative engagement with specific identified groups like victims of domestic and sexual violence. This could be carried out through focus groups or by engaging with organisations that may speak on behalf of victims like Women’s Aid.
- Confidence in police could also be enhanced if all officers responding to incidents were specially trained to understand domestic and sexual violence and how to respond to it, with training ongoing throughout their career. Another helpful improvement would be quicker follow-up from police after the point of initial contact and investigation. Many of the women whom we have supported have expressed frustration and confusion over the criminal justice system, especially when they report a crime and hear very little from police or other agencies after that. This not only crushes confidence in policing, it also discourages victims from continuing in the criminal justice process or engaging if they are victims of crime in future. We urge that measures on training and victim engagement are included in the plan.
- In cases of rape or sexual assault, a victim can suffer re-victimisation if their complaint is not taken seriously, if they are not able to access specialist services like the Rowan or given the number of the 24 Hour Domestic and Sexual Violence Helpline to support them through their trauma, if insufficient evidence is collected leading to a decision not to prosecute, or if a victim feels confused and overwhelmed by the justice process due to lack of information or support. These experiences significantly dent the confidence of these victims in the police service. We urge that measures to improve confidence of sexual violence victims in police are included in the document.

**Strategic Outcome – Ensure the PSNI engages with communities to improve understanding of the impact of policing decisions and involve communities wherever possible in those decisions**

- We note that there are further actions to be added to this section. It is difficult to comment on this section without the inclusion of all proposed measures and actions.
- Women’s Aid recommends inclusion of specific actions to reach out to domestic and sexual abuse victims, and inform communities about domestic and sexual violence and what needs to be done to tackle it. This is in keeping with Strand 2 of the draft government Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategy, which aims to reduce the incidence of domestic & sexual violence through prevention, early intervention and awareness raising.
- It is especially important for the PSNI to engage in this awareness raising role as domestic and sexual violence are hidden crimes, and as such there is usually very low community awareness of the fact that domestic and sexual violence are issues in their area. It is important for police to engage through PCSPs to ensure that domestic and sexual violence are a priority in all local areas.

## Protection of People and Communities

**Strategic Outcome – Reducing harm caused by crime and anti-social behaviour with a focus on protecting the most vulnerable**

### Sexual offences

- We welcome the inclusion of sexual offences within this section. However it is disappointing that there are no targets or actions in the plan relating to sexual offences, other than reporting to the Policing Board twice yearly.
- Sexual crime is hugely under-reported, and those reports that are made rarely result in conviction. This is a complete failure to those vulnerable victims who have bravely come forward to report the violence perpetrated against them.
- We urge that this Policing Plan includes more concrete measures to improve the police response to sexual violence, including measures to improve how police deal with complaints promptly and in a compassionate manner, to improve evidence collection and increase chances of conviction, and to respond in a way that is victim-centred and victim driven.

### Identifying Repeat Victims

- We note that this section not yet complete, and that actions and measures are to be added following the publication of the IAG report.

- In the absence of these actions, Women’s Aid has a number of recommendations for what could be included. This section requires robust objectives relating to domestic violence, which should go beyond merely “identifying repeat victims” and include tackling and reducing the repeat victimisation of those affected by domestic violence.
- In order to effectively tackle domestic violence, early intervention and effective partnership work is required. We recommend that actions and measures are added to the plan to encourage early intervention, including increased referrals to specialist support organisations like Women’s Aid. This is especially important in cases where a victim is assessed as low or medium risk and so is not referred to MARAC. It is vital to take action to disrupt the cycle of violence and get support for identified victims as early as possible to avoid escalation of abuse to the point that they are high risk.
- Expertise is also essential, not just for Domestic Abuse Officers but for those officers who are first responders on the scene of a domestic incident. Therefore ongoing training for responding officers is vital and should be included as an action under this section.

## Reduction in Offending

- It is extremely disappointing that there is no specific action within this section to address repeat domestic violence abusers. It is well established that many domestic abusers are serial perpetrators, both committing multiple offences against the same victim and also going on to abuse multiple other victims. Yet there is no recognition of this significant issue in the draft document. A consistent multi-agency response is required to tackle serial perpetrators, and the police service plays a vital role in this.
- Women’s Aid urges that this document recognises that policing domestic violence doesn’t start and end with protective measures for victims, although these are important. Policing domestic violence must also be about pursuing perpetrators and bringing them to justice. This not only sends the right message to perpetrators, that domestic violence is a serious crime that will not be tolerated, but also acts to prevent them from committing further abuse. We recommend that measures and actions are included in the document which acknowledge domestic violence as a serious crime that escalates in risk and harm, and commits to gathering robust evidence and pursuing perpetrators so that justice is delivered for victims.
- Under Working In Partnership to Address Serious and Organised Crime, we recommend adding an action for police to enforce the human trafficking laws in full, including the sex buyer law. In our view, trafficking can only be effectively tackled if the law is being enforced in full, and all legislative measures designed to tackle trafficking are being implemented.

## Contact Details

For further information about this response please contact:

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