

Chief Executive Officer's report

During 2015 - 16 we experienced a range of changes in the external environment that are both positive and negative

On the positive side in March 2016 the government's 7-year strategy on domestic and sexual violence was launched. The vision of the Strategy is to have a society in Northern Ireland in which domestic and sexual violence is not tolerated in any form, effective tailored preventative and responsive services are provided for in the document, which aims to ensure that all victims are supported, and perpetrators are held to account.

Women's aid welcomes the strategy and we must ensure that we are involved in the planning and implementation of it at regional and strategic level. But we have concerns in regard to its gender neutrality, which runs the risk of marginalising violence against women and the disproportionate impact the domestic violence has on women. The strategy has allowed for a renewed focus on domestic and sexual violence and we must ensure that this is maintained. Regarding this the new Justice Minister, Claire Sugden has made domestic violence her priority and everyone at Women's Aid is looking forward to working with her as well as other Ministers and MLAs.

Alongside this following the consultation in 2015/16 regarding a specific domestic violence– or coercive control- offence, there is finally the opportunity for legislation that will give us the ability to encapsulate the emotional, psychological and life-long impact of domestic violence. New legislation has been a long-term campaign for Women's Aid and we welcome its development. Hopefully we will also see accompanying legislation on stalking, as this would add to our ability to ensure adequate legal protection for women in Northern Ireland. Our vital policy and lobbying in this area has continued and will continue as we work to ensure domestic and sexual violence remain high on the public and political agenda.

Problematically positive changes in policy, have not been underwritten by dedicated core funding from government – and all Women's Aid services have faced challenges this year. The funding climate is extremely difficult, cuts to core funding, lack of clarity about the future of funding, increased competition and tendering processes are all risks, that we must try to mitigate individually and collectively. We have backed the Supporting People campaign again this year to try to ensure that the essential life-saving work carried out by Women's Aid is secure. But there is continued uncertainty and we must work together to ensure that vital services are protected.

In house, there have been several staff changes this year, we said goodbye to Annie Campbell who has been CEO for the past 12 years and I would like to take this opportunity to wish her well. We also welcomed new staff and saw changes to roles within the Helpline team, with Sonya McMullan recruited into the Helpline Manager post in December 2015. This service is a model of good practice and a lifeline to women and men affected by domestic and sexual violence. Funded by the three Departments Justice, Communities & Health, the service is given additional support by WAFNI. This year 1207 hours of work to the Helpline which amounts to a £15,177.30 contribution in kind and I wish to extend my sincere thanks to all the committed staff and volunteers for all their hard work on the helpline itself and at WAFNI.

Our achievements for the year have focused on our key areas of work _ Helpline - Training - Policy and Lobbying.

- Helpline staff managed 25, 932 calls to the helpline – working directly with all victims of domestic and sexual violence. The Helpline team also developed and underwent training in sexual violence - and this programme of training was rolled out across the Women’s Aids teams.
- In terms of training we trained-400 doctors and dentists as part of their professional training programme through NIMDTA (Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency). We have also worked with the Police Service of Northern Ireland and, in partnership with our local groups, to deliver a total of 23 training sessions to over 300 PSNI recruits at Garnerville Training College.
- We also trained 150 teachers from 97 Primary Schools to deliver Helping Hands in their classroom, taking our overall total to 974 teachers from 650 primary schools across Northern Ireland in the last 6 years. We also continued to deliver on our 5-year children & young people’s strategy, Our Place – Safe Space, to meet the needs of children and young people affected by domestic violence.
- We responded to 18 consultations with Government and the Public sector ensuring that the voices of women and children are counted. We also worked on the lobby for coercive control legislation and the disclosure scheme and worked on consultations with CEDAW and worked with the U.K. federations and WAVE in Europe.
- In terms of refuge and Outreach Support, services across Northern Ireland in Foyle, ABCLN, Belfast & Lisburn, North Down, MidUlster, Omagh, Armagh Down and Causeway supported:

738 women and accommodated in refuge
520 children accommodated in refuge
6212 women accessed community based support
7296 children accessed community support
15 babies born to women in refuge
51 pregnant women accommodated in refuge
167 pregnant women in outreach support
267 women could not access refuge – due to lack of space

The services provided by Women's Aid are excellent and our work throughout Northern Ireland has changed lives - so well done to everyone. The work we do to support women and children, change attitudes, lobby Government and create awareness about domestic and sexual violence, continues and we are lucky to have an excellent in-house staff/ volunteer team who I would like to thank for all their hard work. Within WAFNI our work is governed by the WAFNI Management Board, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the Board members for their continued leadership, professionalism and commitment to the organisation.

Jan Melia

Chief Executive Officer
Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland