



**Children and young people at the HEART
(Hear, Engage, Advocate, Review, Train)**

Women's Aid Participation Strategy



Revised September 2021



Women's Aid

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Thoughts on participation...

you should not
feel like you
are not allowed
to talk.

Stand
up
for your
rights

dad
mum
brother
sister
the brother
side

don't hold it
in always talk
to someone!

Do not
Worley
I'm hear
for you

I'm
happy
a
Day

Keep
Calm
and
Relax

The children should
have to say what
ever they want to
say.

The government should
talk to the children
in need.
and the children
in need should
listen.

being able to
go to group.

Support
one another

in
Just you

Section 1 - Introduction and background

Women's Aid is deeply committed to the meaningful, effective participation of children and young people in all elements of service design and delivery. We believe all children and young people have a voice and a right for that voice to be listened to and heard.

This participation strategy outlines Women's Aid's commitment to the meaningful participation of children and young people and details the guiding principles, standards, commitments and activities, which underpin it. It is clear to us that policies and services which impact upon children and young people, are much more effective if they are based upon the lived experiences of the children and young people we support. It is also clear to us, if we are to advocate for, with and on behalf of children and young people who experience domestic abuse, then we need to listen to what their experiences and needs are and ensure all our lobbying and advocacy efforts and activities are informed and directed by their voices.

As an organisation, Women's Aid is completely committed to putting in place, measures that encourage children and young people's meaningful participation in ways, which are appropriate, fun and which facilitate their participation in accordance with their age and maturity. We believe all children and young people have equal rights to participation and we are committed to implementing this strategy without discrimination.

1.1 Benefits of participation

Women's Aid believes that meaningful participation of children and young people brings a wealth of benefits, to children and young people, to the organisation and ultimately to society. Such benefits include (but are not restricted to):

- A greater understanding of the needs and experiences of children and young people who experience domestic abuse across Women's Aid and externally.
- A range of improved outcomes for children and young people including, increased sense of self-worth, self-esteem and improved confidence as well as greater friendships and peer relationships among children and young people.
- Better, more informed service development and provision across Women's Aid and externally for children and young people.
- Improved and more informed advocacy and better partnership working with other agencies to support children and young people who are affected by domestic abuse.

Overall, we believe that meaningful participation gives children and young people a voice and empowers them to create social change at a range of levels, including organisation, community, government and society.

1.2 Participation and the ethos of Women's Aid

Participation of children and young people fits clearly with the ethos and values of Women's Aid. Women's Aid has, since its establishment, over forty years ago, demonstrated a commitment to making a difference for children and young people affected by domestic abuse and this has always been reflected in the core aims and ethos of the organisation.

In February 2019, Women’s Aid NI launched its ten-year children and young people’s strategy **See, Hear, Act**, with an overall vision for children and young people in Northern Ireland:

A society where all children and young people are safe, supported and surrounded by social guardians who will listen to them, build their confidence and encourage them to be the best they can be.

The strategy, was launched in Parliament Buildings and supported by The Children’s Commissioner for Northern Ireland, set out a clear strategic vision and plan for developing and delivering effective tailored services for children and young who have experienced (or who are at risk of experiencing) domestic abuse. The strategy is matched to the NI Strategy for Children and Young People and 8 commitments are matched to the 8 high level outcomes presented in this key document. Our 8 commitments are:

We will provide effective support interventions for children and young people, in refuges, communities and education settings to develop resilience and promote physical and mental health and well-being.

We will encourage all children and young people engaged in our services to participate in a range of age appropriate play, social and recreational activities.

We will work to ensure every child/young person in our service benefits fully from education. Additionally, we will build teacher’s capacity to be social guardians and to deliver our preventative education programmes in primary and post primary education settings.

We will provide a safe place for all children and young people who use our services and strive continuously, to reduce risk and promote the safety and stability of all families we work with.

We will work with families to ensure they have access to information, resources and support necessary to promote their economic and environmental well-being.

We will empower and support children and young people to be active citizens who can challenge social injustice and become champions for change.

We will develop our work upon a strong foundation of children’s rights as laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Additionally, we will be relentless children’s rights advocates, working tirelessly to ensure the rights of children and young people who experience domestic abuse are understood and addressed.

1.3 Article 12

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, articles 12 and 13 emphasis children’s rights to having their voice heard in all decisions affecting them.

Article 12

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views, the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child

Article 13

1. The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.¹

¹ UNCRC text; <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>

This participation strategy provides a clear focus upon these articles and provides an overview of how Women's Aid works to implement and embed them in the delivery of children and young people's services.

1.3 Challenges to participation

While Women's Aid is completely committed to encouraging and facilitating the meaningful participation of children and young people, we also recognise, the challenges presented, in relation to the nature of our work with children and young people and the experiences some of them may have or had in their lives. Such challenges include:

- **The levels at which children and young people engage.** Every child/young person will have their own journey, which needs to be progressed, with support, at their own pace.
- **The transient nature of children and young people's involvement with Women's Aid.** Many children and young people will only be involved for a short period of time.
- **Other commitments in children and young people's lives** e.g. schools, part time jobs, caring responsibilities etc.
- **Children and young people's voices not being heard externally** by other organisations.
- **A lack of recognition and understanding from other organisations** in relation to the nature and impact of domestic abuse in children and young people's lives.
- **Balancing support and safety needs with participation opportunities** and ensuring that a robust safety and support framework surrounds all participation activities.
- **Harnessing parental support for participation** of children and young people.

Women's Aid is committed to building upon its strengths, values and commitment to help overcome these challenges. We appreciate the importance of working with mothers to ensure their support and commitment to participation. Above all, we are committed to working with children and young people to ensure participation is a safe, supportive and fun experience for them. We will work with them at their pace and will remember, always, that participation is a choice.

Section 2 - Participation principles

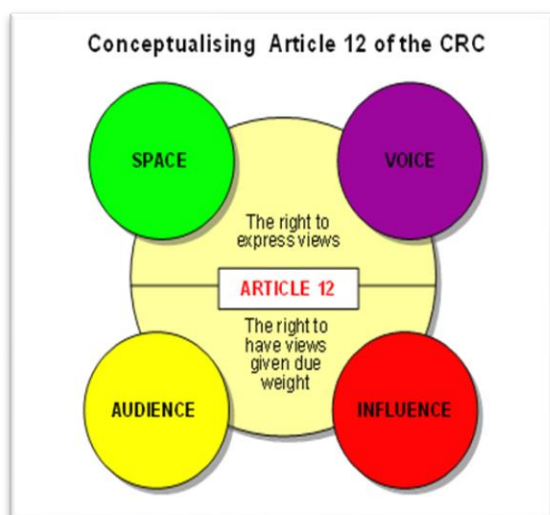
Women's Aid across Northern Ireland is completely committed to putting children and young people at the **heart** of service development and delivery. We will do this in the following ways:

H	Hear (not just listen to) children and young people's voices
E	Engage children and young people in meaningful ways to inform service development and delivery.
A	Advocate for, with and on behalf of children and young people, ensuring their voices are heard at all times.
R	Review the effectiveness of service delivery on an on-going basis, in partnership with children and young people.
T	Train and support staff to understand the importance of participation and to equip them with methods, which promote, meaningful participation.



Section 3- Standards, commitments and activities

Women's Aid fully endorses the **Lundy Model of Participation**² and has found this model especially useful in considering the need for a holistic and dedicated approach to making the participation of children and young people both genuine and meaningful. The Lundy Model, developed by Professor Laura Lundy, Queens University Belfast³ has been recognised, locally, nationally and internationally as a simple yet highly effective model for promoting and implementing participation.



The model, which is based upon the premise that voice is not enough, highlights four key components, which it considers to be essential to make Article 12 a reality. The model was prominently endorsed by the Irish Department of Children and Youth Affairs in the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (2015– 2020).⁴ This publication provides a checklist, which has been developed to guide organisations in the implementation of the four key components contained within the model. Women's Aid implements the four key components of the Lundy Model in the following ways:

Space – Women's Aid across Northern Ireland provides children and young people with safe, supportive and welcoming spaces to enable them to access support and have their voices heard. These spaces are actively created, with children and young people in refuge and in resource centres across Northern Ireland.

Voice – Women's Aid across Northern Ireland is committed to giving children and young people a voice and providing safe and supportive opportunities for children and young people to express their views and have their voices heard. Supportive processes such as group work, arts and crafts and one to one support will be provided to help children express their views in age appropriate ways.

Audience – Women's Aid across Northern Ireland is committed, not only listening to children and young people but to actively hearing what they have to say, capturing their views, taking these views on board and ensuring these views are considered in decision making, to reflect the best interests of children and young people. Women's Aid will, where necessary, advocate on behalf of children and young people to ensure their voices are heard by external agencies at all levels including policy development at a government level.

Influence – Women's Aid across Northern Ireland will work closely with a wide range of organisations and government departments, to ensure children and young people's voices are heard and taken on board and to affect change for all children and young people affected by domestic abuse.

² http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/files/lundy_model_child_participation.pdf

³ <http://www.qub.ac.uk>

⁴ Ireland Department of Children and Youth Affairs, National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015- 2020 (17 June 2015), p. 21.

In addition to the Lundy Model, Women's Aid has also used, as a reference and guide, the *Northern Ireland Standards for Children and Young People's Participation in Public Decision Making*⁵ Ask First toolkit and has benchmarked participation activities to the 8 high level standards presented in this publication. These are:

1. Appropriate methods
2. Support
3. Knowledge
4. Feedback
5. Inclusion
6. Respect
7. Senior People and
8. Timing

Based upon these standards, Women's Aid has eight commitments to children and young people's participation.

- 1 Women's Aid will ensure all children and young people will be engaged in a variety of ways to promote participation, which are supportive, creative and designed to be appropriate to their needs and levels of maturity.
- 2 All children and young people engaged in services provided by Women's Aid will have access to tailored individual support which will be based upon their needs and experiences.
- 3 Children and young people, who use Women's Aid services, will be provided with information, which is easily understood. We will talk to children and young people continually, using appropriate language and will endeavour always, to explain things in terms, which are clear and easily understood.
- 4 Children and young people will be informed about how their views will be used, both in terms of service development and to influence change for all children and young people who may be experiencing or at risk of experiencing domestic and/or sexual abuse and abuse.
- 5 Women's Aid is completely committed to involving all children and young people engaged in services, in participation activities and will put measures in place, to promote and ensure the involvement of those who may be particularly vulnerable or marginalised, giving due attention to section 75 and UNCRC obligations.
- 6 Children and young people engaged in Women's Aid services will be treated with the utmost respect at all times. Their feelings, experiences and opinions will be at the heart of all interactions and planned activities.
- 7 Women's Aid will work closely with children and young people affected by domestic abuse to ensure their voices are heard at the most senior levels in organisations and in government departments.
- 8 All participation activities and efforts will be carefully planned to be timely and to suit the lifestyles and commitments of children and young people.

⁵ Ask First! Northern Ireland Standards for Children & Young People's Participation in Public Decision Making (2010) Participation Network: Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister

3.1 Standard one – appropriate methods

Commitment: Women’s Aid will ensure all children and young people will be engaged in a variety of ways to promote participation, which are supportive, creative and designed to be appropriate to their needs and levels of maturity.

Women’s Aid will:

- Ensure all staff involved in the delivery of children and young people’s services receive participation skills training, including creative ways to evaluate and review effectiveness of service provision with children and young people.
- Encourage staff across Women’s Aid to share best practice in participation methods and encourage the development of a vibrant participation culture across the organisation.
- Develop a range of ways to actively engage children and young people in service development and design and to ensure their voices are heard. This may include (but is not restricted to):
 - Children’s house meetings in refuges
 - Promoting children’s choices at every level, e.g. snacks, outings, social events etc.
 - Planning events involving children and young people (e.g. to plan a summer programme).
 - Establishing and facilitating a children’s group or youth forum
 - Working in partnership with mothers
 - Involving young people in promotional activities or fundraising
 - Involving children and young people in the recruitment and selection of staff
 - Producing promotional and information resources, e.g. videos, leaflets etc.
 - Developing young people as peer mentors (with appropriate staff support, training and supervision) to support other children and young people
- Allocate adequate resources to participation events such as trips, planning meetings, residential etc.
- Develop and nurture effective partnerships are developed and nurtured with local schools, youth organisations and children’s charities to promote effective referral processes and information sharing.
- Work to ensure all children and young people enjoy their participation and have fun.

Women’s Aid challenges me and builds my confidence...it’s a safe place for me to meet others who have been through similar experiences. I have a voice there and people listen.

Girl age 14

3.2 Standard two – support

Commitment: All children and young people engaged in services provided by Women’s Aid will have access to tailored individual support which will be based upon their needs and experiences.

Women’s Aid will:

- Work in partnership with children, young people and mothers to develop a personal plan, which will be based upon support needs.
- Ensure all children and young people have access to a skilled and trusted person (or persons) who will work directly with them to provide tailored support. This may include (but is not restricted to):
 - One to one support
 - Group support
 - Referral to other organisations
 - Play opportunities
 - Advocating on their behalf with other organisations
 - Homework support
 - Safety planning
 - Delivery of Women’s Aid Helping Hands programme (on an individual or group basis)
 - Delivery of other empowerment and personal development programmes (self-esteem, relationship building etc.)
- Involve all children and young people in effective service review using a range of age appropriate and creative evaluation tools.
- Develop and deliver services, based upon feedback from children and young people, best practice and strict adherence to health and safety and rigorous child protection safeguards.

I love coming to Homework club, the staff are really nice. They are always there to help with homework and also any problems I might have at home or at school...I love that I can practice my reading in a quiet space with one of the workers because it’s difficult to concentrate at home because I live in a house with lots of kids...

Girl age 12

Comment from a girl. age 9

3.3 Standard three – knowledge

Commitment: Children and young people who use Women’s Aid services will be provided with information, which is easily understood. We will talk to children and young people continually, using appropriate language and will endeavour always, to explain things in terms, which are clear and easily understood.

Women’s Aid will:

- Ensure all children and young people who engage in Women’s Aid services receive age appropriate, clear information about Women’s Aid and the services they will benefit from. Examples of this currently in existence include:
 - Buddy back pack (welcome pack for children and young people in refuge)
 - Child friendly information leaflets and booklets about services
 - Information posters and displays
 - One to one support from experienced staff.
- Strive to ensure that information will be made available in formats that are accessible to all children and young people, including those with sensory and learning disabilities.
- Ensure support staff check in regularly with children and young people to ensure they understand all information provided to them and are fully aware of all circumstances, which may impact upon them.
- Provide children and young people engaged in consultation events and processes (e.g. to inform the NI strategy for children and young people) with the appropriate information and support to ensure they are clear of the context of what is being asked of them and how the results of their consultation will be used.
- Base all children and young people’s services upon the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and promote a rights-based culture throughout the organisation visually, using posters and information leaflets.

I know how to keep myself safe in my relationship. I got a lot of help through hard times at home. I am much more open with my parents about everything I do. I can enjoy life a lot better now and I know everything is not my fault.

Boy age 14

3.4 Standard four – feedback

Commitment: Children and young people will be informed about how their views will be used both in terms of service development and to influence change for all children and young people who may be experiencing or at risk of experiencing domestic and/or sexual abuse and abuse.

Women's Aid will:

- Seek permission from children, young people and mothers where appropriate if it is intended to use their comments/artwork etc. in training materials, presentations and/or publications. Explain the impact their work can have for all children and young people affected by domestic abuse.
- Facilitate follow up sessions (where possible and practical) with children and young people who engage in consultation events to update them on progress and the extent to which their voices have been heard at a wider level, including by government.
- Reference all children and young people's involvement in consultation events e.g. as part of government policy response, and ensure children and young people are credited for their involvement and participation.
- Evaluate and review all support services delivered to children and young people with children and young people and ensure their evaluations are used to inform future service development and delivery.
- Ensure a children and young person's complaints procedure is in place and promoted across Women's Aid to enable children and young people to have their voices heard if they have been dissatisfied with any aspect of service delivery.
- Evaluate all consultation and participation events with children and young people to ensure they have been meaningful and fun for all involved.

I have been involved with Women's Aid as a young volunteer for many years. When I was old enough to take some of the OCN qualifications and get more involved, I took the opportunity to start helping out at the Homework Club because I knew it would be really rewarding...I think it has been good for me as you can see the small but beneficial impact you can make in children's lives...overall this experience has exceeded my expectations and encouraged me to become more involved with Women's Aid.

Girl age 17

3.5 Standard five – inclusion

Commitment: Women’s Aid is completely committed to involving all children and young people engaged in services in participation activities and will put measures in place to promote and ensure the involvement of those who may be particularly vulnerable or marginalised, giving due attention to section 75 and UNCRC obligations.

Women’s Aid will:

- Ensure venues used for service delivery are accessible and user friendly.
- Ensure information provided to children and young people is inclusive and meets all needs.
- Promote opportunities for engagement to all children and young people.
- Where necessary, harness external support e.g. signers or interpreters to ensure the inclusion of all children and young people.
- Deliver all activities at a pace, which is safe, supportive and comfortable for all children and young people.

I learned to get rid of all my worries and not keep them inside and bottle them up.

Girl age 9

3.6 Standard six – respect

Commitment: Children and young people engaged in Women’s Aid services will be treated with the utmost respect at all times. Their feelings, experiences and opinions will be at the heart of all interactions and planned activities.

Women’s Aid will:

- Work to build an environment of mutual respect and understanding among staff, mothers, children and young people. Promote an understanding of rights and responsibilities and establish clear boundaries for behaviours and activities in the understanding that **everyone has the right to feel safe all the time.**
- Ensure all children and young people are given 100% attention. Staff will work to ensure children and young people know they are respected and valued by giving them time to express their views and taking these views on board.
- Respect that every child/young person is an individual with skills and opinions, which are completely unique to that child. We will celebrate children as individuals and ensure support is based upon their uniqueness.
- Never make any assumptions about what children and young people have experienced or how they may have been affected. It is up to children and young people to share this with us at their own pace if they choose to do so.
- Ensure children and young people’s views are at the heart of all planning activities and children and young people are encouraged to set their own agendas and bring their own views and opinions to the table.
- Respect children and young people’s choices, including the choice not to participate. While children and young people will be encouraged to participate and staff will clearly explain the benefits of participation, if children and young people decide a certain activity is not for them, staff will respect this decision and will not push participation in any way.
- Work with mothers e.g. through delivery of programmes such as You and Me, Mum to help them set safe and respectful boundaries for their children and to implement strategies to manage challenging behaviours.
- Talk to (and not at) children and young people. Communication will be a two-way process and staff will work to ensure children and young people feel their views and opinions have been taken on board.
- Work with children and young people at their pace, considering their needs and experiences.

Women’s Aid has helped me say how I feel about what is happening and I can now say exactly what I want...they listen to you and try their best to help you.

Girl age 9

3.7 Standard seven – senior people

Commitment: We will work closely with children and young people affected by domestic abuse to ensure their voices are heard at the most senior levels in organisations and in government departments.

Women's Aid will:

- Reflect children and young people's voices and reiterate what they tell us in all training and lobbying activities.
- Ensure all staff are champions for children and advocate for them at all levels to ensure their best interests are paramount at all times and in all decisions.
- Create opportunities for children and young people to influence change at the highest levels, including:
 - Supporting children and young people to respond to government policy through facilitation of consultation approaches.
 - Delivering presentations to politicians and senior public-sector personnel.
 - Encouraging government officials to attend meetings with children and young people (with permission from children and young people).
 - Harnessing children and young people's voices in all policy responses.
 - Producing information resources to be shared with politicians and senior personnel such as videos etc.
- Ensure all children and young people who choose to engage in media events are provided with support (and training where necessary) before, during and after the event, with utmost attention being paid to safety and self-protection needs always.

Women's Aid has been brilliant and helped me so much. Now my life is so much better with all the help...

Boy age 13

3.8 Standard eight – timing

Commitment: All participation activities and efforts will be carefully planned to be timely and to suit the lifestyles and commitments of children and young people.

Women's Aid will:

- Ensure all consultation processes are carefully planned, so they are not rushed and give ample time for children and young people to share their views.
- Plan all participation events to suit the needs, lifestyles and commitments of children and young people e.g. school, part time work, caring commitments etc.
- Harness children and young people's views at the earliest stages to ensure they can influence government policy as it develops.
- Provide feedback to children and young people as soon after the consultation event as possible, to enable them to see how their input has been used to create social change.
- Take time to celebrate the vital contributions made by children and young people through participation activities on a regular basis and throughout their participation journey.

Thank you for helping me so much over the last 4 years. Before my life was really horrible, now my life is so much better. The best thing for me was spending time with leaders and friends and learning topics that can help me. I wouldn't change a thing.... Women's Aid is 10/10 for me.

Boy age 12