



A written submission in response to:

Facing the Future
Housing Strategy for Northern Ireland
Consultation on Northern Ireland Housing Strategy
2012-2017

Department for Social Development
December 2012

Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland

129 University Street
BELFAST BT7 1HP

Tel: 028 9024 9041

General Email: info@womensaidni.org

Website: www.womensaidni.org

24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline - 0800 917 1414

Email support: 24hrsupport@dvhelpline.org

Text SUPPORT to 07797 805 839

Open to all women and men affected by domestic violence

Contents

Section		Page
1.	Introduction to Women's Aid in Northern Ireland 1.1 Women's Aid statistics	3
2.	Response - overview	4
3.	Response to theme 1- Ensuring access to decent, affordable sustainable homes across all tenures 3.1 Developing further innovation in the funding of new Social Housing 3.2 Improving the regulation of houses in multiple occupancy 3.3 maintaining Social Housing Stock to a good standard	6
4.	Response to theme 2- Meeting housing needs and supporting the most vulnerable 4.1 Undertaking a fundamental review of social housing allocations policy 4.2 Making better use of housing stock 4.3 Preventing Homelessness	8
5.	Response to theme 3- Housing and Welfare Reform 5.1 Welfare Reform Implementation 5.2 Research to better understand impacts 5.3 Housing Services	12
6.	Concluding comments	16
7.	Contact details	18
	Appendices Appendix 1: Additional statistical data regarding domestic and sexual violence and abuse	

1. Introduction to Women's Aid in Northern Ireland

Women's Aid is the lead voluntary organisation challenging and addressing domestic and sexual violence and abuse in Northern Ireland. Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland manages the 24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline which is open to all women and men experiencing domestic violence. There are 10 local Women's Aid groups throughout Northern Ireland providing refuge and a range of emotional and practical support services, including outreach and aftercare to women and children suffering from domestic violence. Women's Aid also provides a range of tailored, age appropriate support for children and young people, this work is further documented in the Women's Aid strategy for children and young people "Our Place-Safe Space" and the directory of services for children and young people.

The core work of Women's Aid in Northern Ireland, including Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland and the 10 local groups is to:

- provide refuge accommodation to women and their children suffering, mental, physical, financial or sexual abuse within the home
- run the 24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline
- provide a range of support services to enable women who are leaving a violent situation to rebuild their lives and the lives of their children
- provide a range of support services to children and young people who have experienced domestic and sexual violence
- run preventative education programmes in schools and other settings
- educate and inform the public, media, police, courts, social services and other agencies of the impact and effects of domestic violence
- advise and support all relevant agencies in the development of domestic violence policies, protocols and service delivery, and
- work in partnership with all relevant agencies to ensure a joined up approach to domestic violence.

Every day across Northern Ireland, another five women and children come to stay in refuge because they are not safe in their own homes. Last year 3,663 women and 4,152 children accessed the Floating Support service enabling women to access support whilst remaining in their own homes and communities. These figures are increasing on a yearly basis as the organisation reaches out to families experiencing domestic violence across Northern Ireland.

In Northern Ireland, over the past three decades, the growth of the Women's Aid movement and the subsequent development and provision of refuge accommodation in Northern Ireland has been impressive and progressive.

The first Women's Aid refuge opened in 1975 in Belfast. During 1977, Women's Aid groups were set up in Derry/Londonderry and Coleraine. These groups formed the Northern Ireland Women's Aid Federation (NIWAF) in 1978. Throughout the 1980's and 1990's further refuges were opened across Northern Ireland bringing the provision today to a total of 12 refuges, providing over 300 bed spaces for women and children experiencing domestic and sexual violence and abuse. Refuges are equipped with playrooms and communal facilities. Refuge accommodation provides a temporary place of safety for women and children fleeing from domestic and sexual violence and abuse. Women can stay in refuge for as long as is needed to rebuild their lives and get the support they need.

Women's Aid refuges provide an individually tailored and responsive service, which is based upon a woman's needs and those of her children. Refuges can provide respite, safety and support and while accommodated in refuge, women and children can be supported to come to terms with their situation and can be encouraged to make positive plans for the future. In addition to 12 twelve refuges, Women's Aid also has 15 resource centres across Northern Ireland for women seeking information and support, group work and training.

1.1 Women's Aid statistics (2011 - 2012)

- 831 women and 586 children sought refuge.
- 3,663 women and 4,152 children accessed the Floating Support service enabling women to access support whilst remaining in their own homes and communities.
- In 2011/12 the 24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline, open to all women and men affected by domestic violence, managed 43,949 calls. This represented an increase of 14.5% on 2010/11.

Additional Women's Aid statistics and statistics relating to Domestic violence and violence against women are provided as an appendix (appendix 1)

2. Response - Overview

- Women's Aid welcomes the publication of **Facing the Future: Housing Strategy for Northern Ireland**, produced by the Department for Social Development and the opportunity to comment upon the document on behalf of our ten local groups as part of the strategy consultation.
- Overall we found the strategy to be well researched and comprehensive. The strategy is wide ranging and clearly acknowledged the challenges presented by welfare reform and the difficult economic circumstances which currently exist.
- We would like to use this opportunity to present some of the specific challenges that are faced on a daily basis in relation to housing by women and children who are affected by domestic violence. We also welcome this opportunity to present some

of the challenges we are currently experiencing and anticipate for the future, in our role as a temporary accommodation provider.

- Women's Aid welcomes and concurs with the three government roles presented on page 4 in relation to Housing i.e.
 1. Helping to create the right conditions for a stable and sustainable housing market that supports economic growth and prosperity:
 2. Providing support for individuals and families to access housing, particularly the most vulnerable in society: and
 3. Setting minimum standards for the quality of new and existing homes and for how rented housing is managed.
- Women's Aid agrees that the current economic situation is challenging for housing provision and there is a need to make difficult decisions and to make the best use of resources available. We believe these difficult decisions can be made in consultation with all relevant agencies, including housing and temporary housing providers.
- We welcome the intention set out on page 5, to use public funding in innovative ways to increase the supply of social and affordable housing. We welcome a review of the future role of social housing and recommend that this be done with clear consultation with all Social Housing Providers.
- We agree changes to Housing Benefit, introduced through the Welfare Reform Bill, pose particular challenges. Women's Aid has serious concerns regarding this which we have already highlighted in our response to the proposed Welfare Reform Bill. We will explore these concerns in greater detail throughout this document.
- We welcome a clear focus on standards in the social housing sector presented on page 5 and the further improvement of the regulation of social housing landlords.
- Women's Aid welcomes and endorses the five core principles set out on page 7. We look forward to seeing these core principles translated into key actions in the delivery of the strategy and in translation into actions at all levels.
- Women's Aid welcomes the five themes presented in the strategy i.e.
 1. Ensuring access to decent, affordable, sustainable homes across all tenures
 2. Meeting housing needs and supporting the most vulnerable
 3. Housing and Welfare Reform
 4. Driving regeneration and sustaining communities through housing
 5. Getting the structures right
- For the purpose of our response, we have concentrated our response on the first three themes as we consider them to be most relevant to our work.

3. Response to theme 1 -

Ensuring access to decent, affordable, sustainable homes across all tenures

- Women's Aid welcomes the development of a strategy for housing which recognises the need for a balanced housing market, providing households in Northern Ireland with a range of good quality housing choices at a price they can afford.

3.1 Developing further innovation in the funding of new social housing

- Women's Aid welcomes the intention presented on page 12 to develop further innovation in the funding of new social housing. We understand that all new social housing is developed by registered housing associations through the Social Housing Development Programme.
- We welcome the proposals set out on page 13. We concur with the need to work closely with Housing Associations to support the delivery of more new housing, we feel this will be crucial, given the proposed changes as a result of Welfare Reform. In particular, we welcome the proposal to continue to explore alternative models for funding new social housing.

3.2 Improving the regulation of houses in multiple occupation (HMO)

- Women's Aid welcomes the production of proposals for improving regulation of houses in multiple occupation. We also anticipate that changes in housing benefit as part of the Welfare Reform programme will lead to an increased need and demand for HMOs.
- We are extremely concerned by the extension of the Single Room Rent to those under 35 years of age and fear this is highly likely to place vulnerable and at risk individuals in wholly unsuitable accommodation. We are also seriously concerned about the social impact forcing people from their homes may have, in particular, on children. Children need safety and stability and moving to a new community, school etc. clearly may not be in their best interests. Additionally, this can place pressures on single parents who may be dependent upon extended family and community services for support and in many cases, informal child care.
- To enable a tenant to remain in an under occupied house the options available include, supplementing income to meet this increase, or falling into arrears. We are seriously concerned about the implications for women and children affected by domestic and sexual violence and abuse in this situation.

- In the absence of suitable smaller housing, many individuals may have to move into accommodation with multiple occupancy. Moving to accommodation with multiple occupancy is not always suitable for women who are affected by domestic and sexual violence and abuse and who are already vulnerable. This can result in increased isolation and loss of much needed support. There are potentially also serious child protection issues.
- There are many additional issues which need to be considered for women experiencing domestic violence. There could be problems relating to security, privacy and confidentiality. Where there is a history of domestic violence, personal information such as legal documentation must be kept confidential and this can be increasingly difficult where accommodation is shared.
- Complications may also arise where a woman is not the custodial parent. Shared accommodation may not be suitable for bringing children for day visits or overnight stays as there are clear child protection issues. This issue is also prevalent in families where parents have separated and contact is shared between both parents.
- Conflict may also arise with the primary care parent or with the perpetrator of domestic violence over the suitability of shared accommodation for children and young people.
- Finally, in situations of domestic and sexual violence and abuse where the woman and children have fled the home and the abuser remains, there may be circumstances where the house is declared under-occupied. We are concerned that women who leave will be at higher risk as a direct result. This will reduce the Housing Benefit paid to the partner, we are concerned this financial hit will be used as another reason to abuse, threaten and cajole the woman who has left.
- Such issues can compound women's fears in relation to leaving an abusive situation and in many cases are primary drivers for her to return to an unsafe situation.
- We strongly believe such proposals contradict other government policies which are currently in place, such as the family support strategy, Families Matter-Supporting Families in Northern Ireland, produced by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, 2009.
- Women's Aid is seriously concerned that there is currently a lack of appropriate housing to meet the needs which will arise out of this extension of the Single Room Rate to under 35. We are seriously concerned about how this will impact upon women and children who are affected by domestic violence and seeking suitable safe housing.

3.3 Maintaining social housing stock to a good standard

- Women's Aid welcomes the proposals set out on page 19, to ensure high standards of social housing. While we accept that surveys have shown Northern Ireland to be among the best providers of social housing in the United Kingdom, we also strongly agree and that there exists, many Housing Executive homes which require extensive work to bring them up to standards which are consistent with the five core principles presented in this strategy. We have encountered such properties, on an on-going basis throughout our three decades of work in the appropriate placement and resettling of women and children who are moving on from refuge provision.
- We agree that many social housing tenants are on low income and at risk of fuel poverty. Since the economic downturn, we have witnessed levels of poverty among women using our services that are shocking. Examples have included women approaching charitable organisations for donations of food, clothing, furniture etc. and women having to overlook their own basic needs in order to provide food and clothing for their children. Many of these women have no available funds for basic needs such as food and fuel and find themselves at financial hardship during what is already a difficult and highly stressful time.
- We welcome all proposals which have the potential to improve this situation. We also welcome all proposals to improve the energy efficiency of all housing stock presented on page 20.

4. Response to theme 2-

Meeting housing needs and supporting the most vulnerable

- Women's Aid agrees that the role of social housing has changed over the past thirty years and welcomes the opportunities presented to look at these changes strategically to address the challenges that are evident and will be presented through the proposed Welfare Reform Programme.
- We particularly welcome a review of the social housing waiting list and allocations. We also welcome the intention to work closely with stakeholders to develop appropriate policies and systems to ensure public resources are used effectively and efficiently.
- We agree with the statement presented on page 23, *housing needs tend to vary over the course of an individual's life as a result of changes in personal, health or family circumstances*. This is clearly evident in the experiences of women and children who are affected by domestic and sexual violence and abuse. From our experience over three decades of supporting women and children who have experienced domestic and sexual violence and abuse, we know they have a variety of needs which will inevitably change over time and with the provision of support. Many of these needs can only be met initially in the context of the safe, secure and supportive

environment afforded by our refuges, which enable women to re-build their lives. However, there is also a need to focus upon how these needs can change as women move on to live independently, to afford as many options as possible for those who have experienced domestic violence. This presents both challenges and opportunities.

- Women's Aid believes there is a clear need for a review and remodelling of refuge provision across Northern Ireland in response to women and children's needs, government strategy and the challenges presented through Welfare Reform. This is consistent with proposals outlined in the Homeless Strategy for Northern Ireland and is explored further in section 5.3.
- We also feel there is also a need to provide more safe suitable housing to enable women and in many cases women and children affected by domestic and sexual violence and abuse, to move on and live independently.
- This need is even more prevalent now, given the extension of the Single Room Rent to under 35. We are concerned this extension will present an additional barrier for women moving on from refuge to live independently and will further reduce the options available to them. Such barriers highlight the need for a review of refuge provision to provide a mix of communal and self-contained living to ensure women experiencing domestic and sexual violence and abuse have more choices and options to live independently. This is explored further in section 5.3.
- We welcome the intention set out on page 23 of the Housing Strategy, to build on existing work in Northern Ireland to develop a fuller range of homelessness prevention measures. We understand the main vehicle for this will be the Homelessness Strategy which was launched in May 2012.

4.1 Undertaking a fundamental review of social housing allocations policy

- Women's Aid welcomes the proposal to lead a fundamental review of social housing allocation policy. We believe this will be crucial to deal with the impact of welfare reform.
- We suggest that any such review is undertaken in close consultation with temporary housing providers to ensure housing need is effectively assessed and all factors taken into account when determining priority for allocation of social housing. We welcome any opportunity to be part of this review and look forward to utilising this opportunity to highlight the needs and experiences of women and children who are experiencing domestic and sexual violence and abuse.
- Women's Aid has experience spanning cross three decades of working closely with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to ensure the safe and appropriate re housing of women and children who have been affected by domestic violence.

- While refuge provision is essential for women and children to meet their support needs at crisis point and while they rebuild their lives, there comes a time when women are ready to move on from refuge and live independently.
- Waiting times for women to be rehoused vary greatly and many women and children find themselves in refuge accommodation for lengthy periods while they are waiting to be allocated suitable housing. While Women's Aid prides itself upon the quality of refuge provision and the support services attached, the primary purpose of refuge provision is to provide safe temporary accommodation. Living in refuges for long periods of time can present difficulties and frustrations for families who are ready for and clearly desire independent living and a new start. This continues to be an issue of serious concern for us and once again highlights the need for a review of refuge provision with a view to remodelling refuge accommodation. This is further outlined in section 5.3.
- Additionally we remain concerned by the lengthy waiting lists and lack of access to social housing available in rural areas in Northern Ireland. This has had consequences for many of women attempting to move on from Women's Aid refuge accommodation in rural areas.
- We strongly believe it is essential that the impact of domestic violence is fully considered as a primary factor when determining priority for allocation of social housing.

4.2 Making better use of Housing Stock

- Once again, we would like to reiterate our serious concerns regarding the extension of the Single Room Rent to those under 35 years of age and fear that this is highly likely to place vulnerable and at risk individuals in wholly unsuitable accommodation.
- We are also concerned that this change will result in additional delays in women being rehoused after refuge. We have already expressed our concerns in relation to waiting lists for suitable housing. These are already lengthy and we fear, given the lack of suitable accommodation for single occupancy, women and children will have to wait for longer periods.
- Once again, Women's Aid recognises the need to adapt to such changes and this provides a clear strategic fit with plans already in place for the remodelling of refuges across Northern Ireland to provide a mix of both communal and self-contained units. This is explored further in section 5.3. Additionally there is a clear need for greater provision of smaller, suitable housing to address the issues of under occupancy created by the extension of the Single Room Rent to under 35.
- While we welcome the proposal presented on page 27, to work with social housing landlords to support under occupying tenants, who wish to do so, to move to smaller

properties, Women's Aid is seriously concerned that there is currently a lack of appropriate alternative housing to meet the needs which will arise out of this extension. It has been estimated that there could be c. 32,000 households in social housing in Northern Ireland that will be affected by this change. It is evident that there is a limited supply of quality affordable one bedroom properties to meet the increased demand such changes may bring. Once again, we feel this may place additional demands on HMOs, which, as we have previously outlined, are not always suitable for women and children who have experienced domestic violence.

- While there is potential to make better use of existing Housing Stock, we believe that in reality, the appropriate housing stock to meet this additional demand is simply not available. We strongly believe this is a serious issue which needs to be addressed strategically by government. We call on government to fully consider the serious implications of this major change.

4.3 Preventing homelessness

- Women's Aid welcomes the publication of the Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland 2012-2017 and recognises and commends the significant progress outlined in implementing the Housing Executive's Homelessness Strategy since 2002 and the recognition given to the essential role of joint working with voluntary sector partners. We would specifically highlight the successful establishment and operation of the 24-Hour Domestic Violence Helpline which contributes to the prevention of homelessness and which is funded by NIHE, together with DHSS&PS and the DOJ. The introduction of a network of Floating Support services in 2002 was also highly significant and successful. The Floating Support services run by Women's Aid are essential to support victims of domestic violence and effectively contribute to sustaining tenancies and preventing homelessness.
- We do have concerns regarding the emphasis placed throughout the Homelessness Strategy, upon the private rented sector for the provision of both temporary and permanent accommodation. These concerns broadly encompass affordability, suitability and sustainability. Such concerns were highlighted in greater detail in our collective response submitted during the consultation process for the Homelessness Strategy.
- We understand the Homelessness Strategy will be the main vehicle for developing and embedding the homelessness prevention agenda. Women's Aid is currently represented in the structures for taking this forward, specifically Annie Campbell, Director of Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland sits on the Improving Services for Vulnerable Groups sub group.
- Women's Aid welcomes the opportunities to work in partnership with the Housing Executive and others to implement the Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland.

5. Response to theme 3 – Housing and Welfare reform

- Women’s Aid has serious concerns relating to the introduction and implementation of the Welfare Reform Bill in Northern Ireland. We clearly outlined these concerns in our response to the Committee for Social Development in relation to the proposed Welfare Reform Bill.
- Our concerns relate to the potentially devastating consequences of the proposed Welfare Reform Bill on women and as direct result, their children and families. We view the proposed Bill as a major step backwards in relation to women’s rights and gender parity. In its current format, the Bill negates the positive progress we have witnessed in these areas over the past decades with EU, UK and NI gender equality strategies.
- Welfare and emergency support is crucial in helping victims of domestic and sexual violence leave their abusive home situation and ensure the safety of themselves and their children. Such support ensures that victims have the option to extricate themselves from a domestic violence situation in the knowledge that it will not lead to destitution.
- While we welcome the aims presented on page 33 to ensure Welfare Reform operates effectively and to support people affected by housing related changes to adapt to the new circumstances, we feel the repercussions brought about by such change are huge and would seek more detailed actions in relation to how these aims will be achieved and the negative impact of such reform be minimised.

5.1 Welfare Reform implementation

- We share the concerns presented on page 34 in relation to payment of Universal Credit, including housing costs. These concerns were emphasised in our response to the Welfare Reform Bill.
- We welcome the proposal presented on page 34 to *examine carefully the potential to maintain within the Universal Credit system, a choice for tenants regarding direct payment of housing costs to their landlord.*
- We also welcome the announcement by Minister McCausland on 22nd October 2012 in relation to customisation that would allow landlords to be able to receive direct payment of housing costs and to allow fortnightly payments to be made where it is felt necessary and appropriate.

- Women's Aid anticipates several problems arising from the rolling of Housing Benefit into Universal Credit. We see this as a huge and potentially devastating step and one which we feel should not be taken without in depth consultation with gender experts and providers of temporary housing such as Women's Aid. We believe this move will lead to women falling into debt, becoming homeless or being forced to take unsafe steps to improve their situation.
- While we welcome the announcement by Minister McCausland on 22nd October 2012 that *whilst parity will be maintained the Bill would be customised to suit the special circumstances of people in Northern Ireland* we remain concerned in relation to payment of Universal Credit.
- We are concerned there may be situations where the housing benefit element of Universal Credit will be paid to the perpetrator of domestic violence, even if his name is not on the tenancy. If this is the case and he does not pay the rent, the debt may then be attributed to the woman who does hold the tenancy. This proposed approach for payment of Housing Benefit has the potential to reduce substantially the crucial funding that provides a safe place for women and children who are escaping from domestic and sexual violence in Northern Ireland. Even if this is not the case, and the element of housing benefit is paid to the woman, the impacts of changes in welfare reform such as extension of the single room rate, to economic wellbeing, can still leave a woman struggling to meet ends meet and as a result, in rent arrears.
- If a woman escapes domestic violence and comes to a Women's Aid refuge for safety and support, rent arrears can follow her. As a direct consequence, the problem is then being passed onto Women's Aid as the temporary housing provider.
- The accrual of debt can have serious repercussions for payment of housing benefits to temporary housing providers such as Women's Aid. Women's Aid is totally reliant on Housing Benefit to cover the costs of women and children accessing refuge accommodation. Without rents and service charges being met in full, the provision of refuge accommodation would no longer be viable.
- Women's Aid across Northern Ireland is already working within reduced budgets and insecure funding streams. We are not in a position to support multiple women without Housing Benefit in the long term. This problem is also exacerbated by the numbers of women we are accommodating who have no recourse to public funds (NRPF). These women are not eligible for benefits, such as housing benefit whilst in refuge, and prohibited from employment. Women's Aid is committed to providing support, emergency accommodation and assistance for all women and children who are victims of domestic violence, however as an organisation, it is severely limited in its capacity to do so for women with no recourse to public funds, due to a lack of funding and resources. Women's Aid groups are struggling to survive in the current funding and economic climate and have, over the past years, experienced huge reductions in funding streams and also a reduction in individual and corporate

donations as a direct result of the economic downturn. The sustainability of Women's Aid services is at serious risk and the organisation is seriously concerned about the financial impacts of Welfare Reform on this sustainability.

- Women's Aid urges consideration of a collective review by Housing Associations, DSD and NIHE of the risks associated with the overall costs associated with running a refuge including rent and management. This could include consideration of issues such as deficits in rent and women with no recourse to public funds. Women's Aid would like to see clear plans and funding put in place to address these issues and to minimise risks.
- Women's Aid strongly urges consideration of payment of a block grant for Housing Benefit which could be paid annually to refuge providers to cover occupancy. As a minimum, the Housing Benefit element of Universal Credit should continue to be paid on an individual basis but directly to landlords, including refuge providers.

5.2 Research to better understand impacts

- While we feel research does have its place in helping to understand who will be affected by the housing related changes and how, we believe much of this knowledge, expertise and understanding is already there among housing and temporary housing providers.
- The issues are clear and we would strongly recommend on-going collective consultation process rather than spending time and resources on research which could be more appropriately and effectively deployed on front line services. The establishment of a Housing Forum, as proposed under theme one, could prove to be a valuable vehicle for providing information on housing related issues and impact.

5.3 Housing services

- Women's Aid agrees that many households will face considerable challenges in adapting to the changes and challenges brought about through the implementation of the Welfare Reform Bill.
- We seek further clarification on what appropriate housing services will be put in place to support affected households through his transition to new benefit arrangements as referred to on page 35.
- We are also concerned that there is little public awareness of such changes in spite of the fact that these changes are due to be implemented in April 2013 (less than six months' time). We urge government to consider the implementation of a public awareness campaign to go some way to preparing individuals and organisations that will be affected.

- We welcome the proposal to increase funding for discretionary housing payments and the extension of these to all social housing tenants.
- While we welcome the proposals outlined on page 36, we seek clarification on how these will be implemented e.g. proposal 2 states that *we will support the development of additional housing advice for those affected by Welfare Reform which could help tenants explore the other options available to them.* How will this translate into action? Will this include additional allocation of funding to front line services?
- While we welcome the third proposal, *to work with social housing landlords to support under occupying tenants who wish to do so, to move to smaller properties,* once again, we feel, once again, this is a complex area which requires careful consideration, based upon the needs and circumstances of that particular individual or family. Also, once again, we are concerned that in reality, the levels of alternative accommodation which will be required simply do not exist at present.
- We particularly welcome the proposal to work with social housing landlords, to explore whether there are opportunities to remodel some existing social properties in areas where there are particular shortages of smaller dwellings and build a different size mix of accommodation within the Social Housing Development Programme.
- The Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland, produced by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and launched in May 2012, provides the opportunity *to engage with Supporting People colleagues and temporary accommodation providers, to complete a fundamental review of the temporary accommodation portfolio and to develop plans for the delivery of a cost effective response which balances the need for supported and unsupported accommodation”* (pg. 19)
- The Homelessness Strategy also proposes a review of refuge provision by 2014/15. We welcome this review and feel the time is right to look at remodelling of refuge provision in line with current government strategy and to help address the challenges which may be presented through Welfare Reform. Women’s Aid strongly believes this review will need to be clearly informed by the expertise and knowledge of Women’s Aid and service users. Women’s Aid, in partnership with Housing Associations has already made progress in this area.
- Women’s Aid in Northern Ireland has a long and successful history of working closely with local Housing Associations which spans over 30 years. Partnerships between Women’s Aid and Housing Associations have been instrumental in the development and provision of safe accommodation for women and children experiencing domestic violence. Refuges are managed by Women’s Aid and the Housing Association performs the role of the social landlord.

- Across Women’s Aid in Northern Ireland, some Women’s Aid groups have already explored or developed, in partnership with their Housing Association, revised innovative models of refuge accommodation, to include a range of purpose built and state of the art facilities, combining a mix of communal living and smaller self-contained units based upon need. Such remodelling provides a “strategic fit” with many of the changes encompassed under the Welfare Reform programme such as the extension of the Single Room Rent to those under 35 years of age.
- Several Women’s Aid groups have worked closely with their Housing Association to develop plans for new models of accommodation provision and have found this a very positive experience. Problems with funding however have prevented further developments and progression in this area.
- We believe the time is right to move forward with this review and subsequent remodelling and development of refuges, given the existence of the government strategy relating to domestic and sexual violence and abuse and the challenges presented through welfare reform. Funding for refurbishment and remodelling is a major issue facing both Women’s Aid and Housing Associations at present. While there is enthusiasm across the organisation in relation to remodelling of refuge accommodation, long delays have created frustration and uncertainty. To ensure the provision of best quality needs led accommodation and to enable us to meet the challenges presented through Welfare Reform, Women’s Aid would like to see the remodelling and refurbishment of refuges to be addressed as a priority. We are of the strong belief that this needs to be done in partnership with Housing Associations, The Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Department of Social Development Ireland.
- Government investment in this process will provide a clear investment in improving standards of current provision in line with government strategy, while going some way to address the challenges presented through Welfare Reform. It will also provide a strategic and innovative approach as well as a demonstration of continued commitment to meeting the needs of women and children experiencing domestic and sexual violence and abuse.

6. Concluding comments

- Women’s Aid appreciates the opportunity to respond to the first ever Housing Strategy produced in Northern Ireland. We strongly believe there is need for such a strategy in the current economic climate and in light of the changes proposed through Welfare Reform.

- Overall we found the strategy to be well researched and comprehensive. The strategy is wide ranging and clearly acknowledges the challenges presented by welfare reform and the difficult economic circumstances which currently exist.
- While we welcome the strategy and the aims and proposals contained therein, we feel that many of these seem to be aspirational in nature with little specific detail in relation to how these will be translated into actions. We would welcome the inclusion of clear specific actions or targets which progress can be measured against.
- Women's Aid strongly believes that adequate funding streams must be put in place to ensure the effective implementation of the strategy. While the key actions presented are to be commended, they must be strengthened by the existence of core long term funding. Difficulties are currently experienced across the sector in relation to sustainability of services and this has increasingly become a major concern for Women's Aid.
- Women's Aid remains seriously concerned about the potential impact of welfare reform on women and children who are experiencing domestic and sexual abuse. We are also concerned about the impact such changes will have on the organisations ability to sustain core services such as refuge accommodation.
- We would like to reiterate the serious concerns we have highlighted throughout this response in relation to the extension of the single room rate to those under 35 and the appropriateness of this for woman and children who are affected by domestic violence. We would also wish to reiterate our concerns relating to the anticipated increase in demand for suitable housing and the impact this will have on the already lengthy waiting lists for suitable social housing.
- In spite of such concerns, Women's Aid remains committed to facing the future by working in partnership with all relevant agencies including DSD, The Housing Executive, Housing Associations and other voluntary providers to ensure the provision of quality refuge accommodation and to making a vision of best quality refuge and housing provision a reality for women and children experiencing domestic and sexual violence in Northern Ireland.
- In conclusion, once again, Women's Aid appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Housing Strategy for Northern Ireland. We urge consideration of the points we have raised. We welcome the opportunity for further consultation and we look forward to the role we can play in supporting its implementation.

7. Contact details

For further information about this response please contact:

Annie Campbell
Director
Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland
129 University Street
BELFAST

BT7 1HP
Tel: 028 9024 9041

Email: annie.campbell@womensaidni.org
Website: www.womensaidni.org

24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline - 0800 917 1414
Email Support: 24hrsupport@dvhelpline.org
Text SUPPORT to 07797805839

Open to all women and men affected by domestic violence

Appendix 1- Additional statistical data regarding domestic and sexual violence and abuse

Additional Women's Aid statistical data

- Since 1999, Women's Aid across Northern Ireland gave refuge to 15,545 women and 14,942 children and young people.
- During the last 17 years Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland managed 326,809 calls to the 24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline.

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.
- Over 30% of all domestic violence starts during pregnancy.

Domestic violence: crime statistics

- Domestic Violence is a crime. PSNI statistics for 2011/12 indicate that there were more recorded crimes with a domestic motivation (10,387) than the combined total of all the following crimes (10,327) – all recorded sexual offences (1,836), shoplifting (6,201) and theft of a motor vehicle (2,290).
- PSNI Statistics for 2011/12 indicate that they responded to a domestic incident every 21 minutes of every day of the year.
- The total of 10,387 crimes with a domestic motivation in 11/12 represents an average of approximately 1 domestic crime every 51 minutes in Northern Ireland.
- The number of all recorded offences of murder in Northern Ireland in 11/12 total 16. Those classed as having a domestic motivation total 3. Therefore, 19% of all murders in Northern Ireland in 11/12 had a domestic motivation.

- There were 553 rapes (including attempted Rapes) in Northern Ireland in the period 2011/12.¹
- Official sources (NISOSMC) estimate that up to 80% of sex crimes are not papered.

Violence against Women is not limited to domestic violence, it includes amongst other crimes murder, rape, sexual assault, sexual exploitation, trafficking, sexual stalking and sexual harassment.

¹http://www.psnipolice.uk/index/updates/updates_statistics/updates_domestic_and_hate_motivation_statistics.htm