



## **Longford Women's Link's**

**Submission to COSC on the proposed Strategy**

**On Domestic, Sexual & Gender-based Violence**

**2014-2018**

## LONGFORD WOMEN'S LINK

Longford Women's Link (LWL) is a local organisation aimed at increasing the participation of Longford women in the economic, social and cultural life of their community. From its origins in 1995, LWL has grown and evolved to become an established and widely respected organisation providing a range of supports and services for Longford women, particularly focusing on marginalised groups. The priority areas of our work are:

1. Direct Support
2. Access (to build individual capacity)
3. Voice (mentoring women to engage so that they can – where practicable - contribute to and influence policies and decision making that impact them at local, regional and national level)

Our Vision is that Women in Longford can achieve their full potential in a safe and equal society. Our Purpose is to Link women with resources that can help them improve and sometimes transform their own and their family's lives.



From our experience of supporting women on the ground, we have concluded that there are three key issues that many women in Longford face that contribute to and maintain poverty and disadvantage for them and their families:

1. Lack of Economic Independence
2. Specific needs of Women from New Communities
3. Domestic Violence (DV)

These key issues invariably interconnect to create barriers for women and their families in achieving their potential in a safe and equal society.

## **LWL's Submission – Proposals for a New Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence**

LWL welcomes the opportunity to contribute to COSC's proposed Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence 2014 - 2018

For over 17 years, LWL has provided support and information to Longford women who are physically, sexually, emotionally and financially abused by their intimate partners. We provide Domestic Abuse survivors with a one-to-one support service, as well as court accompaniment and group work. In addition to mentoring clients to advocate for their rights and entitlements, we also strive to provide information and to raise public awareness about the levels of intimate violence currently prevalent in the community of Longford with the purpose of getting societal engagement around actively supporting victims and eliminating this criminal activity

For the purposes of this submission, we would like it noted that LWL is a member of the **Safe Ireland** Network and therefore, we have contributed to, read and concur with everything contained in the separated Safe Ireland submission to COSC titled 'Transforming the Response to Violence Against Women.

Consequently, even though LWL's concerns regarding the current legislation, practice and procedure on domestic violence are multi-faceted, it is not our intention to repeat any of the Review Observations or Recommendations made by Safe Ireland other than where necessary to expand on issues that are causing considerable difficulties for the victims whom we are working with directly on the ground.

As a result we are focusing on the following areas:

- Housing and Accommodation Issues
- Interaction with statutory agencies and recognition of the expertise and professionalism of DV specialists

We do however; feel that it is imperative to make a general comment on the inconsistencies of outcomes for women accessing the Justice system. Geography and/or varying approaches by the judiciary and judicial personnel can in our experience play a significant part in outcomes for women. LWL contends that the system should be consistent throughout and when victims of domestic abuse take that very terrifying and brave step to access the legal system, support services such as LWL should be in a position to advise them of the likely outcome based on historic evidence of consistency in application of the law.

## **Housing and Accommodation Issues**

Working directly with women who are victims of Domestic Abuse our key focus is to maximise the safety of these women and their children and indeed very often, the key focus of these women is not on their own immediate safety but to provide a safe and nurturing environment for their children. Our experience demonstrates that to achieve this safe family environment women must often leave the family home and seek residence elsewhere. Generally, these women have no independent means and are reliant on the services of the state in order to be re housed.

We believe continued collaboration between state agencies and community and voluntary organisations which provide specialised support to victims of Domestic Abuse is critical to maximising victims' safety and in respect the homeless requirements of women and children attempting to leave a domestic abuse situation, LWL submit that

- 1 In **Housing Legislation**, Victims of Domestic Abuse should be listed as a separate category of homeless client. Given the very specific dynamics of Domestic Abuse situations, an explicit strategy must be developed to appropriately support these clients with their housing needs.
  2. On foot of an agreed explicit strategy, the specific needs of these clients should be identified and **consistently delivered in each Local Authority area**
- **Service Availability/Planning for Clients who are victims of Domestic Abuse.** Women and their children attempting to leave a Domestic Abuse situation should have the same access and entitlements to social housing and homeless services as the general population. Assessment on housing needs to either secure rent allowance, be placed on a housing list or be placed in immediate emergency accommodation should **never** be influenced by or be dependent on whether or not
    - The client's name is on the Mortgage Deed or is part owner of or has equity in the Family Home
    - The client is marginally over the means test limit to get rent supplement
    - The client has been able to secure temporary accommodation for herself and her children with family and friends
    - The client has started legal separation proceedings
    - The client has previously occupied local authority housing with her spouse/partner (the perpetrator)
    - Whether or not client meets the criteria for HRC

- 4. Realistic Rent Allowances:** In 2013 Maximum rent allowance ceilings were revised nationally. Longford is the lowest in the country by a significant margin. For instance, for a family with three children, the max is 350 for Longford. For everywhere else, it ranges from 400-1000 Euros, the average being 586 Euros.

The only way to understand the impact of this is to pretend you are a woman with two children fleeing a violent home. Your rent allowance max is 340 Euros. On checking available accommodation on a given day, 45 available properties in Longford, 38 are too expensive for you: What can you afford?

You can afford a one bedroom apartment. There are five available averaging 325 Euros. The cheapest is 300 Euros, but it's on the top floor of an apartment block which has no lift.

There is a two bedroom house available. But this is on an estate at the edge of town (hope you have a car), which has been featured on Primetime and the national newspapers due to its sub-par building standard and smell of sewage. It was the first ghost estate to have been partially knocked down by the government due to its inhabitability.

The rent allowance is the same for a couple with two children, which means four people living in a one bedroom apartment. If you are a woman with 3 children, or a couple with three children, the rent allowance is 350 Euros. You can afford a two bedroom apartment only, and there are only three of these. There is one 3 bed apartment for 350 Euros. This means, a family of five will be living in a two bedroom apartment.

- 5. Out of hour's services:** Experience on the ground has determined a need for a weekend and out of hour's response to emergency housing needs. Where there are no assessment officers available and or there are no emergency hostel beds available consideration should be given to the implementation of an emergency 'out of hours' settlement service particularly where children or vulnerable adults are involved.
- 5 Inter-county and inter regional reciprocal arrangements:** Experience on the ground also suggests that there are occasions when a flexible approach may need to be adopted by Local Authority Officers when assessing particular applications. This relates to situations where Domestic Abuse survivors may have to move from their home county or region in order to maximise their safety and that of their children
- LWL submit that formal reciprocal arrangements should be implemented at inter county, regional and national level and that transfer/transport arrangements should form part of such agreements.

- 6 **Funding in a Rural Context:** It should be recognised by the D.O.E.C.L.G, TUSLA and D.O.J.E. that a different model is needed when developing services in rural areas. The costs associated with housing, transferring and supporting clients on a county wide, regional and sometimes national basis, where relocation for safety is a involved, must be allowed for when budgets are being reviewed.
- 7 **The Homeless Action Teams (HAT's)** is working well in Longford and we submit that that HAT's nationally should be regularly reviewed for consistency and efficacy and all work to the same set of Standard Operating Procedures (S.O.Ps)

### **Interaction with statutory agencies and recognition of the expertise and professionalism of DV specialists**

- 1 **Interagency Working:** Central to each of the above recommendations is the need to understand and recognise that the time a victim of Domestic Abuse decides she needs to escape the abuse is probably one of the most dangerous times for her and her children.

Equally, understanding the dangers and dynamics or a Domestic Abuse situation, the frozen and worn down state that a victim may present in and indeed being fully aware of the myriad of tactics that a perpetrator will engage in to undermine and further victimise their partner is critical for any staff member, statutory or voluntary dealing with a victim of Domestic Abuse.

Therefore it is critical that

- All statutory agency personnel recognise, listen to, believe and take into account the expertise of the referring Domestic Abuse Support Service, in determining the level of risk/danger a client may be exposed to.
- All statutory agency personnel be trained in the dynamics at play in a Domestic Abuse situation so that they can recognise the danger and understand level of risk escalation that exists around the time a women makes a complaint or tries to leave the situation
- All statutory agency personnel be provided with anti oppressive training so that all women and Domestic Abuse support workers are treated with dignity and respect
- Agreed SLA's should be implemented between statutory agencies and expert DV referring services particularly where the 'At Risk' level is determined to be acute
- All statutory agencies have the requisite policies, processes and procedures in place to address the victims needs compassionately and quickly in order to avert the danger to the women and her children

- Clear boundaries are implemented for Social Workers as to what they can require of a Domestic Abuse victim e.g. psychiatric assessment when there is no evidence of bad parenting on her behalf
- Particularly for the courts and those providing section 20 reports there must be a review of the damaging effects on abuse victims and their children where the children clearly don't want to partake in court directed custody and access arrangements with the perpetrator

## **FURTHER INFORMATION**

For further information or clarification on any of the above, please do not hesitate to contact Louise Lovett CEO, Longford Women's Link, Willow House, Longford, 0433341511