

22 February 2024

Our Ref: FOI 278

Request

We received your request on 25 January 2024 for the following information:

Supporting people strategic needs assessment, November 2020. Research and evidence based assessments to inform future housing support needs. Final report. I would like the research and evidence used to base indicators that as much as 1 in 4 women suffer from domestic abuse with a slightly lower figure for men (possibly 1 in 7). This is important to note for completeness.; page 177.

I would like any evidence or research gathered from male specific organizations used in the assessment and the 3 year draft plan.

I would like any evidence or research from female specific organisations used in assessment and the 3 year draft plan

As in both the assessment and the supporting people three year strategic plan 2022-2025, there is no strategic plan or strategy in place for male victims of domestic abuse no secure accommodation no working, joined up support network. No supporting People funded organisation dedicated to male victims of domestic abuse and their, I would like to know what can or is being done on the ground to address this gap of support in this area.

Your request has been handled under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA).

Our response

- 1. I would like the research and evidence used to base indicators that as much as 1 in 4 women suffer from domestic abuse with a slightly lower figure for men (possibly 1 in 7). This is important to note for completeness.; page 177.***

We do not hold information to meet this request. Business Consultancy Service were commissioned to complete the Supporting People Strategic Needs Assessment Final Report November 2020 for the Housing Executive. You may wish to redirect this request to Business Consultancy Service: info.BCS@finance-ni.gov.uk or foi@finance-ni.gov.uk.

2. *I would like any evidence or research gathered from male specific organizations used in the assessment and the 3 year draft plan.*

Please see response 1 in respect to the Supporting People Strategic Needs Assessment.

We do hold information to meet the request in respect to the Supporting People Three Year Draft Strategic Plan and COVID-19 Recovery Plan 2022-2025. A Public Consultation on ran for 12 weeks, from 31 January 2022 to 25 April 2022. No male specific organisations responded.

3. *I would like any evidence or research from female specific organisations used in assessment and the 3 year draft plan.*

Please see response 1 in respect to the Supporting People Strategic Needs Assessment.

A Public Consultation on Supporting People Three Year Draft Strategic Plan and COVID-19 Recovery Plan 2022-2025 ran for 12 weeks, from 31 January 2022 to 25 April 2022. Responses from female specific organisations are detailed below:

While the mission and strategic priorities emanating from it are aligned there is no reference to the negative impact of Brexit nor the significant impact of cost of living arising from the recent Ukrainian war. Recovery from Covid is a very important issue particularly for women experiencing domestic violence but to properly respond to those most at need we cannot ignore the added negative impact of Brexit and the Ukrainian war. Women are disproportionately impacted by poverty, are significantly more likely to be in lower paying and part time employment and to carry the majority and all to often, all childcare responsibilities. Fear of not being able to provide for children and personal financial entrapment in a relationship are huge barriers for women fleeing domestic violence and if we are to respond to the current need and the increased need as identified in the Strategic Needs Assessment then we must look wider than recovering from Covid. We welcome the identification of women fleeing domestic abuse as services that will be prioritised to reduce the gap between need and supply. We are fully committed to working with Supporting People to ensure that future innovations in service delivery and accommodation models are fit for purpose and lead to the best possible outcomes for women and children and would request that this process be formalised as a matter of urgency. The document identifies that it was developed a view to strong strategic alignment, however, there is no reference to Violence Against Women and Girls. To best inform future services for women experiencing domestic violence and to deliver services that best meet their needs, strategic alignment that does not recognise the context in which women exist in our society will fall short. We therefore ask that Supporting People recognise the need to

include a strong alignment with the development of a VAWG strategy within the lifetime of this document. The desire to strengthen relationships across health, criminal justice and housing is welcomed. The woman and children we support have adverse physical and mental health outcomes because of the abuse they experience and the overlap with both the civil and criminal justice systems is a significant area of our work. We have expertise and knowledge that will be vital to informing the development of services to women fleeing domestic abuse that arise from the greater collaboration that is planned and given our experience would expect that we would be engaged in this process. We are fully prepared to play an active role in supporting this strategy, however, it cannot be ignored that a 15 year freeze on budgets, with 5% reduction to refuge budgets within that period alongside significant increased costs in recent times for utilities etc. means that the work we do to secure additional funding is what holds the Supporting People services up. No increase in our budget is no increase in the Supporting People budget and we recognise the efforts made by the Supporting People team to address this. The strategic priorities within the strategy are aligned to many of our hopes for future service delivery but without investment services will not improve they will decline.

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As detailed above the wider context of Brexit and the Ukrainian war must be addressed. In relation to Covid- 19 recovery we have begun a new financial year with no Covid-19 budget being available despite ongoing costs. There is still a need for PPE provision, static budgets for 15 years mean that recruitment and retention of staff is extremely difficult, that unavoidable running costs for accommodation and many other pressures must be met. Cases of Covid-19 are impacting our service users and our staff and there is no expectation that this will end imminently. Without a pandemic a 15 year static budget is a crisis. Costs of purchasing and implementing new IT equipment and systems to ensure that Supporting People services could continue were not borne by Supporting People but relied on our ability to attract support from other funders. Since the onset of the pandemic we have adapted and ensured delivery of Supporting People services. We have ensured regional re-branding and the Unlock Your Lockdown campaign to ensure that women fleeing domestic violence were clear how to contact us and to know that we would not close any service. Support for PPE and staffing costs has been invaluable and the work and support from Supporting People staff to deliver on these has been excellent but the disjoint between responding to a 3 year draft strategy about recovering from Covid-19 at the same time as necessary support has been removed is stark. The ongoing ability to access restricted reserves would be extremely beneficial to meet some of the ongoing costs arising from Covid-19.

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It is recognised that at time of drafting this strategy that administering Covid-19 funding to providers was envisaged. While this has not been the outcome it is indicative of the Supporting People teams understanding of how important this ongoing support is. The unfunded action of funding providers to develop capacity and resilience needs not only funding but a further explanation as the term capacity can relate to many things. Increasing resilience also needs further clarity. Delivering services over a 15 year

period without increased budgets to meet costs requires resilience in itself. Mental health training for staff will be welcomed however, awareness raising is not training and we would urge that training is at a level that will exceed current skills and knowledge of staff and be available to all levels of staff and recognises the impact of abuse and the resulting trauma. The expertise of Women's Aid knowledge and skills can be utilised in this area given that our most recent experience of training delivery is that developing Coercive Control training that 5000 PSNI officers have benefitted from. The unfunded plans for two annual competitions based on non-recurrent funding are problematic. Firstly there is no current budget for this to be progressed, secondly two competitions will necessitate quick turnarounds and in year spending which means that providers will be curtailed in the development of projects that have longer term impacts. We welcome the desire to support flexible contracts and the potential to increase floating support to meet the increasing demands for our services however, query why women fleeing domestic violence have not been identified here as per Objective 2. Working to ensure efficiencies is integral to our current Supporting People delivery and will continue to be so however, efficiencies in our current context cannot deliver on service improvements and meeting the increased demand identified within the SNA alone. Supporting flexibility, reconfigurations and service development to release funds from accommodation services to fund additional floating support services to address mental health and homeless prevention is very broad. We welcome any opportunity to deliver appropriate and safe accommodation for women and children fleeing domestic abuse and are fully committed to increasing Floating support services to have a positive impact on homeless prevention and seek to increase collaborative working with Supporting People to ensure that any and all changes result in increased safety and independence for those we support.

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The recognition that women at risk of domestic violence are identified within this objective is welcomed particularly because the women we support can be older, have mental health issues, be single and live with alcohol or drug dependency. The actions under this objective are undermined by lack of funding, are based on releasing funds from a 15 year static budget in which opportunities to make efficiencies are rare and undermined by rising costs. We are committed to the reduction in contracts as a means to reduce administrative burdens on providers and Supporting People, we recognise the importance of appropriate mergers but must stress that the financial costs of mergers may be prohibitive to many providers. There is clear evidence for the need for increased floating support for women at risk of domestic violence but no corresponding budget. Reconfiguration of services will not be able to square that circle. Ensuring that eligible costs are those carried by Supporting People is legitimate, however, we would ask that the outworkings of this safeguards providers. If any ineligible cost is identified as better placed within Housing Benefit no provider should be left with reduced funds for necessary costs and the responsibility of negotiation with Housing Benefit. A strategic response from Supporting People is required in this. The unfunded action of running two annual competitions is not an adequate response to addressing the gap between need and supply. The SNA has provided an evidence base for future planning.

Providers in partnership with Supporting People will deliver better long term outcomes than competitions that are highly likely to be a quick turnaround with in year expenditure. An action that commits to direct partnership working with the providers who deliver services for those primary client groups listed would yield better outcomes. The freeing up of voids from accommodation based services to floating support requires further explanation. Communal refuges with low staffing levels are already a long term feature. A move to self-contained accommodation would allow support for those in our accommodation services to be supported by a floating support model.

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We are absolutely committed to engaging with Supporting People to deliver innovation, value for money and better outcomes for service users. To deliver the best outcomes for women at risk of domestic violence we urge Supporting People to work directly with us to best meet the needs of this primary client group. Again there is a need for investment in this objective to allow the projected outcomes to become a reality, however, there is significant progress that can be made through collaboration between Supporting People and Women's Aid and we seek that this process be undertaken as a matter of urgency.

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Women at risk of domestic violence have all areas of their lives negatively impacted on. Homelessness or threat of homelessness is intrinsic, negative physical and mental health and contact with PSNI, solicitors, civil courts, criminal courts and family courts can all be features in their lives for years and often as abuse continues. Increased collaboration between departments to ensure improved safeguarding of and provision for victims of abuse is not only welcome is imperative. As the lead providers for services for victims of domestic violence we should be included in these processes and are ready to be so. We not only deliver services but are inextricably linked to all the partnerships tasked with delivering safeguarding for women and children. We are members of area safeguarding partnerships, domestic and sexual violence partnerships, family hubs, and SBNI and MARAC. We have piloted services at a local level which have been implemented regionally such as AssistNi which is supported by DoJ and the current IRIS and DAS projects are further evidence of Women's Aid groups working directly with DoH to improve services.

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It is importance that there is strategic alignment with the development of a Violence Against Women and Girls strategy for Northern Ireland so that development of future services are seen through this lens and thereby improved. A commitment to a Primary Client Group focus on engagement with providers is vital to ensure that their full expertise and the voices of their service users can result in true innovation and services that deliver sustainable and tangible outcomes.

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We are fully committed to working with Supporting People to improve services to women at risk of domestic violence. It is evident that Supporting People have identified necessary additional funding is required to be able to deliver on the strategy and we

are committed to helping this process in any way possible. We recognise that these efforts have been made but have not been possible for reasons outside of their control.

- 4. As in both the assessment and the supporting people three year strategic plan 2022-2025, there is no strategic plan or strategy in place for male victims of domestic abuse no secure accommodation no working, joined up support network. No supporting People funded organisation dedicated to male victims of domestic abuse and their, I would like to know what can or is being done on the ground to address this gulf of support in this area.***

The Housing Executive's Supporting People Strategic Plan and Covid Recovery Plan 2022-2025 considers the existing needs and emerging demands on housing support services. An action aligned to Domestic Violence, while requiring additional funding and subject to DfC budget confirmation, is to develop new services and enhanced delivery for people at risk of domestic abuse.

This concludes our response.