



Housing Rights Legislative Theatre Policy Report

March 2025



Introduction

In early 2025, Housing Rights, in partnership with North Down and Ards Women's Aid, Arts & Homelessness International, and The People Act, collaborated on a Legislative Theatre process aimed at preventing homelessness for women experiencing domestic abuse in Northern Ireland.

The initiative brought together experts by experience; women with first-hand experience of domestic abuse and homelessness, who created and performed a short play reflecting their experiences. Audience members who attended and participated in the event included experts by experience, government officials, representatives from statutory bodies, elected representatives and charities.



Key issues raised

After having watched the play, audience members were asked to identify the issues that were highlighted by the actors. These included a broad range of issues including:



- Women experiencing domestic abuse having to leave their homes while the perpetrator stays
- Financial barriers preventing women from being able to leave their abuser and to getting support once they did (for example court order fees)
- Women not being believed by services across housing, policing and justice, and being asked for evidence they could not provide in order to access support/protection
- Lack of housing supply and suitable temporary accommodation
- Difficulties obtaining court orders and lack of enforcement of court order breaches
- Overwhelming volume of information and jargon to digest with regard to housing and court order
- Detrimental impact on children, including missing school

Co-creation of policy proposals

Having identified the above issues, audience members were invited to suggest and test potential solutions by participating in interactive scenes with the actors.



Following these improvisations, the actors and audience members collaborated with a panel of policymakers to co-create policy proposals addressing the key issues raised in the play. This involved actors and audience members working in small groups to put forward policy proposals, which were then summarised into 3 proposals by a panel of key policymakers. Actors and audience members then discussed the 3 proposals and had the opportunity to propose amendments.

The event concluded with each of the members of the policymaker panel members committing to short or long-term actions to work towards the proposals, which they will report back on within 8 weeks of the event.

The policymaker panel included representatives from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), the Public Health Agency, the Executive Office, Department of Justice, Department for Communities, Francis Hanna & Co. Solicitors, North Down and Ards Women's Aid and Housing Rights. The commitments made by each representative are outlined below each proposal.



Policy Proposals

Policy Proposal 1: Introduction and Development of Domestic Abuse Officers in each NIHE office

Creating dedicated housing officers with specialised domestic abuse training in each Northern Ireland Housing Executive office across all of Northern Ireland to support victims of domestic abuse who are presenting as homeless and seeking housing assistance. These specialist officers will come from within the current NIHE staffing structure and will exclusively handle cases relating to domestic abuse.

This new approach will be piloted in 3 NIHE offices (one in each of the 3 regions) and then rolled out across all NIHE offices.

Amendments and additions proposed by actors and audience members:

- All frontline NIHE staff, including patch managers, should also receive basic domestic abuse training, including how to identify the signs of domestic abuse. Refresher training should be carried out every 3 years or whenever legislation changes
- NIHE should ensure victims do not have to retell their stories to multiple staff members by ensuring all staff are trained to identify the signs of domestic abuse
- Frontline staff in Housing Associations and other housing providers should also receive training to ensure the same level of support is available to NIHE and Housing Association tenants
- Regular impact assessments and evaluations should be carried out to ensure the new approach is effective, with experts by experience closely involved
- NIHE should liaise with other relevant agencies to ensure victims of domestic abuse have access to any other support services they need
- NIHE should ensure frontline staff also have the support they need in the role, such as therapeutic support, and should liaise with Women's Aid to provide advice on best practice in this regard
- NIHE should introduce a dedicated domestic abuse phone line that enables people to speak directly to their specialist domestic abuse housing officers



Commitments to action:

Helen Walsh, Domestic Abuse Policy Lead (Northern Ireland Housing Executive): Will explore the feasibility of specialist Domestic Abuse officers in each of the NIHE offices within 8 weeks and find ways to avoid victims of domestic abuse having to retell their stories. Will also consider introducing a dedicated domestic abuse phone line that enables women to directly contact the specialist domestic abuse housing officers.

Daniel Philips, Homelessness Lead (Department for Communities): Will explore funding for these new roles and engage the Director of Housing Supply Policy in order to do so.

Policy Proposal 2: Legal and Policing Reforms - Accessibility and Affordability of Legal Protections

Improving legal protections and policing responses for victims of domestic abuse, with emphasis on better enforcement, accessibility, and victim-centered approaches. This includes:

- improving awareness and training on waivers for court order fees, to ensure solicitors are aware of and use these waivers
- introducing an extension of the court fee waiver scheme for Occupation Orders as well as Non-Molestation Orders
- training for agencies regarding non-molestation orders
- introducing a pro-arrest policy for perpetrators of domestic abuse at the earliest opportunity
- implementing electronic monitoring for perpetrators of domestic abuse based on the UK domestic abuse protection orders pilot.

Amendments and additions proposed by actors and audience members:



- Implementing Domestic Abuse Protection Notices and Orders, as already enabled by current legislation
- Enhancing joined-up working across judiciary and between PSNI and courts to ensure consistent enforcement of court orders
- Updating evidence collection methods to ensure breaches of court orders, e.g. via social media, are recognised as a breach and arrests take place upon the first breach
- Addressing the mismatch between victims' lived experiences and official police data regarding domestic abuse cases through a public audit

- PSNI to ensure their officers are aware of history of domestic abuse/MARAC when called to an incident
- Ensuring buy-in from the judiciary and Public Prosecution Service
- Ensuring victims have access to jargon-free information on court processes
- Introducing training and engagement with experts by experience for judges

Commitments to Action:

Stephanie Finlay, Detective Chief Inspector over Rape Crime and Domestic Abuse (PSNI):

Will hold a meeting with PSNI District Managers about domestic abuse responses.

Emma Crozier, Head of Violence Against the Person (Department of Justice): Will meet with relevant stakeholders to explore the possibility of electronic monitoring for perpetrators of domestic abuse.

Karen Connolly, Partner (Francis Hanna & Co. Solicitors): Will circulate information to other solicitors and public services so people understand their rights to waivers for court order fees.

Policy Proposal 3: Integrated Support Services that deliver the right help at the right time. Ensuring women only have to tell their story once and the services then wrap around them.

Creating coordinated, trauma-informed support services that reduce re-traumatisation and provide timely, accessible assistance to victims of domestic abuse. These services should be centralised in one place.

Amendments and additions proposed by actors and audience members:

- Introducing community-led support centres modelled after Women's Aid One Stop Shop best practices, with increased availability during peak times (holidays, etc.), these services should have child-friendly facilities with expanded childcare support to reduce isolation and loneliness.
- Pet fostering services should be available for women entering refuges
- Online portals should also be made available to signpost to and access services
- Safe spaces for women should be co-created with experts by experience
- Ensuring mothers and children are able to stay together
- Ensuring information is available and accessible as to how the housing system work and what support is available

Commitments to Action:

Emalyn Turkington, CEO (North Down and Ards Women's Aid): Will meet with all agencies represented on the policy panel within 6-8 weeks to progress these actions and engage in partnership working.

Kate McCauley, CEO (Housing Rights): Housing Rights staff will debrief following the event and explore how we can strengthen our services based on what we have learned from this process. A meaningful first step will be to review our online advice content information to ensure it is accessible, clear and useful to women affected by domestic abuse and homelessness. The actors will be invited to take part in this process.

Emily Roberts, Designated Nurse for Safeguarding Children (Public Health Agency): Will work in collaboration across a wide range of bodies and departments including statutory, voluntary and community sectors to address the root causes of domestic abuse.

Ryan Somerville, Policy and Research Lead (Executive Office): Will commit to expanding TEO's Ending Violence Against Women and Girls lived experience network in the next 4-6 weeks and engage the actors in this. Inclusion of lived experience will be crucial in future actions within the EVAWG Delivery Plan (2024-26) including the first stage of a digital 'My Justice Journey' platform to improve access to information and support.



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