

National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence, 2010-2014

Final Review and Proposals for New Strategy

Introduction

- ✓ Please complete the questions below which relate to your area of work or experience.
- ✓ Be specific in your answers referring to particular actions under the National Strategy and to data, evaluations and reviews where possible.
- ✓ A key section of the questionnaire asks you to say what you can do under the next strategy. Actions need to be feasible, do-able and ambitious. Any wish lists under this heading should be labelled as such.
- ✓ The questions are purposefully open-ended. Please be as specific and as comprehensive as possible in your answers.
- ✓ Please remember specific developments or actions in relation to vulnerable or high risk groups, including Travellers, people with a disability, older people, migrants, young people, pregnant women and those involved with substance abuse.
- ✓ Do not expect to fill in each and every subheading; the subheadings are meant to prompt your memory.
- ✓ It is better to spend time developing the comment than agonising over which subheading it should go under.
- ✓ Do not get lost with all the subheadings; there are basically five questions:
 - 1. What was good about the strategy?**
 - 2. What was not good?**
 - 3. Have you any evidence either way?**
 - 4. What do you want to do in the next strategy?**
 - 5. What should others do?**
- ✓ Your submission will be published on the Cosc website with the final review.

Name of your organisation:

Sonas Domestic Violence Charity

Sonas is the largest provider of front line services to women and children experiencing domestic violence in the greater Dublin area.

Our responses outlined below are based on that service delivery experience of intensively supporting on an annual basis:

- 350 women
- 350 children – 2 out of 3 children in our services are under the age of 10

Spanning a quantum of services that encompasses the current systemic response to domestic violence:

- Emergency refuge/ Blanchardstown
- Supported/ housing 102 houses and apartments across the four Dublin local authority areas
- Outreach including court accompaniment
- Visiting Support and Crisis Intervention

We have been providing direct front-line intensive services to women and children experiencing domestic violence over the past 21 years. Sonas is a member of Safe Ireland and would support Safe Ireland's submission on the strategy.

Positive developments

As a result of actions under the current Strategy what, if any, positive developments have occurred in relation to domestic, sexual or gender-based violence under the following headings:

- .1 Victims' experience of state services
- .2 Victims' experience of voluntary sector services
- .3 Accountability of perpetrators
- .4 Awareness and attitudes
- .5 Prevention
- .6 Policy making or service planning
- .7 Research or data collection
- .8 Structures or processes to support the strategy (consultation, meetings, six monthly review reports etc.)

.9 **Outside the Strategy** what, if any, have been the positive developments in relation to domestic, sexual or gender-based violence, generally or under any of the categories above, in the period 2010-2014?

1.9

Sonias would regard the development of Tusla – the Child and Family Agency as a welcome development since it brings together key services at an operational level for victims of domestic violence including children as under Children First, domestic violence is the emotional abuse of children.

The development of the Child and Family Agency raises a number of questions:

- How is the agency responsible for responding to domestic violence on an operational level and the agency responsible for policy-making in the area to work together to ensure there is not a disconnect between policy and operations?
- Domestic violence is fundamentally a crime, and an under-reported one – how is the criminal justice system going to interact with the statutory agencies tasked with delivering services to victims of domestic violence so there is a fully integrated systemic response to an issue that affects one in five women and a significant number of children.

In our experience, there are three immediate challenges facing women and children escaping domestic violence:

- the **lack of suitable affordable accommodation** and this is leading to women staying with or going back to abusive partners; as in many cases, women perceive their only option, and rightly, as homeless services
- **inconsistent/ inadequate legal responses** around granting of orders, perpetrator accountability, residency status in the case of migrant women and custody and access in relation to children in the context of domestic violence
- **the lack of a systemic services response to domestic violence** from Government, to department to services level and which manifests itself on the ground, for example, as an absence of a MARAC system similar to that in the UK

It is expected that trend in the State response to domestic violence will be delivery of services into victims' own homes. While the rationale for this direction is worthy ie "why should the victims of domestic violence be forced to leave their homes...", the absence of the aforementioned integrated systemic response guaranteeing women and children's safety in their own homes means this is not feasible.

Put another way, it is not acceptable to withdraw funding from services and to ask women and children to wait while various Government departments, agencies, local authorities and courts decide what the eventual service construction should look like.

Undesirable developments

As a result of actions or inaction under the current Strategy what, if any, undesirable developments have occurred in relation to domestic, sexual or gender-based violence under the following headings:

- .1 Victims' experience of state services
- .2 Victims' experience of voluntary sector services
- .3 Accountability of perpetrators
- .4 Awareness and attitudes
- .5 Prevention
- .6 Policy making or service planning
- .7 Research or data collection
- .8 Structures or processes to support the strategy (consultation, meetings, six monthly review reports etc.)
- .9 **Outside the Strategy** what undesirable developments, if any, have occurred in relation to domestic, sexual or gender-based violence, generally or under any of the categories above, in the period 2010-2014?

Sonas, in order to answer these questions, consulted internally with services managers running key services across the greater Dublin area – refuge, housing, visiting support and outreach.

Our responses refer to 2.1, 2.3 and 2.9

2.1 and 2.3

Service users in general tell us they find the legal system inconsistent and inadequate in responding to their situations from other seeking an order, all the way through to custody and access arrangements.

Many clients have reported to us that when Gardaí are called out to a home on the breach of a court order it is very rare (from the service users' experience) that an arrest for breach of an order is made.

In general, the Strategy talks a lot about dealing with perpetrators but makes reference to convicted perpetrators. In our experience conviction rates are low in the first place for such a prevalent crime and convictions are usually only secured unless it is an extreme case.

Our experience of being a housing provider is that perpetrators both convicted and non, have little respect for clients' privacy, stated wishes or legal orders and we routinely experience perpetrators either watching their ex-partners' home or paying unwanted visits and in some cases making actual threats to both clients and staff.

Access arrangements, in particular, can be an anxiety-provoking time and again we have seen access visits being used to either re-abuse the woman directly or via children. We have also dealt with cases where children were abused directly by perpetrators on access visits. The link between child abuse and domestic abuse is a well-catalogued one.

The role of local authorities in relation to housing needs and domestic violence need to be reviewed. (We understand that arrangements for local authority funding of domestic violence services is currently being reviewed). While staff in local authorities do make a concerted effort on behalf of individuals, the lack of an integrated structural response means individual situations are assessed on a case by case basis:

- Local Authorities have little or no power to remove a perpetrator from a local Authority House, even where they are now the sole occupant of a three or four bedroom property.
- Local authorities are extremely reluctant to allow a woman move from one local authority's housing list to another even when it is demonstrated that the woman is at increased risk if she continues to reside in the local authority area, for example, from her ex partner or his family and associates
- Women who are home owners can also find themselves in a legal limbo unsure what their rights are in the situation and we have had clients receiving conflicting legal advice regarding whether they should stay or go
- There also appears to be confusion over the "homeless" status of women and children who experience domestic violence; there is a proportion of women who are using homeless services who experience domestic violence. By far the biggest population are women and children who have had to leave the family home because of domestic violence and are now homeless

The current homeless strategy appears to struggle as to where these women and children actually fit with service provision.

2.9

It would be Sonas's opinion that the strategy failed to give due consideration or fully understood the primacy of housing and accommodation in terms of domestic violence. Fundamentally, women want to be safe with their children.

Demand for both refuge and general accommodation in Sonas's refuge routinely outstrips our capacity to supply.

In our experience, the lack of affordable, suitable accommodation has been a key contributing factor and in many cases, the decisive one, for women going back to abusive ex-partners or remaining in abusive relationships. Women tell us they simply cannot face going to homeless services with their children and for many coming out of refuge, emergency accommodation is their only option. The situation can be even graver for women without children experiencing domestic violence as their alternative may be at best hostel accommodation.

For those women who feel they have no option to return or those who are home owners and feel they cannot leave, we engage in risk and safety planning via our refuge and outreach services.

Women and children are making these desperate choices because Government decisions around resourcing services, an effective termination of any local authority housing development and a belief that the private sector will address the accommodation deficit.

Simple maths and clients' reported experience show this is not the case. The maximum rent allowance for a lone parent and two children in Dublin ranges between €900 and €975 a month. Average monthly rents for a for a 2 bed apartment or 3 bed house on outskirts of Dublin are averaging €1,200. That's a difference of between €225 and €300 a month. A single woman in Dublin will receive a maximum rent allowance of €520 a month.

From a strategy development perspective, this may seem overly services oriented or indeed operational. Policies and strategies determine service priorities on the ground where Sonas works. We believe it is important that those drafting strategy and making policy understand the lived reality of those whom the policies impact.

From a service provider's point of view we face stark choices: having to move women and children on from refuge because the demand is so great for this form of emergency accommodation – of which Ireland is sorely under represented by European standards – but knowing that they may have little option but to go to homeless services. It should be stated, we endeavour to find move on accommodation for all women and children going through refuge but the reality is we cannot meet the demand.

If we do not move families on then we are denying a place of safety to women and children waiting to access services. Our priority is to provide services to women and children experiencing domestic violence at the point where they interact with our services, for example, some women will just want outreach and court accompaniment rather than refuge. The challenge where on-going accommodation is the issue, is that there is a limited dwindling supply.

Governments and departments make choices that have consequences, and women and children experiencing domestic violence are experiencing the lived reality of those consequences.

The Evidence

- .1 What actions did you take to evaluate or review the impact of any of the actions under the National Strategy? Please forward copies of any relevant publications or documents.
- .2 Are you aware of evaluations or reviews by others of the impact of any actions under the Strategy? Please forward copies of any relevant publications or documents, or contact details of those who undertook the evaluation.

What can be done better in the future?

By you

What specific actions is your organisation proposing to undertake in the context of a new national strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, in the period 2015-2019, under any of the following categories.

- .1 State services for victims
 - .2 Voluntary sector services for victims
 - .3 Accountability of perpetrators
 - .4 Awareness and attitudes
 - .5 Prevention
 - .6 Policy making or service planning
 - .7 Research or data collection
 - .8 Structures or processes to support the strategy (consultation, meetings, six monthly review reports etc.)
5. What specific actions is your organisation proposing to undertake for victims generally which will also apply to victims of domestic, sexual or gender-based violence, in the period 2015-2019, under any of the above categories?

We have restructured outreach services in order to meet service demands in areas where there were none or few services.

We intend on carrying on with innovative service delivery to either better meet existing needs or answer unmet ones in particular areas.

We intend to work closely with statutory funders in order to ensure optimum service delivery and will be incorporating the Child and Family Agency's new data collection template into our existing data collection structure as well as ongoing reporting to local authorities and HSE Social Inclusion.

We intend to pilot programme based prevention work with key at risk groups and have undertaken some preliminary work in this regard.

We will carry on advocating on those issues which impact on women and children experiencing domestic violence and, in particular, will be focusing on the need for an integrated systemic response to these risk and security needs.

By others

What other specific actions should be undertaken in the context of a new national strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, 2015-2019, under any of the following categories?

Who should undertake these actions?

Please also state, with your reasons, if you believe that there should be no further action by anyone under any heading.

- .1 State services for victims
 - .2 Voluntary sector services for victims
 - .3 Accountability of perpetrators
 - .4 Awareness and attitudes
 - .5 Prevention
 - .6 Policy making or service planning
 - .7 Research or data collection
 - .8 Structures or processes to support the strategy (consultation, meetings, six monthly review reports etc.)
- .1 What specific actions should be undertaken for victims generally which will also apply to victims of domestic, sexual or gender-based violence, in the period 2015-19, under any of the above categories?
 - .2 Who should undertake the actions mentioned above?

Governments make choices and these choices impact on women and children experiencing domestic violence.

From a strategy perspective, we would suggest paying due regard to the operational environment the strategy is located in; in other words, if it is to be more than an aspirational wish list or departmental report card, it has to be:

- Relevant
- Real
- Resourced

Devising a domestic violence strategy, however, that doesn't address the fundamental need for a place of safety and ongoing accommodation provision will mean that strategy will not succeed. It is at the nexus point of wellbeing and welfare, risk, safety and security provision.

That in itself needs to be part of an integrated systemic response to domestic violence where domestic violence is recognised as a crime, a matter for the criminal justice system, as well as social services and the appropriate reforms implemented.

Some suggestions...

Why not start from what women and children experiencing domestic violence actually need and build out from there?

Prioritise ensuing actions and ensure key stakeholders charged with delivering services are actually involved in developing the strategy.

Ground the strategy in reality. Incorporate a review and monitoring mechanism; if the operating environment changes then the strategy should be capable of being adjusted in order to maintain its relevance.

In relation to data collection, the new Child and Family Agency is poised to introduce a new data set around domestic violence based on services input. HSE Social Inclusion is collecting data as do local authorities. The added value from this data is when it is reviewed in relation to each other in order to gain a holistic picture of what is actually happening.

The critical missing side of the triangle is the criminal justice side – Garda call outs, enforcement of orders, cases going to court, orders granted, convictions secured etc

Review best practice in other jurisdictions with a view to relevance and applicability in an Irish context.

One reality is that current Government term ends in 2016 – while the strategy can be time lined to 2019, realistically, a set of actions should be developed up to 2016.

Awareness and attitudes are challenging; again why not start with identifying whose awareness needs to be heightened and whose attitudes need to be changed. Where are they going to get information/ who are they listening to. In an era of social media it can be challenging to interrupt the noise, and if the interruption is successful what is it that needs to be said and how to sustain the message.

And finally

8. Please make additional comments, if any, here.

An observation...

In terms of effectiveness...Social marketing campaigns tend to be more effective than public awareness campaigns in delivering actual behavioural change.

Awareness campaigns can result in a spike in awareness which dissipates after the initial burst of advertising and may not change behaviour/ attitudes unless significant resources are invested: mass communications relies on volume advertising, across different media for a reinforcing effect and even then generally where only a very simple message is involved

Legal changes can do more to change behaviour than all the multi-million euro advertising campaigns can; witness the impact of the smoking ban in comparison to ad campaigns highlighting the danger of smoking or alcohol price adjustments in Canada which again resulted in a fall in consumption.

Where public awareness campaigns have been found to be effective is raising awareness of the existing legal situation.