



# Housing Rights Legislative Theatre Project 8-week Update Report

June 2025



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

**Helen Walsh, Domestic Abuse Policy Lead (Northern Ireland Housing Executive)**

**Commitment:** 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.

**Update:** Helen met with 3 NIHE Area Managers to discuss the feasibility of introducing dedicated Domestic Abuse housing advisors. The area managers had reservations on how appropriate cases would be identified given that in many instances people presenting as homeless due to domestic abuse do not state that this is the reason for their presentation. In these cases NIHE were concerned people may have to speak to 2 advisers about their situation which does not follow their 'Housing Solutions' approach of ensuring where possible people have 1 adviser throughout their journey. The area managers felt that it would therefore be important to ensure that all housing advisors and patch managers are trained to identify the signs of domestic abuse in cases where it might not be immediately obvious that this is the reason for the homelessness presentation.

Helen discussed the above with North Down & Ards Women's Aid and decided to instead pilot introducing Domestic Abuse Experts to each NIHE office rather than Domestic Abuse advisers. These experts would be chosen from housing advisers who would be given the opportunity to apply for the role due to their interest in this area of work. These experts would not take on domestic abuse cases from other advisers but instead would provide support for advisers when working on these cases and ensure they have taken every possible opportunity to support victims of domestic abuse. Helen intends to meet with NIHE Team Leaders and Women's Aid staff in September 2025 to discuss the roll out of this new pilot.

Helen has also had initial conversations with NIHE colleagues about the possibility of introducing a dedicated phone line for people experiencing domestic abuse and how the process would work. She plans to continue to follow up on this and will be able to provide a further update in September about whether this is something NIHE can take forward

**Additional updates:** Helen has also incorporated learning from the legislative theatre performance into NIHE's internal training course on domestic abuse, which is currently being rolled out with staff.

## **Daniel Philips, Homelessness Lead (Department for Communities)**

**Commitment:** Will explore funding for these new roles and engage the Director of Housing Supply Policy in order to do so.

**Update:** Daniel passed on details of the Department of Justice's Domestic and Sexual Abuse funding to NIHE in order for them to make an application.

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

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

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

**Update:** Stephanie has spoken to District commanders within PSNI and discussed the PSNI's response to victims of domestic abuse. As a result of this further training has commenced and is being rolled out. This training is focused on evidence-led prosecutions, dealing with Breaches of Court orders, Domestic Abuse, Stalking, Harassment, and Honour-based Abuse (DASH) training and understanding the new legislation, including Stalking and Harassment and Non-fatal Strangulation.

### **Additional updates:**

Stephanie has commenced a dip sample of the Non-Molestation Order breaches being dealt with by PSNI. The Public Prosecution Service (PPS) have committed to doing the same internally and then together PSNI and PPS will look at common themes / issues with the intention of preparing a paper that will assist in how they collectively deal with breaches of Non-Molestation Orders moving forward. Women's aid will be involved with this piece of work to ensure the victim's voice is heard. This piece of work has commenced and is ongoing.

Stephanie has also reviewed the domestic abuse training that is being taught to Student Officers. This is being looked at with a view to being refreshed and the hope is that student officers will now receive more training specifically on domestic abuse. Stephanie is currently working with the Police College on a new training plan.

**Emma Crozier, Head of Violence Against the Person (Department of Justice):**

**Commitment:** Will meet with relevant stakeholders to explore the possibility of electronic monitoring for perpetrators of domestic abuse.

**Update:** Emma will be meeting with the electronic monitoring lead in mid-June to explore the possibility of electronic monitoring for perpetrators of domestic abuse, and will provide a further update then.

**Karen Connolly, Partner (Francis Hanna & Co. Solicitors):**

**Commitment:** Will circulate information to other solicitors and public services so people understand their rights to waivers for court order fees.

**Update:** An article has been posted on Francis Hanna & Co.'s website dealing with the Domestic Abuse Waiver to allow this information to be accessible to members of the public who may be seeking information on their rights to protection:

<https://fhanna.co.uk/family/Legal-Aid-Waiver-for-DV-Victims->

Francis Hanna & Co. also disseminated a Family Law Newsletter to various agencies that work with victims of domestic abuse including Women's Aid, Nexus, Assist NI and various women's centres. They have included this information in their newsletter so that those working in these organisations are aware of the waiver. The Law Society of NI has also published information regarding the waiver to allow lawyers working in this area to familiarise themselves with the information.

## **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.**

**Emalyn Turkington, CEO (North Down and Ards Women's Aid)**

**Commitment:** Will meet with all agencies represented on the policy panel within 6-8 weeks to progress these actions and engage in partnership working.

**Update:**

Emalyn met with Helen Walsh from NIHE to discuss North Down and Ards Women's Aid working in partnership with their Ards office. Helen's team are also linking in with other Women's Aids regarding One Stop Shop's in their area.

Emalyn also met with Stephanie Finlay from PSNI regarding PSNI responses to women regarding breaches of non-molestation orders and other issues women are facing with the PSNI. With women's consent, Emalyn has provided Stephanie with case studies regarding these issues.

## **Kate McCauley, CEO (Housing Rights)**

**Commitment:** 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.

**Update:** Housing Rights staff and leadership team met following the event to discuss learning from the legislative theatre event. Colleagues from the senior leadership, advice, legal information/practitioner support and participation teams joined the meeting. It was agreed to progress the review of Housing Rights online advice content in the first instance, and a budget and staff resources were allocated for this purpose.

The actors from the focus group were then invited to join a workshop with Housing Rights staff to review their online public advice content and website. The women provided feedback and ideas with regard to navigating to the necessary information on Housing Rights website, the language and content of the information pages and how to ensure women experiencing domestic abuse know about that advice and information is available on Housing Rights' website. Housing Rights communications, participation and digital teams then met to discuss implementing the necessary changes based on the feedback and ideas provided. Certain changes to language, the order of information, and the level of information provided have already been implemented. Other proposals such as the development of advice videos and leaflets are currently being explored and progressed.

**Further update:** The senior team is also exploring how our advice provision to support women affected by domestic abuse and homelessness could be further improved, based on the insights from the Legislative Theatre. Though discussions are ongoing, it is recognised that an expanded model would require additional resources.

## **Emily Roberts, Designated Nurse for Safeguarding Children (Public Health Agency):**

**Commitment:** 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.

**Update:** The Public Health Agency have since included a priority in their 2025-2026 Corporate Plan to "work with others to promote the safeguarding and protection of children and young people". An action has also been included in their Business plan for 2025/26 for the Public Health Agency to "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".

As part of the PHA's review of Routine Enquiry (the screening process for domestic abuse across midwifery, health visiting and family nursing services) a new model and revised guidance are being developed. As a result of learning from the legislative theatre event, the revised guidance will include the importance of considering the particular needs of women and children who are or at risk of experiencing homelessness. This will also be reinforced and included in the training and awareness raising when PHA are implementing their new model and guidance.

**Ryan Somerville, Policy and Research Lead (Executive Office):**

**Commitment:** 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.

**Update:** Ryan has held informal discussions with the Head of Communications for the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAWG) Strategic Framework and initial scoping work has been completed to identify gaps in representation and opportunities for wider engagement. Planning is underway for engagement sessions and to include the actors within the EVAWG Insights & Reference Network (IRN). The IRN will be a communications mechanism highlighting opportunities to participate in relevant initiatives, events, conferences and other ways to share and showcase EVAWG work, keeping this priority on the agenda of decision-makers, organisations and communities.

when everyone has a **home**