

The Committee Clerk,
Room 242,
Parliament Buildings,
Ballymiscaw,
Stormont,
Belfast,
BT4 3XX

1: Introduction

- 1:1 Onus was established as a social enterprise by Women's Aid Antrim, Ballymena, Carrickfergus, Larne and Newtownabbey (ABCLN) in 2007 and offers specialist training and consultancy services on domestic violence or abuse.

In 2010 we launched our Workplace Charter on Domestic Violence, a bespoke accreditation scheme, to enable organisations, businesses, Churches and communities, to be recognised for their support to anyone affected by domestic violence or abuse. Our range of supported pathways empower communities to recognise and respond to anyone affected by domestic or sexual violence or abuse.

We believe that in order to create a society that has zero tolerance towards domestic violence or abuse, prevention and early intervention work is crucial.

We don't provide direct support services to anyone living with domestic abuse, we aim to raise awareness and build capacity to ensure anyone affected by domestic abuse is directed to support services, hence the name of our range of initiatives 'Pathways for Participation'.

Our range of **pathways** enable everyone to play their part and we work with a wide range of organisations, including employers, community groups and Churches, to provide **training** and resources in recognising and responding to domestic abuse and referring on to appropriate services.

2: Proposed Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill

- 2:1 We welcome the opportunity to comment on the proposed Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill.
- 2:2 Onus welcomes the proposed Bill, particularly the criminalisation of coercive and controlling behaviours which we believe represents the intentional and persistent nature of domestic abuse and can destroy many lives.

- 2:3 Onus recognises that domestic abuse is much more than a criminal justice issue alone and would highlight the value of partnership and multi-agency responses in recognising and responding to an individual's needs arising from a domestic abuse situation. Successful prosecution for a cumulative offence, instead of fragmented incidents, may necessitate victim/survivor engagement with the criminal justice agencies for a sustained period of time, consideration should be given to support for victim throughout this time. It is the view of Onus that services emerging from partnership approaches, identified at local Domestic and Sexual Violence Partnerships, will play an increasingly valuable role in victims' safe engagement throughout the criminal justice process.

3: Support for employees in the workplace

- 3:1 Onus launched the Workplace Charter on Domestic Violence in 2010. We continue to work with a wide network of employers ranging from employers with thousands of employees, such as PSNI, Northern Health and Social Care Trust and Belfast City Council to small businesses and even sole traders. We believe that everyone can play their part in recognising domestic abuse and supporting individuals experiencing abuse on to the next step in their journey to live a life free of abuse.
- 3:2 The Workplace Charter was developed in partnership with employers, School of Communication at University of Ulster and with the help of staff and women using the services of Women's Aid ABCLN. Partnership working is at the core of the Onus approach and the Workplace Charter has continued to evolve over the past decade and the partnership approach reinforced to the stage we now work with a network of Safe Place Advocates, who identify and lead initiatives to support employees and service users themselves. We continue to share best practice with our network of Workplace Charter Organisations and Safe Place Advocates.
- 3:3 Onus welcomes the guidance for employers launched in November 2018 at one of our Workplace Charter organisations, Belfast City Council, who highlighted the benefits of having availed of training for staff to successfully implement their workplace policy. Having developed and delivered this training over the past 10 years, Onus are aware of the particular concerns employers may have in implementing a policy on domestic abuse, a matter that previously had been 'left at home'.
- 3:4 Onus welcomes the focus on 'economic abuse' encompassing financial abuse, as this highlights the particular damage from preventing individuals accessing employment or losing their job as a result of domestic abuse. We would like to see all employers recognising the vital role they can play in helping any employee maintain and thrive in their job and recognise the detrimental impact of domestic abuse on employees, businesses and the wider economy.
- 3:5 Since launching the Workplace Charter in 2010 and continuing to work with our network of employers, Onus has noted that male employees have

accessed support within the workplace. Whilst not having collated exact statistics, we would tentatively suggest that workplace initiatives are a potentially good means of reaching a demographic that has traditionally not availed of support services to a great extent.

- 3:6 Research would indicate that point of separation from an abusive partner is when victims are most at risk. The workplace can be a place where someone could be accessed and can therefore be a place of particular vulnerability. Legislation in New Zealand passed in July 2019 gave employees 10 days paid leave when leaving an abusive relationship. Similar initiatives have been discussed in Republic of Ireland and in Westminster and Onus would welcome the opportunity for Northern Ireland to afford employees 10 days paid leave to address all the needs that arise from leaving a domestic abuse relationship.

4 Removing barriers in society

- 4:1 While we believe that this Bill has potential to enhance existing legislation and facilitate a robust response to perpetrators of domestic abuse, it may take some time for societal understanding and attitudes to change to recognise controlling and coercive behaviours not only as potentially criminal acts but also potentially dangerous forms of domestic abuse.

- 4:2 Routine Activity Theory, identified by Cohen and Felson (1979) states that the commission of a crime requires

- A vulnerable/suitable victim or target
- A motivated offender
- The absence of capable guardianship.

It is in the latter requirement that Onus focus their work, in working to dissipate stereotypes and myths surrounding domestic abuse and safeguarding and empowering businesses/communities/Churches with the skills and confidence for an effective response to individuals experiencing/at risk of domestic abuse.

- 4:3 There has been a renewed focus on Bystander Theory in recent years, and the efficacy of approaches that encourage a move towards becoming a 'prosocial bystander' (Berkowitz 2009), for example the 'No More' initiative launched in 2019: <https://thecommonwealth.org/media/news/commonwealth-teams-no-more-initiative-reduce-violence-against-women-and-girls>

The Onus 'Pathways for Participation' have been successfully operating such initiatives in Northern Ireland over the past decade and would echo the validity and value of implementing these initiatives to encourage the cultural, societal and attitudinal changes that will be required to ensure successful implementation of the new legislation.

5 Conclusion

Onus believe that the new Bill is a positive step forward in supporting victims of domestic abuse become survivors of domestic abuse. There are a number of opportunities to support effective implementation of the Bill:

- Recognising the value of new services being developed and delivered in partnership between agencies and being identified at local Domestic and Sexual Violence Partnerships
- Recognising the vital role workplaces can play in supporting employees to access support for domestic abuse and/or leave abusive relationships
- Recognising the importance of societal/attitudinal change in understanding and responding to domestic abuse.

As a local social enterprise, Onus has been delivering on these outcomes through the Pathways for Participation initiatives and would welcome the opportunity to extend their reach further.

We would welcome the opportunity to further discuss with Departments how we believe we could work with them through non-legislative approaches to ensure the new Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill has the best possible opportunity to radically address domestic abuse in Northern Ireland.

Colette Stewart
Onus Chief Executive