



**EVIDENCE TO THE EDUCATION  
COMMITTEE ON RSE**

**A RESPONSE SUBMISSION BY  
WOMEN'S AID NI  
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## WOMEN'S AID – INFORMATION & STATISTICS

Women's Aid NI is the lead voluntary organisation challenging and addressing domestic violence and abuse in Northern Ireland. WAFNI is the umbrella body of eight Women's Aid groups across NI. WAFNI promotes regional collaborative working across all Women's Aid groups and provides a regional lead in areas of training development, preventative education, strategic development of children and young people's services, policy response and advocacy.

### **We work collectively across Northern Ireland to:**

- engage with women, children and young people; to give them a voice and ensure they inform all aspects of service development and delivery.
- provide trauma informed specialised services to women, children and young people who have experienced domestic abuse.
- deliver preventative education programmes in schools and community settings to promote healthy non-abusive relationships and share key safeguarding messages.
- educate and inform the public, private, voluntary, statutory and community sectors of the context and impact of domestic abuse.
- provide quality assured education and training to a wide audience, to increase capacity to respond to domestic abuse.
- monitor, influence and respond to government policy and legislation as a Subject Matter Expert, giving a voice to survivors of domestic abuse.
- Work in partnership, sharing our expertise with all relevant agencies to ensure a joined-up response to domestic abuse.

**Throughout this response, the term “Women's Aid” refers to the overall Women's Aid movement in Northern Ireland, including our local groups and Women's Aid Federation.**

# WOMEN'S AID SERVICES IN 2023/24



**527 WOMEN**  
stayed in our refuges  
throughout NI



**10,955**  
Referrals made to  
Women's Aid Services



**291 CHILDREN**  
stayed in refuge  
with their mum



**7,637 WOMEN**  
received support whilst  
staying in their homes



**10 BABIES**  
were born whilst their  
mum was in refuge



**5,293 CHILDREN**  
had mums supported in  
Women's Aid services



**266 WOMEN**  
who were pregnant  
received support



**39 WOMEN**  
and 31 children with no  
recourse to public funds  
stayed in our refuges

## DOMESTIC ABUSE POLICE SNAPSHOT



**16**  
minutes

The average time  
the PSNI receive a  
call regarding  
a domestic abuse  
incident in 23/24



**1/5** of all Crime

The amount of crimes  
committed that were  
domestic abuse related in  
23/24



**25**  
Women  
murdered

The number of  
women killed in  
Northern Ireland  
since 2020

Domestic abuse is now recognised as a serious issue facing society and forms part of a policy agenda across government. As a direct result of a clear strategic focus from government and greater public awareness of the issue, statutory and voluntary agencies have developed clear roles, policies and responses for all victims of domestic abuse, leading to effective partnership working, greater service provision and more effective response to need.

For over forty years, Women's Aid in Northern Ireland has sought to provide support and increase protection and safety for women, children and young people who are victims and survivors of domestic abuse. In the last financial year alone, we provided specialist support for 527 women and 291 children through our network of refuges. Responding to the needs of children and young people who have experienced domestic abuse and don't feel safe, Women's Aid have been innovators in producing preventative education programs that assist in prevention and early intervention. It is essential to provide children and young people with a series of coping strategies to use in any situation when they feel that they are unsafe e.g. bullying, experiencing community violence and domestic abuse.

**Eliminating abuse begins with preventing abuse.** Women's Aid NI has been an innovator in producing preventative education programmes for children and young people for over 20 years. The huge success of our preventative work at primary school level, along with feedback from teachers and external agencies has highlighted the need for continued teacher training and support in this area. Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland, over the last 14 years, has been instrumental in the development and delivery of effective preventative education, focused upon developing schools' capacity to promote and safeguard the welfare of all children and young people. We have trained **1,827** teachers (including 2023/24 statistics) from over **600** primary schools across Northern Ireland.

## **THE HELPING HANDS PROGRAMME**

Helping Hands is one of our flagship programs, for children aged 7-11 (Key Stage 2) and continues to be delivered successfully in schools by teachers and others concerned with the safety and of children in Northern Ireland and beyond with an overall aim of increasing children's understanding of feeling safe and to explore and promote behaviours which will contribute to a safe environment.

The aims of training teachers as Social Guardians is to:

- Assist teachers to understand the context and impact of domestic abuse on the lives of children and their families.

- Assist teachers to develop preventative and early intervention strategies in relation to children who do not feel safe, especially children affected by domestic abuse.
- Enable teachers to deliver the Helping Hands programme linked to the curriculum

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, we reviewed and updated the content of the programme with up-to-date research. We also included changes that reflected the updates in domestic abuse legislation, focusing on children’s experiences of coercive control in particular Operation Encompass and Child Aggravator within the Domestic Abuse & Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021.

## OPERATION ENCOMPASS

The scheme is a partnership between the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Education Authority, and education providers. It means if Police attend a domestic abuse call, and children are present, Operation Encompass allows the officers to pass on relevant information to the safeguarding team at the child’s school the following morning, so the right support can be put in place.

This was a major initiative that initially was piloted in the South-Eastern area via Education and Police with a consent only reporting mechanism. The response to provide consent was very high which highlighted the necessity for this process. The legislation given Police power to inform schools of incidents of domestic abuse attended where children were present was introduced in September 2021. The scheme was fully rolled out across Northern Ireland in May 2023. It is now operational in all 1,162 schools and EOTAS (Education Other Than at School) centres in Northern Ireland.

The numbers to date are very high and Women’s Aid across NI are receiving requests from primary and post primary schools to provide capacity training to support the Operation Encompass initiative. As of May 2024, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) had made over 23,000 referrals to Operation Encompass. This scheme is a partnership between the PSNI, the Education Authority, and education providers.

Following the roll out of this updated Helping Hands programme, an extensive consultation with teachers who participated found that:

- 100% rated trainer’s style and manner as either excellent (98%) or good (2%).
- 100% rated course content and materials as either excellent (98%) or good (2%).
- 100% rated range of methods used as either excellent (96%) or good (4%).

Through working in partnership with the Department of Education, Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland (WAFNI) has developed and implemented a strategic way forward, to ensure all children and young people in Northern Ireland have access to the Helping Hands preventative education programme for key stages 1&2 children.

To date this has been achieved through the development and annual roll out (in partnership with the Department of Education) of an accredited training programme, which builds capacity for primary school teachers to deliver the creative education programme, *Helping Hands*. This programme, *Effective Communication Skills for Social Guardians*, has been delivered to primary school teachers across Northern Ireland since 2010 and is CPD accredited. The programme has the following Social Guardian outcomes:

- Assist teachers to develop preventative and early intervention strategies in relation to children who do not feel safe, specifically children affected by domestic violence.
- Enable teachers to deliver the Helping Hands programme linked to the curriculum.
- Assist teachers to understand the context and impact of domestic violence in the lives of children and their families.

Feedback from schools consistently highlights the importance of the programme and the need for continued delivery. Each year, in partnership with the 8 local Women's Aid groups, Women's Aid Federation NI (WAFNI) trains approximately 160 teachers across Northern Ireland.

The evaluation of preventative work at primary school age along with feedback from ongoing consultations with young people, teachers and external agencies has highlighted the need for a robust preventative model at post primary level. This information needs to be available in education and youth settings to increase awareness of differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships and promote sound values of respect, equality, and trust.

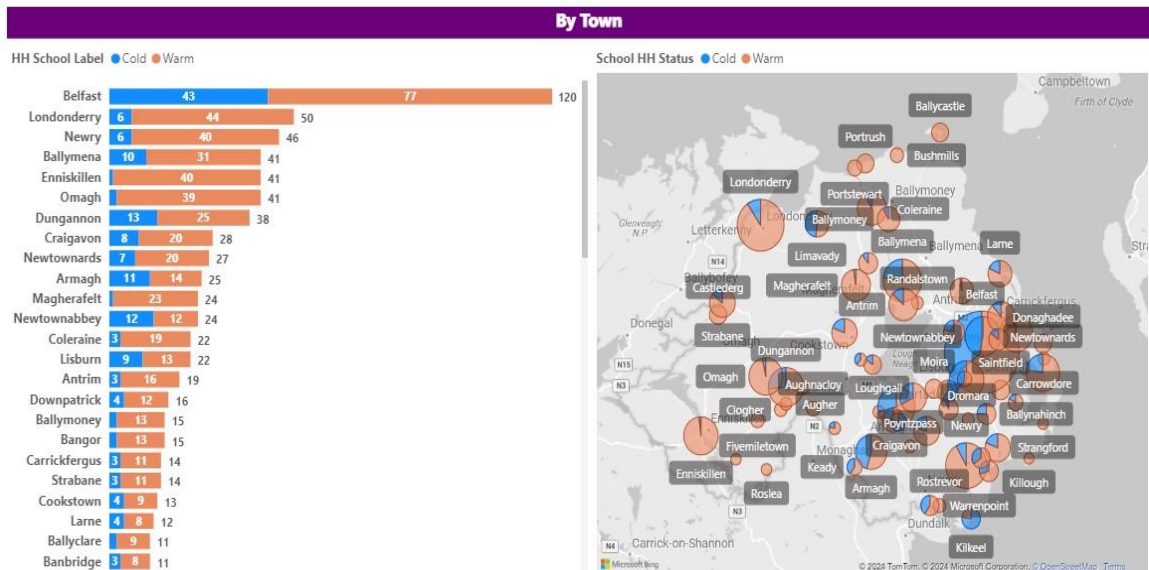
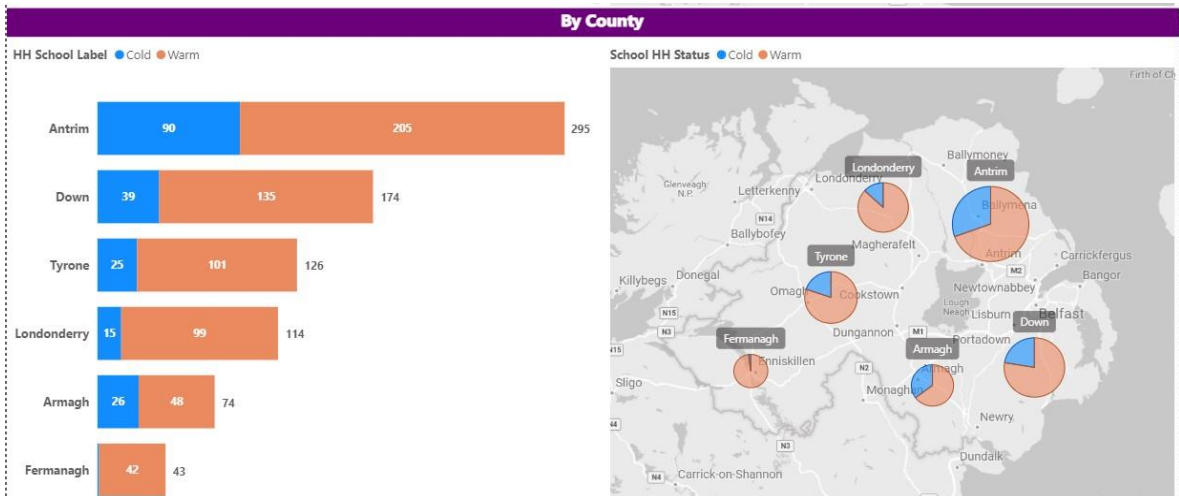
***We are developing a Helping Hands for Early Years Resource to increase understanding of feeling safe and promote early intervention in statutory and community early years settings.***

The successful implementation of Helping Hands across primary schools in NI is a good news story. Teacher training evaluations, feedback from early years practitioners and research by Dr Bronagh McKee has identified a need for key messages contained in the programme to be heard at an even younger age. A creative scoping day, facilitated in partnership with the Early Childhood Studies Department at Stranmillis

University College (SUC), identified the need to develop an early years version. This will be developed as a holistic approach, working with families engaged in early years settings, to promote early identification and response to risk.

- Develop a creative early years resource building upon the core components of the Helping Hands model.
- Pilot the resource as a holistic early intervention capacity building approach with early years practitioners (statutory and community), supported by CPD accredited training.

Number of County	Number of Institutions	Number of Teachers
6	628	1754



*The above charts show the schools that we have delivered Helping Hands in across NI indicated by warm schools and those schools that we have yet to deliver the programme in which are cold schools. First chart is by county for an overview and second is by major town. It gives a good visual of the reach of the programme.*

To develop and address the need at post primary level, Women's Aid Federation NI, in collaboration with the eight Women's Aid groups across NI has developed the Stand up for Healthy Relationships program. Women's Aid NI believes that eliminating abuse begins with preventing abuse. The Stand up for Healthy Relationships program is the next stage of the evolving response of Women's Aid in Northern Ireland to developing preventative education interventions that address the context and impact of domestic abuse in Northern Ireland.

Educating young people is perhaps one of the most vital and important steps in eliminating domestic abuse in our society. All young people are developing relationships, they need to have the tools to understand the differences between what is healthy and what is abusive. This fits clearly with curriculum statutory requirements for Learning for Life and Work: Personal Development at key stages 3 and 4 in the areas of self-awareness, personal health and relationships.

We want young people to be fully informed about rights in relationships and to be equipped to recognise the signs and symptoms of unhealthy relationships. For children and young people to know the difference between what a loving and healthy relationship is, and what unacceptable behaviours that sit outside this, gives them the confidence and ability to draw the line at abuse. We want every young person to have this knowledge and we want every young person to be able to act, for themselves and for their peers and to play their role in preventing abuse and developing a safer society. The young people we have supported over many years have expressed this to us, and none more so than in our most recent project – Social Action Youth (SAY).

## **THE SOCIAL ACTION YOUTH (SAY) PROJECT**

Women's Aid Federation NI (WAFNI) has established and launched an exciting youth led project, funded by Children in Need through the Youth Social Action Fund, and in collaboration with the See Hear Act project funded by Comic Relief.

The SAY (Social Action for Young People) project has involved the coordination of a series of regional Women's Aid youth led workshops for young people aged 11-18. The SAY project brings together a diverse group of young people (of post primary age) engaged in Women's Aid services across NI, who are survivors of domestic abuse currently engaged in Women's Aid services. The young people work in partnership with staff to help drive forward change. Since the project started in 2022, the young people have already:

1. Ensured their voices were heard in the Women's Aid input into the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy Draft Framework Consultation.

2. Informed the development of a Training and Learning Framework for professionals working with children and young people affected by domestic abuse. (In partnership with Safeguarding Board NI)
3. Developed educational resources for young people including a bespoke Healthy Relationships Website launching in 2024, and a post primary education programme focusing on Healthy Relationships.

The SAY project involved the delivery of a series of regional, fun filled productive workshops between Spring and Summer 2023. The workshops enabled young people from Women's Aid groups across NI to come together, have a say on issues affecting them, and make a difference for other young people. Young people participating will benefit from three overarching outcomes (big differences) as follows:



The first Social Action session encouraged young people to develop their vision for the project and think about how we can raise awareness of healthy relationships. They shared their ideas on key messages for young people in relation to healthy relationships and how we can ensure these messages are heard (including the [development of a website and animation which was launched at Stormont on 4<sup>th</sup> December 2024.](#)

The website has gone live and can be accessed by visiting: [sayni.org.uk](http://sayni.org.uk)

The Social Action element of the workshops has been very powerful and young people have shared their views honestly and articulately and have evidenced their valuable role as agents for change. Following these sessions throughout 2023, as experts by

experience, these young people have expressed the need for the creation of a healthy relationships model for themselves and other young people so that they can learn to live and thrive in healthy relationships going forward.

Repeated topic areas discussed by the young people, which they believed needed to be included in learning about a healthy relationship should include (but not limited to):

- Sexual health information and advice including information on contraception and abortion.
- Healthy relationships and abuse in relationships.
- How to help a friend who is in an abusive relationship.
- Coercive control in relationships.
- Information more specifically on LGBTQIA+ relationships, guidance and support.
- Bystander Intervention Training.

All of our work within Women's Aid is informed by survivor voice and following our work with children and young people and over 40 years' experience delivering specialist support to children and young people who have experienced domestic abuse in Northern Ireland.

Alongside our work delivering our flag ship preventative education programmes to thousands of children and young people via their Social Guardians, and most importantly, the voices of young people in the SAY Project. It is our responsibility to not only listen to what they have to SAY... but to act on their behalf as a society.

Link to the SAY document : [Women's Aid Having Our Say 0.pdf](#)