

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE JUSTICE MINISTER



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Deirdre Hargey MLA
Minister for Communities
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Dear Deirdre

I am writing to draw your attention to a number of matters that have recently been raised with me concerning victims of domestic abuse. Firstly, the Justice Committee has asked if it would be possible to award housing points under your Department's Housing Allocation Scheme, to victims intimidated as a result of domestic violence and abuse.

My understanding is that this is currently not the case, and that victims intimidated in a domestic violence and abuse context are not awarded housing points unlike other victims of intimidation as a result of sectarianism, race, sexual orientation, religion, etc. I would be keen if any such gap exists that it be closed, in order that we can help prioritise housing allocation for victims of domestic violence and abuse similar to other victims of intimidation.

I am aware that your departmental officials recently carried out a review of the Housing Allocation Scheme, but understand that the review has not been finalised and agreed. As such, I would welcome your views on how best the Scheme could be amended so victims of intimidation in a domestic abuse context are not disadvantaged.

At the Committee session DoJ officials were also asked whether provision would be made in the Bill in relation to the grant of secure tenancies for those who are victims of domestic abuse (akin to provision that is being made in the Westminster Domestic Abuse Bill and on which our officials have previously liaised) and for more detail on this matter to be provided. Both of these issues have been highlighted informally with your officials and it would be helpful to have your position on these two matters in order to further advise the Justice Committee.

I also recently held a teleconference with representatives of the Men's Advisory Project and Rainbow Project to discuss domestic abuse service provision for men and members of the LGBT community. A number of matters were discussed, including the shortage of emergency accommodation and indeed accommodation beyond this, for male and LGBT victims of domestic abuse. As you may be aware PSNI statistics indicate that around one third of domestic abuse crime victims are male, yet the provision of emergency accommodation is largely available for women only. Whilst I recognise funding is a major issue for all Departments, and there are a multitude of competing priorities, victims of domestic abuse need our combined support on an equal basis, not least during the current climate when it is more difficult for them to leave their home and their abuser.

I would very much appreciate if you could consider what opportunities there are to increase accommodation provision, both emergency and longer term, for male victims of domestic abuse and victims from the LGBT community. This would be applicable during both the current COVID 19 situation and beyond.

Furthermore, I do think it is important, as I touched on during our meeting with the First Minister and deputy First Minister, that while consideration needs to be given to the provision of accommodation during the current COVID 19 situation that there is also a need to look at this by way of a longer term strategy, in order to ensure that there is suitable accommodation provided for those affected by domestic abuse once they leave

refuge or more short term accommodation. I would also welcome your views in relation to how best this could be taken forward.

At the meeting with Men's Advisory Project and the Rainbow Project the issue of funding to attend Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences was also raised. Both advised that they are currently unable to attend these meetings to provide advice in cases relating to high risk males and those from the LGBT community. They are keen to be involved in this and are of the view that the absence of supporting people funding for these organisations, such as that provided to Women's Aid, is preventing this. Your views in relation to this, and how best this issue may be addressed would be welcome.

I look forward to hearing from you and would be happy to discuss any of these matters further by teleconference if you would find that helpful. I am copying this letter to the Justice Committee Chair and to the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Yours sincerely

Naomi Long MLA
Minister of Justice