



Women's Regional Consortium

Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas

Response to: Domestic homicide Reviews

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Foyle Women's
Information
Network



Women's Regional Consortium: Working to Support Women in Rural Communities and Disadvantaged Urban Areas

1. Introduction

1.1 This response has been undertaken collaboratively by the members of the Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas (hereafter, either the Women's Regional Consortium or simply the Consortium), which is funded by the Department for Communities and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

1.2 The Women's Regional Consortium consists of seven established women's sector organisations that are committed to working in partnership with each other, government, statutory organisations and women's organisations, centres and groups in disadvantaged and rural areas, to ensure that organisations working for women are given the best possible support in the work they do in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion.¹ The seven groups are as follows:

- ♀ Training for Women Network (TWN) – Project lead
- ♀ Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
- ♀ Women's Support Network (WSN)
- ♀ Northern Ireland's Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)
- ♀ Women's TEC
- ♀ Women's Centre Derry
- ♀ Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

1.3 The Consortium is the established link and strategic partner between government and statutory agencies and women in disadvantaged and rural areas, including all groups, centres and organisations delivering essential frontline services, advice and support. The Consortium ensures that there is a continuous two-way flow of information between government and the sector. It also ensures that organisations/centres and groups are made aware of consultations, government planning and policy implementation. In turn, the

¹ Sections 1.2-1.3 represent the official description of the Consortium's work, as agreed and authored by its seven partner organisation

Consortium ascertains the views, needs and aspirations of women in disadvantaged and rural areas and takes these views forward to influence policy development and future government planning, which ultimately results in the empowerment of local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities.

1.4 This response is informed by women’s perspectives gathered through one-to-one discussions and engagement questionnaires, reflecting the views of Consortium regional membership bases.

2. General comments

The Women’s Regional Consortium appreciates the opportunity to respond to the DoJ’s ‘Domestic Homicide Reviews’ Consultation Paper. The Consortium works to advance the interests and wellbeing of disadvantaged, marginalised women in some of the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland.

“Domestic and sexual violence cuts across all policy areas, affecting women in their homes, at school and university, at work, in healthcare and legal institutions, in social life, and in their communities. It is a stain on our society.”²

Domestic abuse is a big problem in Northern Ireland. The PSNI dealt with 30,595 domestic abuse incidents in 2017/18 an increase of 4.8% on the previous 12 months and the highest figure since the start of the data series in 2004/05.³ The number of domestic abuse crimes reached 15,049 an increase of 8.6% on the previous 12 months and also the highest figure since the start

² Violence against Women Consultation with Victims, Survivors & Service Users 2017/18, Women’s Aid Northern Ireland

³ Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland, Update to 30 June 2018 https://www.psnipolice.uk/globalassets/inside-the-psni/our-statistics/domestic-abuse-statistics/2018-19/q1/domestic-abuse-bulletin-jun_-18.pdf

of the data series in 2004/05.⁴ During 2016/17, 69% of all domestic abuse crime victims were female and 31% were male.⁵

A survey by the DoJ revealed that police are not told about six in ten of the worst cases of domestic violence in Northern Ireland.⁶ It is widely accepted that there is gross under-reporting of this issue and the real figures are likely to be much greater.

Tragically every year, on average five people are killed by a current/former partner or close family member.⁷ It is therefore important that arrangements are put in place to learn from what has happened in these tragedies to ensure, where possible, that it does not happen again.

Prior to the collapse of the Northern Ireland Assembly in January 2017 there was draft legislation on coercive and controlling behaviour. If this legislation had been introduced it would have created the domestic abuse offence of coercive and controlling behaviour to strengthen the protection for victims and bring Northern Ireland into line with the UK. It is disappointing to be consulting on proposals for DHRs without having this legislation in place.

We are supportive of proposals which raise awareness of domestic violence and bring these issues out into the public domain. There is much work to be done to move away from the view that it is a private or family matter or there must have been a reason for it. *“There’s still this attitude of “They must have asked for it, they must have done something to provoke it.” And also the sense of “It’s a private matter, I don’t want to get involved. I’m sure they’ll*

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Trends in Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland 2004/05 to 2016/17, Annual Bulletin published 12 January 2018, Police Service of Northern Ireland <https://www.psni.police.uk/globalassets/inside-the-psni/our-statistics/domestic-abuse-statistics/domestic-abuse-incidents-and-crimes-in-northern-ireland-2004-05-to-2016-17.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/news/experience-domestic-violence-findings-201112-201516-northern-ireland-crime-surveys-published-today>

⁷ Page 4, <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/justice/dhr-consultation.pdf>

*make up. Isn't it better for the children if they stay together?" We have that kind of attitude."*⁸

"Still that stigma around domestic violence – still very much hidden. It's still a taboo subject."

- Participant in Consultation Exercise

The Women's Regional Consortium provides a voice for women from disadvantaged and rural areas and supports efforts to tackle disadvantage and social exclusion. We do this by working to ensure that women's voices are heard and central to any proposals for new legislation and policy. We share the views of our colleagues in Women's Aid NI: *"Women's Aid believe that survivors' voices and experiences must be central to informing the development and delivery of legislation, policy and strategy to ensure systems and services best meet survivors' needs."*⁹ We would like to see the voices of victims, particularly women, much more involved and at the centre of how these proposals are developed and implemented.

Recommendation:

The views of victims of domestic violence should be sought and integrated into all aspects of the DHR process.

Every opportunity to learn from the operation of DHRs in England and Wales should be taken. DHRs have been in place in England and Wales since 2011 and this provides valuable experience on how the process operates both positively and negatively. It is important to take learning opportunities from the England and Wales experience.

⁸ Judith Gillespie talks to VIEW about the steps needed to tackle Domestic Abuse, March 2018
<http://viewdigital.org/2018/03/09/judith8394/>

⁹ Violence against Women Consultation with Victims, Survivors & Service Users 2017/18, Women's Aid Northern Ireland

In general we welcome the introduction of DHRs in Northern Ireland. It will be to the benefit of everyone in this society if lessons are learned from domestic homicide cases so that they can be prevented in the future.

3. Specific comments

Question 1:

Do you have any comments to make about the purpose of a Domestic Homicide Review?

There must be absolute clarity in the purpose of a DHR and the purpose must be clearly communicated to all those involved in the process. This will help to secure open and honest conversations and identify any learning opportunities.

It will be very important to differentiate between what is and what is not the purpose of a DHR. It is critically important that its purpose is clearly about seeking out and identifying opportunities for learning and **not** for attributing blame. This must be evident in the operation and outcomes of the DHR so that the process can properly work to reduce the instances of domestic homicide.

It is necessary to get away from any 'blame game' so that people and organisations are encouraged to be honest and share information in their engagements with the DHR process. DHRs will not deliver for victims and those at risk of domestic homicide if there is a blame culture within the DHR process.

We would suggest that purpose (vi)¹⁰ is the overarching purpose of the DHR process and that all the other purposes fall below this.

There must be a robust review mechanism as part of the DHR process. The review will need to ensure that any changes suggested by a DHR are implemented and that organisations follow through on changing how they

¹⁰ Para 5.1, <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/justice/dhr-consultation.pdf>

work. The review mechanism must also make sure that lessons learned and changes to practice must be promoted and shared across Northern Ireland.

Pressure must be brought to bear on organisations to implement the recommendations made within DHRs. The review process must allow for a challenge function if the recommendations of DHRs are not implemented or if organisations do not change their working practices. Perhaps inspection bodies, such as the Regulation & Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA), should take account of the recommendations made in DHRs as part of their work.

Recommendation:

Inspection bodies should take into account recommendations made in DHRs as part of their inspection function.

Women who took part in engagement events were concerned about how the recommendations in reports would be progressed and felt that this was an essential part of any workable DHR process. We would like to see more detail on how it is proposed that recommendations made in DHRs will be enforced as this will be central to the success of this process.

“Who is going to ensure the recommendations are carried out?”

- Participant in Consultation Exercise

“Seeing things through will be important. There is no point in doing things if nothing is going to be learned or put into practice.”

- Participant in Consultation Exercise

There must be some regular analysis of the themes emerging from DHRs over time. Repeated recommendations and commonalities must be identified and analysed and appropriate action taken to reduce these.

We welcome the inclusion of highlighting good practice as a purpose. However we would be concerned that this might be confused with standard practice and lead to organisations listing all their standard practice in these cases. This would just result in lengthy and unhelpful reports. It may be useful to provide a definition of good practice and to make it clear to those participating in DHRs that in many cases there may not be much which goes beyond standard practice to be identified.

The consultation document makes it clear that a DHR is not about how a victim died. However we would suggest that the victim's story is an important part of the process which helps the DHR to more clearly understand what led to their death and how it could have been prevented. It is hugely important that the victim's voice is central to this process. It is only through looking at conduct and policies through the eyes of a victim that true lessons will be learned so that this process can be effective.

Question 2:

Do you have anything to say about when a DHR will or will not be commissioned?

There are clear links between domestic violence and suicide but there are no official figures available. A study has shown a strong link continues to exist between domestic violence and poor mental health, with one in four women reporting that they had attempted to take their own life and one in two reporting suicidal thoughts.¹¹

We understand the reasoning of the DoJ not to include suicide in the proposals for introducing DHRs in Northern Ireland and we acknowledge the

¹¹ Intimate Partner Violence in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies, Insights and Lessons from Northern Ireland, Jessica Leigh Doyle and Monica McWilliams, TJI, University

difficulties in reviewing suicides. In order to make the DHR process fit to tackle the complexities of domestic abuse related suicides it has been suggested that it may be prudent to test the process first. We strongly recommend that once this has been done that domestic violence related suicides should be included in the DHR process.

Women's Aid's work with the Attorney General, John Larkin QC, has revealed that the issue of suicide as a result of domestic abuse is severely under-recognised within existing review processes. The current mechanism whereby the Attorney General can direct the coroner to investigate a death and its causal link to abuse is an imperfect mechanism. It requires a great deal of proactive work on the part of families, support services and the Attorney himself. It may be extremely valuable for the DHR process to fill that gap given that it comes with a wraparound process and pathways tailored to cases where a death has resulted from domestic violence.

It may also be useful to conduct a fact-finding exercise by speaking to those who have experience of DHRs and suicide and gather learning and good practice to ensure its effectiveness in Northern Ireland.

Recommendation:

After an initial testing process DHRs should be commissioned in cases of death by suicide where there is a history of domestic abuse.

Cases of familicide (where a family member murders his family and then dies by suicide) need to be treated with particular sensitivity. The treatment of the perpetrator as an equal victim must be avoided. In these cases DHR reports could be valuable tools in debunking common myths around familicide. These include presenting the perpetrator as a 'good family man' or 'pillar of the community' and the search for undiagnosed mental health issues to explain their actions without acknowledging that the killings were a result of escalating coercive control and abuse. Given that such reviews would be dealing with both domestic homicide and suicide it might be helpful to develop specific guidance for Chairs and Panels on this issue.

Question 3:**Do you have anything to say about what may ‘typically’ be outlined within the terms of reference?**

The terms of reference should include a commitment to ensuring that the ‘voice’ of the victim is at the centre of the process. The personality and life of the victim should be integral to the operation of a DHR so that it informs the process at all times.

Recommendation:**The DHR process must be victim-centred in all aspects of its work so that the persona of the victim is allowed to “come alive” and inform the work of the DHR.**

We are concerned about the support available for family members, friends and others who knew the victim who are involved in the DHR process. The proposed terms of reference make some attempt to consider how family members, friends, employers, support networks, etc will contribute to the review and how this will be managed. However there is no mention of the support which may be required to enable these people to cope with any trauma or pain they experience as a result of this. There should be a commitment in the terms of reference to include how family, friends and others will be supported with any trauma resulting from this process.

Recommendation:**The terms of reference must include how family, friends and others will be supported with any trauma resulting from taking part in a DHR.**

The terms of reference must be written in plain English so that they are easily accessible by everyone involved in the process. The TOR will be sent to families of the victim and should be easily understood by them avoiding technical language where possible.

Question 4:

Do you have anything to say about:

- **the knowledge and skills of the chair**
- **the recruitment and contingency for the role of the chair?**

We suggest that the success of a DHR will be dependent on the combination of the Chair and the panel membership (see next question). The Chair, as leader of the DHR process, will be pivotal to its success.

It seems obvious but the Chair must put the victim at the centre of their work. If the Chair does not care about the victim then they will not be effective in their role. The victim must be at the centre of this process and central to the work of all those involved.

The Chair should be a recognised expert in the field of domestic violence and have a proven in-depth understanding of all aspects of domestic violence including coercive control and the gendered nature of domestic violence and abuse.

The Chair must also have experience in managing large, complex processes like DHRs and have a proven track record in managing relationships with multiple agencies and groups.

In order for this process to be effective it will be important to encourage buy-in from all participants and to provide encouragement to do this in an open and honest manner. It would be useful for the Chair to have experience of this. Perhaps this might be best achieved by recruiting those with some experience of the DHR process in other jurisdictions.

The Chair must also be independent and seen to be independent. It is important that the Chair is independent from all the agencies involved in the process and fully committed to looking for ways to learn from every death in order to prevent future deaths. Their role needs to go beyond a 'tick-box' exercise about whether procedures were followed or not. This will allow the

process to move away from being about blame and put the focus on prevention.

It may also be useful for the Department to consider independence in the context of Northern Ireland. The Chair should take into account the legacy of the Troubles, potential sensitivities of families from different communities and whether the appointment of a Chair with a perceived background or political views may negatively affect buy-in to the process from families. The Chair must also understand the role and context of organisations operating in Northern Ireland.

Communication with families of the victim will be one of the most important roles of the Chair. This role must be carried out with compassion and sensitivity. Inadequate communication and engagement with families tends to be the most criticised aspect of DHR processes in GB and must be avoided. Guidance should be developed to ensure that this vital role of family liaison is not forgotten or poorly carried out. This includes the ability to write letters to families which must have a balance of information in plain English, explanation of the process and compassion and commitment to work with families.

The Chair must also have proven ability to draft reports with clear and concise findings. A skilled author is needed who can write the report in a way that is easily accessible, clearly document the lessons that need to be learned and the things that need to be changed. These reports must allow organisations and professionals to assess the key issues and to understand the actions which need to be taken. The reports resulting from a DHR will be very important documents and if written effectively have the potential to save lives.

We acknowledge that it may be difficult for one person to hold all the necessary expertise in these areas. We agree with the suggestion in the consultation document that there should be more than one Chair. This would allow a broader range of expertise and experience with cases allocated appropriately.

We suggest that organisations from the community and voluntary sector could provide valuable input into the recruitment process for the Chair.

Recommendation:

Representatives from the community and voluntary sector with expertise in domestic violence should be involved and resourced to take part in the recruitment of the Chair given the significance of this role.

Question 5:

Do you have any comments to make about DHR panel membership?

As previously stated the success of a DHR will be dependent on the combination of the Chair and the panel membership. It is therefore important to get this right.

We are pleased to note the vital role of organisations from the voluntary and community sector has been acknowledged in the consultation document.¹² The voluntary and community sector has a significant role to play in providing expertise to the panel and also in the provision of a challenge function for statutory agencies. The voluntary and community sector is trusted by service users in ways that sometimes the statutory sector is not. This has implications for the quality and openness of communications between service users and the services they may interact with. It is not only important that these organisations are represented in the panel membership but that their views are listened to and valued.

“The voluntary and community sector go that extra step and do that extra bit to help people. You need people on the same level as the victim.”
- Participant in Consultation Exercise

¹² Para 6.23, <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/justice/dhr-consultation.pdf>

“Most women I deal with feel they are being treated as if they are being talked down to – they are not treated as an equal by statutory services.”

- Participant in Consultation Exercise

“There is work to be done on breaking down barriers and on the culture in statutory organisations like social services.”

- Participant in Consultation Exercise

“Sometimes it’s about the way you say and do things.”

- Participant in Consultation Exercise

We suggest that, in all cases, organisations from the voluntary and community sector who represent victims of domestic violence and abuse should be represented in the core panel membership. They have much to contribute in terms of knowledge, challenge and support for victims. This could include established domestic violence organisations such as Women’s Aid Federation Northern Ireland or the Men’s Advisory Project and other smaller projects within communities which provide support to those suffering from domestic violence.

“Given the gendered nature of the issue, staff at a women’s centre, for example, might be able to share their experiences of interacting with an individual, and where a crèche has been accessed, experiences of interacting with the individual’s children. Given the informal environment of such centres information gleaned is likely to contribute an authentic bias to the case.”

- Participant in Consultation Exercise

It must be acknowledged that these organisations are working with ever tightening budgets and many rely on short-term funding for particular posts/programmes. This leaves these organisations with scant resources to take on additional work. “*Speaking with management and board members*

from Women's Aid on a regular basis, I am acutely aware that year on year, they are left to scrape the bottom of the barrel to get the funds needed to maintain their refuges and programmes.”¹³

“We get referrals from social services and GP's and that is all well and good and we would never turn anyone in this situation away but there's no funding for this.”

- Participant in Consultation Exercise

In order to allow for effective participation and contribution to the work of DHRs organisations in the voluntary and community sector must be resourced to do this work.

Recommendation:

Organisations in the voluntary and community sector who represent victims of domestic violence and abuse should form part of the core membership of DHR panels.

These organisations must be adequately resourced to provide their input and a challenge to statutory services.

We welcome the proposal to have ad hoc membership of the panel as and when necessary to provide additional knowledge and expertise.¹⁴ Relevant voluntary sector organisations, such as those working in the areas of substance misuse support, mental health, BME support should be invited if the background suggests these agencies have the relevant knowledge or challenge function to contribute. Once again, any such organisation is likely to require additional resourcing in order to be able to carry out this work.

In order to be effective the panel will need to ensure the purpose of a DHR is enshrined in its work. The panel will need to focus on what needs to be

¹³ SDLP Policing and Justice spokesperson Dolores Kelly <https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/belfast-news/action-plan-stop-domestic-abuse-15008471>

¹⁴ Para 6.23, <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/justice/dhr-consultation.pdf>

learned from the case rather than a narrow focus on the procedures and attributing blame. The mind-set of the panel membership will be very important. Panel members will need to be genuinely open to the idea that things may not have been done right. They will need to be committed to looking at how to configure their services differently in order for things to be different in the future.

In order to be properly effective the panel membership must include representation from all key statutory agencies, for example, police, health, probation, etc. This representation on the panel must be at a sufficiently senior level to be able to agree strategic recommendations or it will be ineffective. The panel members need to be able to agree what will happen and when and to ensure progress on recommendations.

Panel members need to have a willingness to work together and adopt an inter-agency approach to ensure that lessons are learned across organisations to prevent similar tragedies in the future.

As previously stated we believe that the victim must be at the centre of this process and that the panel should commit to putting them at the centre of all their work.

Question 6:

Do you have any comments to make about the consideration of equality and diversity issues by the Panel?

We agree that anyone who falls into one of the protected characteristics under equality legislation should have that characteristic taken into consideration during the course of the DHR. We would urge that the gendered nature of the killing of women is not overlooked in equality and diversity considerations in DHRs. Women are the majority of victims in domestic homicides and this is seen to be the 'norm' in these cases. However women are disproportionately victims of domestic homicides because they are women and this fact is inextricably linked with gender inequality. To ignore the impact of gender on

domestic violence does a disservice to women and the aim must be to strive for gender-informed prevention and responses to these situations.

We also recommend that in cases where victims are foreign nationals their cultural context should also be examined. There are different cultural norms around domestic violence in some other countries and this may be a useful consideration in the behaviours of victims.

“We had a young client from Poland who had got married and was suffering domestic abuse. Her family were not supportive of her leaving her husband taking the view that she is married and she has to accept whatever happens in the marriage.”

- Participant in Consultation Exercise

We are pleased to see the consultation document includes rural needs in the consideration of equality and diversity issues. Northern Ireland has a large rural population. Around 670,000 people live in rural areas amounting to 37% of the population.¹⁵ It is therefore important that rural needs are given specific consideration in these proposals.

There may be issues accessing services such as transport and childcare in rural areas. The panel may wish to consider alternate ways of working to account for rural needs to ensure that everyone can actively participate in the DHR process. For example, the panel could consider travelling to meet a family in their local area in a case of a rural domestic homicide.

“Rural women that have no private transport or access to public transport are more isolated. Travel is more costly.”

- Participant in Consultation Exercise

¹⁵ <http://www.rdc.org.uk/statistics>

There are additional considerations to domestic violence in rural areas. There are many factors at play in small, local communities which make it harder for women to leave a domestic violence situation. Some of these come from the fact that people (both the victim and the perpetrator) are often well known in rural communities. Women may be reluctant to be open about domestic violence because of shame, the desire to keep personal business private and standing in the local community.

“Women around here (rural Armagh) wouldn’t want everyone knowing their family business.”

- Participant in Consultation Exercise

There are also issues around the lack of support services in rural communities meaning that it is much more difficult for rural women to report issues and take action. In general women suffering domestic violence are reluctant to disrupt their children’s lives by leaving the family home, school and local communities. This can be even more difficult for rural women who may not only have to uproot their home and family but even their whole way of life potentially moving to an urban area to access services such as social housing or refuge. These issues may make rural women more susceptible to a homicide situation as they feel even more pressured to stay in the family home.

“Local health and wellbeing support is all in the closest town, you have to travel there for everything. I feel strongly that rural areas and people living in them are being more and more discriminated against with the lack of service provision.”

- Participant in Consultation Exercise

Question 7:

Do you have anything to say about family involvement in the process?

We believe that the involvement of family members will be very important to this process should they wish to be involved. In engagement with women this was one of the proposals where the most feedback was given.

Families should be given the opportunity to be integral to the DHR process not just simply involved in it. They can provide a unique insight into who the victim was, what their life was like and their reactions. Involving families will ensure that the voice of someone who is no longer there is heard. Merely presenting facts or a timeline of incidents will not give a sense of the person and family and friends are key to this. The involvement of family will help to ensure that the victim stays at the centre of the process.

“Close family members/friends and those working closely with the victim may be able to provide their version of the case history using anecdotes around early warning signs and perceptions of interactions with statutory agencies, notable changes in appearance and behaviour in the victim and criminal prosecutions pursued and/or dropped.”
- Participant in Consultation Exercise

Family involvement should be reflected more strongly in these proposals and we suggest a partnership approach is taken by Chairs and panels with families. By building a partnership with families, and recognising both their special status as living victims and their value as holders of key information about the victim, a Chair and panel are more likely to get useful and valuable information from them. This will ultimately result in a better DHR process with fuller, more accurate findings and recommendations.

The consultation document does state that it will be important to have clear communication with the family about the process and their role in it.¹⁶ However we feel that this does not go far enough. We believe that family members will not only need to be communicated with about the process but will need to be supported throughout. It is likely that being involved in this process may result in pain and trauma for family members and they must be able to access support services to help them deal with this. The document does not outline any support arrangements for family members.

¹⁶ Para 6.26, <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/justice/dhr-consultation.pdf>

Recommendation:

Access to support services for family members (and others) in dealing with pain and trauma should be included as part of the DHR process.

“People will need someone to talk to who can help them heal. They need the right support or they will feel worse as part of this process. They need to be given the tools to manage, deal with their grief and enable them to move on with their lives.”

- Participant in Consultation Exercise

“They will need to provide qualified support from Women’s Aid, counsellors and community support.”

- Participant in Consultation Exercise

“While it is a good idea to give family, including young people, a chance to be involved in the process due regard must be given to their age/vulnerability. Support should be available for them such as access to counselling. Participation may open up new aspects of trauma through the learning of new information of which they had been previously unaware.”

- Participant in Consultation Exercise

The DoJ could consider asking families that have already been affected by a domestic homicide to provide their input on what support they felt would have been helpful to them. They could use feedback from families to incorporate support arrangements into the DHR process.

The Chair will play an important role in communication with families. As stated in the document this should be carefully and sensitively managed by the Chair. We recommend that families should be informed right from the beginning of the process. They should be given an outline of what the process will involve in plain English. They should be kept informed

throughout the process and this communication should be ongoing even if there is nothing new to report.

In engagement with women there were a number of suggestions made around the issue of family involvement. These included providing informal settings for family members to give their views/opinions. Family members should be invited to participate in the way which is most comfortable for them. This could involve a number of methods including correspondence via email, by telephone, through questionnaires or open discussions, house visits from the Chair, meetings in a neutral venue and the possibility of attending panel meetings. Women also suggested providing a support person/representative from a trusted organisation, such as a women's centre, to help and support with participation in the process.

It may be useful to involve children and young people in this process however this must be carefully managed. This would require a special skillset and sensitivity from the Chair and as such they should have experience in this area. The wellbeing and best interests of children and young people must be at the heart of the process. Guidance and training for Chairs in how to appropriately liaise with families and children should be developed.

“The involvement of young people would require expertise in dealing with matters that may be upsetting and traumatic for some.”

- Participant in Consultation Exercise

“Family have watched through years of abuse and watched the person they love changing. They're left with anger and feel let down by the system and need to be properly supported.”

- Participant in Consultation Exercise

“Everyone in the family is dealing with it in different ways – some are angry that it could have been prevented, others are full of guilt. Have to be very careful the way that family are dealt with.”

- Participant in Consultation Exercise

Question 8:

Do you have anything to say about the involvement of other individuals in the process?

It is likely that friends, work colleagues, employers, etc may all have valuable insights which could assist the DHR process and should be involved. They may also hold insights that family members may not have. In some domestic abuse cases victims have been isolated from their family or may have felt unable to disclose what was happening in their relationship out of shame or fear. The involvement of other individuals will also help to keep the victim at the centre of the process.

These individuals may also experience pain and trauma from being involved in the DHR process and may need support services to enable them to cope with this. Support arrangements for these individuals should also be included in the DHR process.

As previously stated the involvement of other individuals, for example, support workers from the voluntary and community sector including women’s centres may be very useful. They may be able to provide valuable experiences of the victim, what their life was like and evidence of their interaction with services.

“If a woman had accessed services in our women’s centre and we had put in place advice and support we feel that we would have important information to share with the panel in order for them to gain a better understanding of the circumstances leading up to the victim’s death.”

- Participant in Consultation Exercise

Question 9:

Do you have any comments about the two key elements of the DHR process:

- **initial findings, learning and identification of actions needed; and**
- **identification of key findings, learning, actions and longer term change**

to improve service and the response in future cases of domestic violence and abuse?

We are supportive of the two key elements proposed for the DHR process.

Legal processes may mean that considerable time has elapsed before the DHR is able to formally conclude. We feel it is very important that immediate findings or actions that need to be taken to address issues should be raised at an early stage of the process. This will help to ensure that important information and learning is not lost or distorted due to the passage of time.

Question 10:

Do you have any comment on the approach proposed regarding gathering information, or any suggestions as to how best this could be undertaken?

Information should be gathered across a number of variables including frequency of contact with service providers, timeline of contact, nature of contact, nature and content of signposting to other agencies, escalation processes adopted and the effectiveness of these. The victim's timeline should be cross-referenced with the statutory timeline to examine the efficacy of services and interventions provided and information shared (or not) across the agencies involved.

We welcome the approach suggested that those directly involved in the case could be central and active in seeking to capture learning and providing proposals for change.¹⁷ It is important to remove any unnecessary layers from the process as those with direct involvement are likely to have the most valuable contributions.

¹⁷ Para 6.30, <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/justice/dhr-consultation.pdf>

If agencies come to the process believing that the domestic homicide could not have been prevented or they could not have done things differently there will be no point in doing the review. It will just become a pointless exercise with agencies becoming defensive and seeking to protect themselves. This will not serve anyone least of all the victim.

It will therefore be important that the purpose of a DHR is reinforced at all stages of the process, particularly in information gathering, so that those providing information are able to contribute openly and honestly about what happened.

It must be clear, both in the purpose and the operation of the DHR, that the process is not about attributing blame. It will only work if it has 'buy-in' from those directly involved. They must feel able to be completely candid about the information they provide so that it can be a constructive process. This will help to ensure that agencies do not just document what happened but why it happened. It is the 'why' that is central to DHRs and gathering this information will enable the Chair and Panel to better examine what policies and procedures are working, which are missing and which need to change.

Question 11:

Do you have any comment on the suggested approach around publication of the DHR report and do you have any views on the frequency of report publication?

DHR reports will be very important and will have the potential to save lives if properly written and progressed.

We welcome the proposal in the consultation of a streamlined approach which centres on the victim, with a single DHR report that should be concise, focused and proportionate.¹⁸ It should be clear from the report that the victim is at the centre of it.

¹⁸ Para 6.31, <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/justice/dhr-consultation.pdf>

We believe that DHR reports should use plain English and a standard format to ensure that they are as accessible as possible and that good practice and learning opportunities are evident. We agree with the expectation that the final report should include only relevant information and focus on good practice as well as opportunities for learning. We acknowledge that this may be more difficult in complex cases and this must be carefully considered. Lengthy or poor quality reports, which focus too much on detailed information and not on what needs to be learned or changed, will lose not only readers but the sense of the victim as the centre of the process. This should be avoided at all costs given these reports have the potential to save lives in the future.

Following from the DHR report we recommend that a shorter Executive Summary is produced and a key learning document of at most 1-2 pages is disseminated among frontline staff of all the relevant agencies. This will assist with the change process by ensuring that learning is cascaded down through organisations.

The publication of the DHR report should not be viewed as the 'last stage' of the process. As previously stated monitoring the implementation of recommendations and follow-up are essential.

It would be helpful to provide guidance and training for report authors and a template for them to follow so that reports are written in the most effective way.

Recommendation:

Following the production of a DHR report a shorter Executive Summary and key learning document should be produced. These should be disseminated among frontline staff of the relevant agencies.

Guidance and training should be provided to report authors in addition to a report template to ensure effective reports are produced.

We see merit in publishing a report after each individual DHR with an end of year report focusing on key themes and commonalities. This will enable ongoing focus on the key findings and recommendations in reports.

We also agree with the suggestion that there would be merit in a brief thematic report being produced, a minimum of every two years, to reflect what has been learned from domestic homicide cases collectively.¹⁹ It will provide an opportunity to identify emerging themes and to monitor if things are really changing. Once again it will help to ensure that there is regular focus on the progress of actions from DHR reports.

“While it is important for services to learn what they did or did not do and how things might be changed/improved it is crucial that the report places the victim and their family at the centre of its publication. The human side of the victim should be ‘front and centre’ to this process.”

- Participant in Consultation Exercise

“It is important that reports are published in such a way as to underline the learning nature of the exercise and to minimise the potential for the process to become a mechanism for the apportionment of blame and/or legal action.”

- Participant in Consultation Exercise

Question 12:

Do you have any comment on the potential outcome of the reviews through the development of reports?

We welcome a focus on tangible results and acknowledge that actions must be achievable and proportionate. We believe that there must be a robust process for organisations to be held account for the delivery of actions (see next question).

¹⁹ Para 6.33, <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/justice/dhr-consultation.pdf>

As previously stated we have some concerns about the enforceability of recommendations. If the same recommendations continue to be made year after year it will be evident that the DHR process has not been effective or successful in creating meaningful change. Alternative enforcement models used in other jurisdictions are worth further investigation.

“Reports should not be written for the sake of it and left to sit on the shelf.”

- Participant in Consultation Exercise

“Should not be talking for the sake of talking. No point producing reports but at the end of the day nothing is learned. Then the problems are still sitting for the next victim and her family.”

- Participant in Consultation Exercise

There must be some ownership of the DHR recommendations within the agencies named in the report. This could possibly include naming a specific person responsible for overseeing the changes. This person should be sufficiently experienced and hold a senior position in order to take the recommendations forward.

It may also be valuable to include a requirement for agencies to report back to the SOF on the progress of implementing the recommendations within a set time period.

Question 13:

Do you have any comment on the role and scope of the Senior Oversight Forum?

We suggest that deaths will not be prevented unless there is proper follow up on the actions suggested by reports. Reports themselves will be of little use unless the learning and actions coming from them are implemented. There

needs to be clear ownership and management of the outcomes of reports so that they can truly make a difference to victims.

We understand that in England and Wales there has been some evidence of recommendations being repeated in subsequent reports. It is clearly important to avoid this as it indicates that actions are not being properly managed and progressed.

We welcome the proposal to have a quality assurance function as part of the DHR process.²⁰ It will be particularly important to ensure that this quality assurance function monitors the implementation of recommendations emerging from each DHR to ensure they are implemented. This will be critical to the success of the process and ensuring confidence in it.

We would like to see more detail about how the SOF would be able to compel compliance with recommendations. We recommend that the SOF's follow-up function to review how the findings of DHRs are being implemented should be written into the process in detail.

Recommendation

The function of the SOF to review how the findings of DHRs are being implemented should be written into the process in detail.

Question 14:

Do you have any comment on the organisations that would make up the Senior Oversight Forum, particularly the additional bodies that could be considered, or others that should be considered?

The SOF has some critically important functions including deciding when to commission a DHR, endorsing the finalisation of a DHR report and monitoring the implementation of recommendations emerging from DHRs. It is therefore imperative to get the membership of this group right. It needs to be fully representative of the issues involved in DHRs.

²⁰ Para 6.36, <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/justice/dhr-consultation.pdf>

We welcome the proposal to include representatives from voluntary sector organisations representing victims of domestic abuse and violence on the SOF.²¹ Women's Aid and the Men's Advisory Project should be standing members of the SOF as the lead domestic violence organisations in Northern Ireland. As previously stated the voluntary sector can provide an important challenge to statutory agencies.

There should be consideration for including support organisations on the membership of the SOF. This could include organisations such as Women's Centres, BME and LGBT groups and rural support workers who may also be able to make unique contributions to this process.

Question 15:

Do you have any comment on the potential implications the proposed model may have on equality or human rights?

It is likely that the proposed model will impact more on women than men. This is due to the fact that more victims of domestic abuse are female than male. During 2016/17, 69% of all domestic abuse crime victims were female and 31% were male.²² If these proposals are implemented effectively they have the potential to better safeguard the equality and human rights of women.

Question 16:

Do you have any further comment to make about the proposed model?

It is unfortunate to be responding to these proposals without having coercive control legislation in Northern Ireland. A recent study has shown that participants felt that the failure to take psychological violence seriously, both by service responders and in legislation was failing them.²³ The absence of

²¹ Para 4.40, <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/justice/dhr-consultation.pdf>

²² Trends in Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland 2004/05 to 2016/17, Annual Bulletin published 12 January 2018, Police Service of Northern Ireland <https://www.psni.police.uk/globalassets/inside-the-psni/our-statistics/domestic-abuse-statistics/domestic-abuse-incidents-and-crimes-in-northern-ireland-2004-05-to-2016-17.pdf>

²³ Intimate Partner Violence in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies, Insights and Lessons from Northern Ireland, Jessica Leigh Doyle and Monica McWilliams, TJI, Ulster University, May 2018

political decision making in government means that Northern Ireland is falling behind in laws and policies that have made a crucial difference to women's lives in the UK and Europe.²⁴

Many services are rationalised in terms of risk. It is often the case that services are preoccupied with physical risk. If there has been no evidence of physical violence then there is sometimes the belief that the victim is not particularly at risk. All services need to understand coercive control and that physical violence is not necessarily the strongest predictor of future risk.

Recommendation:

Legislation on coercive control should be introduced in Northern Ireland without delay.

All those involved in the DHR process including the Chair, panel membership and SOF must have an understanding of coercive control and take it seriously.

Some of the situations in which a domestic homicide can take place are very complex. In some cases the victim and/or the perpetrator may have addictions and/or mental health issues. It will be important that the agencies involved in the DHR process treat these cases with the same importance and sensitivity as any other case. These people do not deserve to be written off due to the circumstances of their lives.

"If they have an alcohol/drug addiction they feel judged like it's their fault."

- Participant in Consultation Exercise

We are firmly of the view, as previously stated, that there is an important role for the voluntary and community sector in the DHR process. However many voluntary and community organisations are struggling with limited resources and expected to do more for less. They have extremely vital contributions to

²⁴ Ibid

make and provide an important challenge function in this process. In order that their participation be effective funding must be provided to support their involvement. This would enable voluntary and community groups to properly engage with the process without having to worry about where the resources will come from.

We suggest that it will not be possible to allow for anonymity in this process even if names are not used in reports. Northern Ireland is a small place and given the small number of these tragedies it will be impossible to ensure that victims and their families will not be identified. Further consideration should be given to offering anonymity to witnesses and participants to encourage buy-in. For example, a Chair or Panel may wish to speak to a former partner of the perpetrator to get insight into their behaviour. However they may be reluctant to take part unless they can do so anonymously.

4. Conclusion

The introduction of DHRs has the potential to change the conversation around domestic violence in Northern Ireland. If properly implemented and progressed DHRs could save people's lives.

There is a need to move away from the long held notion that domestic violence is a private or family matter. That is why work on awareness raising on domestic violence is so important. Greater publicity around these issues makes it easier for domestic violence to be brought out into the open and could encourage more people to report incidents.

DHR reports could help to raise awareness and educate people around what happens in domestic abuse cases. They could contribute to changing the culture around domestic violence and how victim's stories are told.

The voice of the victim will be incredibly powerful as part of the DHR process and must be at the centre of all its work and actions. Put simply the victim

must matter to all those involved so that the outcomes of a DHR can truly make a difference in the future.

The voluntary and community sector has much to contribute to the DHR process in terms of knowledge, expertise and challenge to the statutory sector. This input must be valued and funded to ensure effective participation.

Changes to funding for voluntary and community groups and the implications of Brexit and Welfare Reform are worrying. There is a need to ensure that specialised support services for women are maintained and developed and that the needs of women and their children are met. The provision of adequate support services and work to remove the stigma of domestic abuse should ensure that people can access the help available before a case gets to a homicide situation.