

Aberlour's Response to the Scottish Government's Equally Safe consultation on a draft Delivery Plan

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Introduction

As Scotland's largest, solely Scottish Children's charity, Aberlour welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to addressing the entrenched issue of gender based violence within Scottish society, and its ambition to eliminate violence against women and girls. Achieving this will not only require that perpetrators of such violence are dealt with swiftly, robustly and consistently by the criminal justice system, but also that those cultural and societal attitudes which often precipitate occurrences of such violence are challenged at the earliest opportunity. We believe the actions outlined within the Strategy draft delivery plan will go some way to beginning to address those attitudes and behaviours which can lead to gender based violence, however we recognise these actions alone will not achieve the Scottish Government's vision of ensuring a Scotland where women and girls are free from all forms of violence and abuse. Gender based violence is a complex issue that cannot effectively be addressed simply by government policy or legislation. Therefore, the prevention of, and response to, gender based violence requires robust and coordinated collective action across sectors, and throughout wider society, in order to understand and identify how attitudes and behaviours which lead to such violence develop in the first place.

Working in over 40 locations across Scotland, we provide services which support vulnerable children, young people and families across a range of settings. The children, young people and families we support experience vulnerability and multiple challenges on a daily basis as a result of being in care, having complex additional support needs and disabilities, facing issues around dependency, or being exposed to inequality and disadvantage. Through the work of our specialist domestic abuse service, the Bridges Partnership, located in the north of Glasgow and delivered in partnership with Shelter Scotland and Glasgow Housing Association, we see the impact of violence perpetrated against women and children every day. Our work around domestic abuse spans a range of interventions in various contexts, through a multi-agency partnership designed to provide a holistic intervention and support service for mothers and children who have experienced domestic abuse. The targeted emotional, practical and therapeutic support the service provides addresses identified areas of need including: housing advice and support, safety planning, developing supportive networks, parenting capacity, and emotional and physical wellbeing.

PRIORITY 1: Scottish society embraces equality and mutual respect, and rejects all forms of violence against women and girls

We agree with this priority and recognise that violence against women and girls will only be eliminated when Scottish society rejects such actions entirely, through embracing equality and mutual respect between genders throughout society. To do this, we believe existing attitudes which do not embrace such equality and respect must be challenged if they are to be changed.

We are particularly supportive of the action: ***“Support initiatives to raise awareness amongst the wider population of violence against women and girls, including what causes it and how to challenge it.”*** Many such initiatives are delivered by the Third Sector, and we believe the implementation of this action will assist and support more opportunities for greater community engagement by organisations who provide support to families impacted by domestic abuse, like Aberlour, in order to share knowledge, skills and experiences to raise awareness and challenge attitudes – and we believe this is key if we are to change those attitudes and behaviours which can lead to gender based violence.

We are also supportive of the action: ***“Develop a Skills Investment Plan for the Early Learning and Childcare sector which sets out the broad skills set within the workforce, identifies opportunities to widen the skill set and actions which will help tackle gender stereotypes within the sector.”*** Recognising that attitudes regarding gender stereotypes are formed at the earliest stages is crucial if we are to prevent such attitudes developing in the first place. The skills development of the early years’ workforce should include greater awareness and training around attitudes relating to gender stereotypes and how those attitudes begin to develop at early stages in a child’s development. The Scottish Government should consider how this can be supported as they look towards the further development and growth of the early years’ workforce across Scotland as part of the expansion of early learning and childcare. We also feel such workforce skills development should not be limited to those who work in early years’ settings, but should also be extended to teachers and school staff and those who work in additional educational settings.

The Scottish Government also rightly identify that women continue to experience violence in the workplace. We agree that the Scottish Government should look to address the issue of gender based violence in the workplace, and that employers have a key role in supporting victims and tackling perpetrators. We believe to do so employers must be supported to take appropriate action, and greater awareness raising and training should be provided to employers to support this. To this end, much work is already being done by Third Sector organisations providing such awareness raising and delivering training to professionals and practitioners across key partner organisations and agencies, such as housing associations, who are likely to encounter issues of gender based violence and domestic abuse amongst women who access their services. Therefore, a similar initiative aimed at employers utilising the knowledge, skills and experience of those Third Sector organisations already engaged in such awareness raising and training can support the Scottish Government’s approach to addressing the issue of gender based violence in the workplace.

We also believe that such engagement around the issue of gender based violence could help employers to recognise the signs of domestic abuse amongst their own employees, which may lead to increased reporting of incidents.

PRIORITY 2: Women and girls thrive as equal citizens: socially, culturally, economically and politically

We agree with this priority and believe that gender equality across all areas of private and public life is essential to enable women and girls to not only thrive as equal citizens, but also to ensure that social, cultural, economic and political equality translates into universal equality in all respects.

We fully support the action: ***“Take forward a transformative programme to expand free Early Learning and Childcare entitlement to 1,140 hours per year by 2020, including piloting a deposit guarantee scheme for childcare places”***. As we highlighted in our response to the Scottish Government’s proposals to expand early learning and childcare (ELC) provision, we believe the limitations and inflexibility of the current system of free ELC provision can be restricting for families and acts as a disincentive to parents who may otherwise want to work. It is our experience that, in most circumstances, it is the mother who is expected to prioritise childcare over any desire or ambition to work, which simply reinforces the gender inequality experienced by women in such situations. We believe any ELC arrangements supported by the Scottish Government should aim to ensure all parents can not only benefit from their entitlement to funded ELC, but also are enabled and empowered to pursue further or higher education, training and/or employment, if they so desire.

In relation to economic inequality, it is our experience that women fleeing domestic abuse can face significant financial difficulties as a result of leaving their home, as often it is the abusing partner who is the main income provider for the household. This hardship impacts on children particularly, with women finding it difficult to afford clothes for their children, as well as beds, bedding, furniture and white goods. Through our own Aberlour Urgent Assistance Fund we frequently receive requests for assistance to purchase such items, with around 65% of requests relating to financial hardship as a result of fleeing domestic abuse. We believe this represents a financial inequality experienced by women who are victims of domestic abuse that is often not recognised.

PRIORITY 3: Interventions are early and effective, preventing violence and maximising the safety and wellbeing of women, children and young people

We agree with this priority and are committed to early intervention and prevention wherever possible to mitigate the potential for gender based violence in all and any circumstances. Maximising the safety and wellbeing of women, children and young people should always be the paramount concern, and it is correct that the Scottish Government should prioritise that this can be assured through early and effective interventions.

Therefore, in order to ensure the quality and sustainability of services available across Scotland which support the safety and wellbeing of women, children and young people, we agree with the action: ***“Initiate an independent review of how national and local specialist services for women and children experiencing gender based violence are commissioned, and how we can ensure quality and sustainability of service”***. However, we are concerned with the current uncertainty regarding funding and sustainability of services provided by Third Sector organisations presently delivering much of that early intervention and prevention work across Scotland, to address issues around gender based violence and support families who have experienced domestic abuse. We believe that the Scottish Government should look to work more closely with local authorities around the approach to commissioning of such services to ensure national Strategy is connected to local action, as well as to continue to support those existing specialist services who not only provide support to victims but also

undertake significant awareness raising and community engagement work around the issues of gender based violence and domestic abuse. It is also our opinion, that funding models for the provision of such services should include that the necessary resources are available to allow workers in those services to access relevant training and qualifications, such as the Independent Domestic Abuse Advocacy (IDAA) qualification for all workers supporting women and children effected by domestic abuse.

We also support the action: ***“Consider the findings from the National Advocacy Scoping Exercise commissioned to help understand the provision of services in this area with the aim to determine where the provision of services could be extended and improved”***. We know from the initial report findings of the National Advocacy Scoping Exercise that there is still a significant gap in the provision of advocacy services specifically for children and young people who have experienced domestic abuse. Therefore, there is still a need to recognise the distinct impact and effects of domestic abuse on children and young people, including a need for specific advocacy services to protect and promote children and young people’s voices and rights. We also welcome that the National Advocacy Scoping Exercise findings highlighted an understanding of “soft advocacy” and the need for a balance of advocacy and practical and emotional support, for women and children who have experienced domestic abuse. One further consideration as a result of the findings of the National Advocacy Scoping Exercise, and which is illustrative of the experiences of families whom we support who have experience of the criminal justice system, must be how to improve communication between the criminal justice system and advocacy and support services and agencies to prevent inefficiencies and needless delay.

We agree with the action: ***“Ensure that commissioned training resources of local authority housing and homelessness hubs incorporate domestic abuse competence”***. As previously highlighted, there is already work being undertaken by Third Sector organisations which aims to provide local housing associations with the necessary skills and knowledge to identify and address issues of gender based violence and domestic abuse, and we believe this action echoes that approach. However, in order to fulfil the Strategy’s overall vision, and specifically to support the objectives **PRIORITY 3**, then we feel the commissioning of training resources must extend further than simply to housing associations and local authority housing and homelessness teams. Building on the key skills and experience of those organisations already undertaking this work and delivering such training, we believe the Scottish Government should look towards developing multi-agency training for all professionals and practitioners across sectors who may encounter domestic abuse. We believe this will help to ensure each is supported to develop the competence and confidence to recognise and report instances of domestic abuse, as well as to support appropriately and sensitively those women, children and young people who access their services impacted by domestic abuse.

We believe the Scottish Government is right to look to the Safe and Together model of child protection and agree with the action: ***“Share lessons from the Safe and Together model of child protection in a domestic abuse setting, encouraging a common understanding that perpetrators of abuse should be assessed and held accountable on their parenting choices”***. It is our experience that too often perpetrators’ parenting suitability is not a consideration when child contact arrangements are made, as parental rights to contact with their child(ren) supersede other concerns. We believe that there must be more focus on perpetrators’ accountability for their choices and actions, and therefore there

is a greater need for parenting capacity to be assessed in such circumstances. It is also our experience that little consideration is given as to the quality of contact between the perpetrator and their child(ren), and that often contact arrangements are made for the benefit of the perpetrator rather than their child(ren).

“Develop the Scottish Women’s Rights Centre as a model for legal services, consider the currently unmet need for victims of gender based violence and the appropriate model of support for women, children and young people experiencing violence”. We fully support the further development of the Scottish Women’s Rights Centre as a model for legal services. It is our experience that the establishment of the Centre has been a positive and valuable resource, both for practitioners and the women who access our service, at times providing essential legal advice and assistance around legal processes and procedures.

PRIORITY 4: Men desist from all forms of violence against women and girls and perpetrators of such violence receive a robust and effective response

We agree with this priority and ensuring that perpetrators of violence against women and girls are dealt with in the most robust and effective way must be a key focus of this Strategy. We believe the clear message within the Strategy must be that perpetrators of violence against women and girls will be held accountable for their actions, and both the criminal and civil justice systems will ensure that consequences are ***“robust, swift, coordinated and consistent”***. In part, this will require that those weaknesses within the Scottish legal system which currently allow the criminal and civil justice systems to operate in isolation from one another, and fail to deliver that coordination or consistency, subsequently highlighting what is often perceived by victims as a failure of justice, are addressed.

In order to ensure that perpetrators of gender based violence are held accountable for their actions and are dealt with appropriately, we support the action: ***“Encourage victims of gender based violence to report it to the Police”***. It is our experience that women who are victims of domestic abuse often do not identify non-physical abuse and coercive and controlling behaviour as abuse in and of itself. There is often a need to support women who access our service to recognise unhealthy relationships and to understand what is abusive behaviour. Therefore, we feel greater support is required for women in such circumstances to understand and recognise those behaviours which constitute non-physical abuse and coercive control, which would increase the likelihood of reporting of incidents of domestic abuse. We also believe that the introduction of a new criminal offence recognising psychological and emotional abuse and coercive control, as proposed within the Scottish Government’s Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill, which aims to both articulate and apply legal recognition of such behaviour as abusive, will also support women in such circumstances to understand and recognise this behaviour as abuse, as well as perform the important function of educating and informing wider society of what is meant by domestic abuse.

“Review training for all professional within Justice System to ensure there is an understanding of the new offence for those investigating cases, including trauma informed practice for all people who work with women and children”. At present, it is our experience that those within the Justice System do not always have an informed understanding of the impact and effects of domestic abuse, particularly on children. We support this action and believe any training for professionals within the

justice system should include an awareness and understanding of the impact and effects of historical levels of abuse and the resulting trauma. We believe that there needs to be a specific focus on training on the impact of domestic abuse on children for children's panel members, as in our experience panel members often are not fully aware of the continuing effects of historical abuse or how that abuse can be continued through contact with the perpetrating parent.

Cross-cutting Actions

We support the cross-cutting actions proposed within the Strategy draft delivery plan, and in particular welcome the clear focus on undertaking explicit actions aimed at ensuring children and young people who are exposed to, or at risk of harm through, violence are better supported.

We support the action: ***“Take forward a programme of action to ensure that vulnerable children (including those who have experienced domestic abuse) get access to the right help at the right time.”*** In order to achieve this, we believe the further development and provision of specialist advocacy and support services for children and young people who have experienced domestic abuse is essential, to ensure children and young people's voices are heard and their rights protected – as highlighted by the findings of the National Advocacy Scoping Exercise. Again, we believe the Scottish Government should look towards the work being done across the Third Sector by organisations who support children and young people in such circumstances, and who often provide “soft advocacy” (a combination of advocacy and practical and emotional support) despite not being dedicated advocacy services.

We are broadly supportive of the action: ***“Ensure the Domestic Abuse Bill effectively acknowledges the impact that domestic abuse can have on children through the operation of a statutory aggravation to the new offence of domestic abuse”***. We understand the complexity of introducing legislation which identifies and recognises children and young people equally as victims of domestic abuse. We have worked alongside our partner organisation across the children's sector to consult with the Scottish Government to try to ensure that any provision within the Bill intended on further protecting children and young people from the effects of domestic abuse is as robust as possible. We believe that the recognition of the impact of domestic abuse within the Bill does represent progress in relation to the current understanding within the criminal justice system of what the effects of such abusive behaviours are on children and young people. Such progress brings the criminal justice system closer to the recognition and understanding of the impact and effects of domestic abuse on children and young people, as being distinct from the impact and effects of other forms of child abuse, within the wider policy context in Scotland. Nonetheless, we believe there is still a gap in in how the criminal justice system understands children and young people's rights in the context of domestic abuse, and where children and young people are seen equally as victims in circumstances where they have experienced or been exposed to domestic abuse, as well as being understood equally to be the victims of abusive behaviours such as coercive control. However, we understand the difficulty in fully incorporating such an offence against children specifically within this Bill, and recognise that further legislative developments, such as an offence of domestic abuse against children, will be needed to address this gap in the future.

We fully support the action: ***“Support a pilot programme of participation with affected groups of women, children and young people”***. We recognise the importance of supporting participation of affected groups of women, children and young people to ensure they can meaningfully inform and influence the development and implementation of the Scottish Government’s Strategy. We are pleased to be able to support the pilot programme of participation, and are actively working with our partners across the children’s sector to ensure the children and young people we support through our own services who have experience of gender based violence and domestic abuse are supported to participate. It is essential that those with lived experience of the issues of gender based violence and domestic abuse are supported to inform and influence how the Strategy is implemented, as those women, children and young people, more than anyone else, understand the impact and effects of that violence and abuse.

Performance Framework and Indicators

We agree broadly with the Strategy Performance Framework and Indicators, but we do feel the indicators and outcomes could be more clearly identified as to how they link to each individual priority and action contained within.

Questions for Groups & Organisations

We see the impact of domestic abuse on families from the north of Glasgow every day through the work of our Bridges Partnership service, supporting mothers and their children who have experienced domestic abuse, by providing both therapeutic emotional support and practical housing support. Continuing to provide such specialist support through our service will ensure those women and children’s wider wellbeing needs and safety needs are met. Through representing and reflecting the experiences of the families we support, we can support the development and implementation of the Strategy delivery plan in meeting those identified short, medium and long-term outcomes. In addition, continuing the community engagement work through our own service, providing domestic abuse awareness raising and training to community groups, agencies and organisations across Glasgow, can also support the delivery plan’s short, medium and long-term outcomes in relation to addressing societal and cultural attitudes to violence against women and girls.

We do note that a significant number of the proposed actions outlined within the Strategy draft delivery plan are to be undertaken by the Scottish Government themselves. We believe that other organisations are well placed to develop and implement some of those proposed actions, and the Scottish Government should look to developing further links and partnerships with those organisations to that end, which we believe will support greater capacity in working to achieve the Strategy’s identified outcomes.

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