

## Summary

The Government's draft bill on Domestic Abuse has been widely welcomed by organizations representing survivors of Domestic Abuse and those providing support services. The Bill is the culmination of many months of work and consultation and has been said by the sector to be a 'once in a generation opportunity to address domestic violence' and having 'the potential to create a step change in the national response'.

We welcome that during our deliberations the Government announced that the Bill will also introduce a statutory requirement for local authorities to provide accommodation for survivors of domestic abuse. We believe this is a profoundly important measure that will help ensure the Bill is the groundbreaking change that all sides wish it to be.

There is a temptation that this Bill be used to address a range of other issues that are linked to Domestic Abuse. This is a temptation that the committee has tried to resist to help ensure this vital legislation has the best opportunity possible of making it onto the statute books. In particular the committee felt strongly that this Bill should not be used to change the law on abortion in Northern Ireland and this view was reflected in the evidence that we received.

During our deliberations we became conscious of the need for Ministers to involve a wide variety of Government Departments and other public sector organizations to deliver successfully and have come to the conclusion that a Cabinet Office Minister lead on implementing the Government strategy to combat domestic abuse would help break free from any residual silo thinking. A case in point is the need to do more to promote prevention and early intervention to tackle the root causes of domestic abuse. It should be noted that there is much to be learnt from the experience in Wales in terms of guidance, training and multi-agency working and we urge Ministers to work cooperatively cross border with devolved administrations.

The committee has made detailed and wide-ranging recommendations that affect many aspects of the Bill, drawing from the excellent evidence we have received including oral evidence from those who have survived domestic abuse themselves. Specific recommendations include the need to recognize the gendered nature of domestic abuse in the Bill's definition to help ensure services are correctly procured and a complete review of how the role of Commissioners should be established to ensure their future credibility and usefulness.

Whilst there is much that is good in the draft bill the Committee feels very strongly that it is currently also a missed opportunity to address the needs of migrant women who have no recourse to public funds. We acknowledge the potential for abuse of any such support by individuals simply seeking to stay in the UK but this cannot be allowed to stop action to help this most vulnerable group of individuals and we recommend the Government consult on the most effective criteria to ensure such a measure reaches the victims it is designed to support.

The other issue on which the Bill is silent is the plight of children who are victims of domestic abuse. The committee has made important recommendations which would ensure the needs of children are better recognized in law.

We welcome that the Government views this draft bill as a way in which they can ratify the Istanbul Convention and urge Ministers to take up our recommendations that are focused on achieving that aim.

Throughout our deliberations we have been increasingly aware of the need for the implementation of this Bill to be integrated into policies on violence against women and girls to reflect the realities of the experiences of victims. This we believe strongly has to be achieved without excluding men, boys, trans and non-binary people from the protection of domestic abuse legislation and services for survivors.