



Llinell Gymorth Camdriniaeth yn y Cartref
a Thrais Rhywiol Cymru Gyfan
All Wales Domestic Abuse and Sexual
Violence Helpline
0808 80 10 800




Cymorth i Ferched Cymru
Welsh Women's Aid
Rhoi Merched a Phlant yn Gyntaf
Putting Women & Children First

HB 54

National Assembly for Wales

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Housing (Wales) Bill : Stage 1

Response from : Welsh Women's Aid

17th January 2014

Committee Clerk
Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff
CF99 1NA

Dear Committee Clerk,

RE: Welsh Women's Aid evidence to the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee inquiry into the general principles of The Housing (Wales) Bill

Welsh Women's Aid welcomes the core principles of the Housing (Wales) Bill and thanks the committee for the opportunity to contribute evidence to its inquiry.

Welsh Women's Aid (WWA) welcome the proactive initiatives been taken by The Welsh Government to reform the housing sector in Wales. Access to safe and quality housing is essential to improving quality of life for all. However, there are a number of considerations WWA feel it is important to discuss further.

Domestic abuse and violence against women affect one in four women during their lifetimes, and have a wide ranging and devastating impact on the lives of women and children in Wales, often hidden from sight behind closed doors.

Please find below a brief outline of Welsh Women's Aid and our evidence on relevant areas of the Bill for your consideration.

Yours Sincerely,

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Welsh Women's Aid evidence to the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee inquiry into the general principles of The Housing (Wales) Bill

1. About Welsh Women's Aid

1. Welsh Women's Aid (WWA) is one of four UK Women's Aid Federations and was founded in 1978 to campaign and lobby for improvements in public policy and government legislation in relation to women and children experiencing domestic abuse in Wales. WWA is the national umbrella organisation for autonomous Women's Aid groups and other organisations providing support to those affected by domestic abuse across Wales. The unique relationship between WWA and our member groups forms the Women's Aid Movement in Wales, delivering a combined total of 262 refuge bed spaces, more than 300 floating support bed spaces and a variety of community-based domestic abuse services.
2. Our member groups provide emergency temporary accommodation, outreach and floating support, information and practical support on legal issues, benefits, housing, children's issues and other matters related to the experience of domestic abuse. In 2011/12, Women's Aid groups across Wales supported nearly 2000 women and over 1500 children and young people.
3. As the national umbrella organisation, WWA provides infrastructure support to our network of member groups, and informs national policy on their behalf. WWA manages the All Wales Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Helpline and the Children Matter project, which delivers regional preventative programmes and support services to children and young people. WWA is also a national Open College Network centre and delivers accredited qualifications to member groups and external agencies.

2. Homelessness

1. Priority need (3.35)
Welsh Women's Aid thanks The Welsh Government for ongoing recognition of the needs of those fleeing domestic abuse and keeping this as a priority need group within the legislation. However, WWA does hold concerns in relation to the process of addressing potential homelessness through local connection testing. WWA appreciates there needs to be a process for allocating homes fairly, but for victims of domestic abuse, to be rehoused within the same local authority because of local connection may not be a safe option. WWA would like to explore the option of victims of domestic abuse to be exempt from this process to ensure their safety is kept as an absolute priority.
2. WWA are aware of many problems when trying to locate move-on accommodation for women who have resided in refuge and have come to the point they are able to move on to independent living. This can be due to the local connection question during the re-housing process where they are subject to long waiting lists if they are not from the local authority in question. This can cause a woman to remain in refuge for longer,

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keeping her from independent living and blocking a refuge bed space for someone who may need it as a matter of urgency.

3. Use of private rented sector to meet housing need (3.46)
WWA agrees that the private rented sector could be an effective tool to reducing homelessness. However, WWA recognizes that some people may prefer the option of Local Authority or Housing Association Housing - not only for a more secure tenure option but for more support with their tenancy. WWA is aware of a number of circumstances where an individual or family would feel more secure in social housing rather than the private rented sector (PRS) due to the knowledge within the social housing sector and the commitment they have made to supporting people with their tenancies.
4. Welfare reform changes have had a detrimental effect on many people WWA encounters during its work, including their ability to manage tenancies and pay rent. Many Housing Associations (HA) are proactively looking to support tenants with rent arrears and believe eviction to be a last resort. HA's have a working knowledge of support schemes for tenants and are trained to sign post people to services. PRS landlords do not have this wealth of knowledge, and are not able to manage rent arrears to any standard due to the effect it will have on their own income. WWA is concerned that if local authorities are able to discharge homelessness duty to the PRS it could exacerbate homelessness in many circumstances.

3. Amendments to priority need for Prison leavers (4.21)

1. WWA remains concerned about the amendments relating to prison leavers and access to housing. It would be important to see what Local Authorities would accept as 'demonstration of vulnerability' to secure priority housing. By definition being homeless is vulnerability without exploring the other issues including mental health that could leave them at risk if not housed appropriately.
2. It is still important to note that if prison leavers are removed from the priority need category, there is an increasing pressure on family or friends to rehouse them; this could affect the household universal credit claims or put them at risk of the housing benefit breaches in terms of bedroom numbers if housing a prison leaver of working age. In the context of domestic abuse, pressure to re-house could have dangerous consequences if a woman is pressured into allowing an abusive partner to return to her home. WWA urge the committee to reconsider this amendment in order to ensure the safety of individuals is kept paramount.

4. Gypsy and Traveller sites

1. WWA supports the development of safe and accessible sites for the Gypsy and Traveller movement and understands the importance of enabling access to services including health and education. However, there are a number of factors we believe need to be considered whilst developing this strategy.
2. Although there is no reliable statistics around the Gypsy Traveller movement, there is anecdotal evidence that women within the movement are disproportionately affected by abuse within the home. A 2007 study in Wrexham found that 61% of English Gypsy women and 81% of married Irish Traveller Women interviewed had



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experienced direct domestic abuse.¹ Anecdotal evidence also suggests that this domestic abuse particularly occurs when women become economically or politically active outside of the house hold while the male roles becomes more difficult to sustain, challenging the deep rooted gender roles within Gypsy and Traveller communities.²

3. Therefore, integrating the movements into non-Gypsy/Traveller society through housing may on one hand help to address domestic abuse - with more access to services and support, but it is crucial that housing services, health services and education are aware of the traditional gender roles and the safety issues for these women where social transition occurs. This should ideally include training for local authority staff on the issues that face the Gypsy Traveller movement, including domestic abuse and violence against women, illiteracy issues (which may be a barrier to accessing services), the pressure on women and girls to conform to gender roles and how this may affect their access to education, and what services need to develop to support women who may leave their community for safety reasons.

5. Conclusion

1. The Housing (Wales) Bill recognises many changes fundamental to improving lives in Wales and WWA remain encouraged by The Welsh Government's continued commitment to tackling these often complex issues. The need for quality housing is essential to ensure quality of life and safety for those who have experienced domestic abuse and we are encouraged that the Bill recognises the role all sectors have to play in improving the landscape of housing provision for society as a whole. However, WWA do still believe that parts of the Bill need consideration and due regard for the safety implications we have explained in the paragraphs above. We would like to thank the committee again for the opportunity to contribute evidence to this inquiry.

For further information please contact Becky Jones; beckyjones@welshwomensaid.org.uk

¹ Roberts, A. Adkins, J. Lewis, H & Wilkinson (2007) *Community Practitioners' & Health Visitors' Association (CPHVA) Annual Conference*. 'Coronary Heart disease and mental health in gypsy travelers in Wrexham: Redressing the balance' Torquay, 31 October – 2 November 2007.

² EHRC, (2009) 'Inequalities Experienced by Gypsy and Traveller Young Women', YWCA briefing, p. 6.