

***Check against delivery**

Joint Committee on Gender Equality re the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly regarding Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

Opening Statement for Minister McEntee

I would like to thank the Joint Committee on Gender Equality for the opportunity to discuss the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly regarding domestic, sexual and gender-based violence.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Chairperson of the Assembly Dr Catherine Day and the other members of the Assembly for their dedication to, and hard work on, this important topic.

I very much welcome the Citizen's Assembly examination of these critical areas of life and policy. As you know it is an area of work which I and my colleagues in Government have identified as a priority and we welcome the committee's interest in advancing these recommendations.

It should be underlined that the majority of the recommendations are aligned to work being carried out across Departments and in particular, by my Department. Any recommendations that are not already captured by our ongoing work will of course be considered on their own merits.

Some of the work which is aligned to the recommendations made by the Assembly includes:

- The audit of how responsibility for DSGBV is segmented across different government agencies, which was published in July 2021;
- The development of the third national strategy to address DSGBV which I will submit to Government in the coming weeks;
- The review of the provision of accommodation for victims of domestic violence which was undertaken by Tusla and published in February which took into consideration both the needs of victims and the types of accommodation that is required.

In addition, as part of the implementation of 'Supporting a Victim's Journey' - my plan to Help Victims and Vulnerable Witnesses in Sexual Violence;

- We worked with our NGO partners and others to map the journey faced by individual victims to identify issues and support needs not met, following which my Department conducted a review of the grant schemes application in order to identify and address any gaps in services. On foot of the outcome of this work I provided additional funding of €445,000 to organisations in 2021 to fill the gaps identified.
- The mapping exercise identified situations in which there are parallel civil and criminal proceedings, and possibly child protection proceedings, as having the potential to further traumatise victims and to give opportunities for perpetrators to seek to exercise coercive control. My Department is working with key NGOs to identify practical solutions based on international best practice to address these issues.
- Work is underway to develop specific training for all of the key personnel, including those in the legal profession that a victim may come into contact with during their journey throughout the criminal justice system.
- The introduction of Preliminary trial hearings, which will reduce delay and allow for sensitive legal issues to be dealt with before the trial starts.
- In March my Department held its inaugural Victims' Forum for state, social and community groups. Findings from these forums will assist my Department in developing further supports for victims.

Improving the system for victims, particularly for vulnerable victims, is a key priority for me and my Department.

As part of the reforms being introduced under 'Supporting a Victim's Journey', the victim will be entitled to their own, dedicated legal advice and support throughout the process.

The major reforms we are driving will, collectively, ensure we have a criminal justice system that places victims at its centre and removes the fear that many victims have of coming forward to report what happened to them. A system that supports, informs and empowers vulnerable victims at every point.

I am also currently leading work on a new whole of Government strategy to combat domestic, sexual and gender-based violence which will further advance the recommendations made by the Assembly. This new plan will have a particular focus on prevention, and on ensuring victims are better supported. It will set an overall goal of zero tolerance in our society of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence.

Among the objectives in the new national strategy to combat DSGBV that are in line with the assembly recommendations are;

- Ensuring the availability of accessible quality specialist and community based DSGBV services across the state so that all people who experience DSGBV have access to integrated services; and
- Ensuring a victim/survivor centred wraparound service through the creation of clear integrated local pathways (building on the mapping of the victim/survivor journey work) for adults and child (female and male) victims/ survivors to access the DV and SV information, services and supports.

The strategy has been developed in partnership with the sector to ensure it is targeted, comprehensive and effective in achieving all of the goals set out.

I am finalising the strategy for submission to government in light of the public and sectoral consultations that formed part its development. I am also working on finalising an accompanying action plan for the rest of this year and next which will set out how each of the aims of the strategy will be achieved, which Departments and agencies are responsible for them, and the timeframe for delivery, so that it is targeted, ambitious and deliverable.

I intend to bring both the finalised strategy and the action plan to Government in the coming weeks.

Furthermore, it is my goal that everyone who needs a refuge space will get one and I am deeply committed to working with partners in the sector and with Government colleagues to achieve that.

In February Minister O’Gorman and I published the review by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, of accommodation for victims of domestic violence.

The review highlights gaps in geographical coverage and inadequate provision of safe accommodation and it provides a list of priority areas where additional services would address the most immediate need.

I fully acknowledge the need to dramatically increase the provision of refuges across the country, and key to this will be ensuring organisations can access funding.

To this end I have established a high level Inter-Departmental Group to review the current system for the provision of refuge spaces and to identify changes that can be made to deliver additional spaces as effectively as possible.

The timelines for delivery of refuge places, as well as further targets for nationwide delivery of refuge accommodation, will be outlined in the third national strategy and further detail will be contained in the accompanying action plan.

Committee members may also be aware that the Government will, for the first time, establish in law a national agency tasked with responsibility for domestic, sexual and gender based violence.

The agency will be responsible for overseeing all of the actions set out in the third national strategy and for delivering domestic violence services.

It will bring together the expertise that already exists within my Department and TUSLA and will report to me as Minister for Justice.

Bringing the responsibility for policy and service delivery together under one Ministry, establishing the Agency in law, and introducing oversight from the Department of the Taoiseach demonstrates our recognition of the need to have a dedicated and expert focused approach to this work.

It demonstrates our commitment to working together to reach our goal of zero tolerance and to ensuring the coherent delivery of the best possible DSGBV services and supports throughout the country.

To conclude I want to emphasise that I am committed to the challenge of preventing and responding to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence.

I acknowledge that whilst we have achieved a lot in this area there is still much work that needs to be done.

Zero tolerance of all forms of DSGBV is an ambitious but necessary goal, by continuing to work together I am confident we can achieve that. I very much look forward to continuing to work with the committee to progress the recommendations of the Assembly.