



## **Saoirse Domestic Violence Services Submission to the Joint Committee on Justice on**

### **“Women’s shelters / domestic abuse refuges”**

#### **Opening Statement – Presentation to Committee**

**3<sup>rd</sup> November 2021**

Domestic violence occurs in all walks of life - all cultures, backgrounds, ages and genders, and Irish society is no different. That is because perpetrators of domestic violence come from all walks of life regardless of their race, culture, age, profession or financial standing. I have worked with women and children suffering domestic violence for 20 years and while every person’s experience of the violence is individual and personal to them, including what forms the violence took or for how long they endured it, what unites them is that it is never their fault.

Domestic violence is the abuse of power over another person in an intimate or close family relationship, by the perpetrator, to maintain absolute control, in every way. It takes many forms from physical to psychological, financial to sexual and also coercive control. Unfortunately myths like, alcohol and drugs cause domestic violence, that it is an anger management issue or it is a private matter between a couple, are still believed.

At Saoirse Domestic Violence Services, we provide safe, supportive refuge accommodation for women and children across two refuges and two safe houses in South West Dublin. We also provide a 24 hour helpline and an expansive Outreach support service reaching communities across south / south west Dublin and West Wicklow. We have dedicated Childcare workers in both refuges offering support, play space and programmes for resident children who have witnessed or experienced domestic violence, as well as space to just be children.

Since opening Tallaght Refuge 16 years ago, we have not had the space to accommodate all the requests for refuge. This unfortunately is the same experience in every refuge across Ireland – there just are not enough spaces. In 2020, we had to turn away 369 requests for refuge from women and children fleeing for their lives. That equates to us not being able to offer safe shelter to 78% of the requests in that year alone and these figures sadly reflect our experience for the past 16 years.

Dublin with a population of approx. 1.4 million, has four refuges open currently. Other counties like Kilkenny, Cork and Galway have one refuge in the whole county. Other counties have no refuge. The oldest purpose built refuge in Ireland, Rathmines Refuge has been shut for 5 years, leaving a huge void of refuge accommodation in the wider Dublin city area.

Every person has been touched by the Covid-19 pandemic and none more so than survivors of domestic violence. The Shadow Pandemic refers to the escalation of the violence as a consequence of families being locked-down with perpetrators during restrictions. They were unable to make a call to family, friends, a support service or even the Gardaí, as their every move was being monitored. Children out of school due to Covid-19, living in abuse 24/7, with no escape from the environment for even short periods, or to get support from a grandparent or teacher, has been devastating to them.

Operation Faoiseamh and the Department of Justice's Awareness Raising Programme *Still Here* were very welcome and offered increased support and protection to victims during the pandemic, as well as raising public awareness of domestic violence. We are keen that such operations continue and that real commitment across government departments to help and protect families, is realised.

**Allison Graham**

**Chief Executive Officer**

**Saoirse Domestic Violence Services**