

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM DHLÍ AGUS CEART

JOINT COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE

Dé Céadaoin, 3 Samhain 2021

Wednesday, 3 November 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 5.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 5.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Jennifer Carroll MacNeill,	Robbie Gallagher,
Patrick Costello,	Lynn Ruane,
Michael Creed,	Barry Ward.
Pa Daly,	
Martin Kenny,	
Thomas Pringle,	
Niamh Smyth.	

I láthair / In attendance: Deputies Réada Cronin, Marian Harkin, Jennifer Murnane O'Connor, Paul Murphy, Patricia Ryan and Pauline Tully.

Teachta / Deputy James Lawless sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Business of Joint Committee

The joint committee met in private session at 4 p.m., suspended at 4.34 p.m. and went into public session at 5.38 p.m.

Women's Shelters and Domestic Abuse Refuges: Discussion

Chairman: Everyone is very welcome. There are several non-members present as well as members. We look forward to hearing their views. I remind members and witnesses to turn off their mobile phones or put them in flight mode. While they might not make noise they can still interfere with the sound recording, which will not become apparent until after the meeting.

The purpose of today's meeting is to have an engagement with a number of stakeholders who have made written submissions on the topic of women's shelters and domestic abuse refuges. All witnesses are appearing virtually from a location outside Leinster House and all Members are in Leinster House. I welcome our witnesses: Ms Mary McDermott, CEO of Safe Ireland; Ms Lisa Marmion, services development manager at Safe Ireland; Ms Allison Graham, CEO of Saoirse Domestic Violence Services; Ms Kathrina Bentley, CEO of Men's Aid; and Ms Christina Sherlock, head of strategic communications and fundraising at Women's Aid. The witnesses are all welcome. As usual, we also have an observer from the Department of Justice, Mr. Ben Ryan, assistant secretary, attending the committee. He is also very welcome.

Turning to a little bit of housekeeping, I ask the witnesses connecting to the meeting remotely to unmute their device when they are speaking so we can hear them, but then to re-mute their microphone when they are not speaking to ensure that we do not have any interference in the background. I ask the members participating remotely to note that point as well. I think everyone can hear me okay and we are all hooked up.

Another piece of housekeeping involves a note on parliamentary privilege, but it has implications for what can and cannot be said and what should and should not be said. All witnesses are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not criticise or make charges against a person or entity by name or in such a manner as to make him, her or it identifiable, or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of the person or entity not represented in the room. Therefore, if their statements are potentially defamatory in regard to an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks. I request everyone to note that point as good order. For witnesses attending remotely, and some witnesses of necessity are participating from outside the precincts of Leinster House, as is the norm these days, I ask them to note that there are potentially some limitations to the parliamentary privilege they will enjoy. If they were in a position to be physically present, they would have a higher degree of immunity. I ask that that point be noted because if there was a challenge in respect of something said by people off-site, they might not enjoy the same full immunity as if they were present here in the building. There is not much we can do about that situation. We are where we are, as the saying goes. Members are advised similarly, although I understand they are on the campus and enjoy absolute privilege, at least when they are on the campus.

The format of the meeting is that I will invite a representative from each of the participating organisations to make an opening statement for three minutes. Organisations with more than

one speaker can divide the time between them, but it is three minutes per organisation. Once the opening statements have been delivered, I will then call the members of the committee and the other members present to put their questions. I will take members in the order they indicate. For everybody's benefit, we have a system in this committee where we have a first round of engagement with the normal members of the committee for seven minutes. Those seven minutes include time for the questions and the responses. Therefore, if members choose to have a long preamble and a short time for a response, that is fine and it is their decision. Equally, though, some members choose to ask short snappy questions and then leave more time for responses, and perhaps some to and fro afterwards. The seven-minute allocation includes the questions and the answers, however. When we have completed the first round of questioning with the members of the committee, I will then invite non-members to come in. The protocol is that they will also have seven minutes for their questions and answers. Once that process is complete, we will then take a second round of questions, if any remain. The second round will be a little bit shorter, at four minutes for each participant. That is how we do it. I hope it makes sense. It is intended to enable equal time to all and it is good housekeeping.

I will call a representative of each organisation now to deliver an opening statement. I call Ms McDermott to lead us off. She has three minutes.

Ms Mary McDermott: Safe Ireland is a co-ordinating body for 38 independent front-line domestic violence services across the country, 20 of which operate 21 staffed refuges, while others operate safe and transitional housing. All members of Safe Ireland provide a front-line specialist response to women and children who experience coercive control and abuse. Our single call today is for a fully-integrated and resourced Government response to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence.

We thank the committee for the invitation to present on the pressing issue of emergency accommodation for those experiencing violence and control. We commend the committee's initiative and we hope that the evidence we present to the members will also be made available to their colleagues on the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage. We wrote this submission on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence within the terms of reference set out by the committee. Therefore, our starting point is a direct statement that Ireland's domestic violence response infrastructure, and in particular its accommodation infrastructure, is critically deficient. These deficiencies place women and children at very real risk of grievous trauma, injury or fatality. We have set out the wider context within which emergency accommodation must be analysed and where solutions must be developed. All inquiry must attend to the absolute necessity for wraparound services to be integral to responses at every point of a woman's journey to freedom. The limitations of examining emergency accommodation itself in isolation from a whole housing approach cannot be overstated. An important qualification here is that we still await the publication of the Tusla audit of domestic violence accommodation, which was due for release in the first quarter of 2021. Safe Ireland and our member organisations worked closely with Tusla in that process over two years, and we are eager to respond to the audit's findings.

While the collection of data on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is an ongoing problem at a national level, some statistics may help to frame this large-scale social problem. In the context of contact with front-line services between March and December 2020, there were more than 57,000 calls to local and national helplines. During this time, on average each month more than 2,000 women and 500 children sought support, 6,000 new women made contact and 216 requests were made for emergency accommodation. Between March and August 2020

alone, there were 1,351 unmet requests for refuge. Without the introduction of the innovative domestic violence rent supplement, which Safe Ireland members lobbied for, and without the corporate assistance of Airbnb, which made hotel beds available for use as refuge, outcomes for women and children would have been much more serious.

Figures relevant to this committee may also help to frame this issue. In 2020, a total of 23,785 incidents were reported to An Garda Síochána, with 4,000 breaches of protective orders recorded. It is the case that the first line of support for women and children experiencing domestic abuse must be immediate access to protective services to prevent further harm. At a minimum, this must also include immediate direction to safe supported accommodation, appropriate information, access to judicial protection and access to therapeutic supports, all of which are provided by Safe Ireland member organisations across the country. Our pre-budget submission called for increases in core funding for front-line wraparound support services, for capital investment in refuges, for safe-at-home sanctuary schemes and for safe and transitional housing.

We again reiterate our primary call for a truly integrated strategy for domestic, sexual and gender-based violence in Ireland and for the responsibility for national policy and services to be housed within one Ministry. I and Ms Marmion will be happy to take questions, and if the committee members have any queries which require further clarification, we will respond to them in writing within the week. I thank the committee.

Chairman: I thank Ms McDermott for her statement and her offer to respond in a timely fashion if there are follow-up queries. That is appreciated. I call Ms Graham, who also has three minutes to make her opening remarks.

Ms Alison Graham: I thank the committee for inviting me to speak on this topic.

Saoirse Domestic Violence Services is based in south-west Dublin. Domestic violence occurs in all walks of life, in all cultures, backgrounds, ages and genders, and Irish society is no different. That is because the perpetrators of domestic violence also come from all walks of life, regardless of race, culture, age, profession or financial standing. I have worked in this sector with women and children suffering domestic violence for more than 20 years, and while the experience of domestic violence may be individual and personal, what unites all people who have experienced it is that it is never their fault. Domestic violence is the abuse of power over another person in an intimate or close family relationship to maintain absolute control by the perpetrator. It takes many forms, and, unfortunately, myths such as alcohol and drugs contributing to domestic violence, that it is an anger management issue or that it is a private matter between a couple are too often still believed.

Saoirse Domestic Violence Services provides safe supportive refuge accommodation for women and children across two refuges and two safe houses in the south-west Dublin area. We also provide a 24-hour helpline and expansive outreach support services that reach communities across south and south-west Dublin, and into west Wicklow. We have a dedicated childcare workers in both refuges that offers support and programmes for resident children who have witnessed or experienced domestic violence as well as a space to just be children.

Since opening a refuge in Tallaght 16 years ago we have been unable to accommodate all of the requests for refuge. Unfortunately, every refuge in this country shares our experience as there are not enough spaces. In 2020, we turned away 369 requests for refuge from women and children. That equates to us not being able to provide safe shelter to 78% of the requests that

we received. Sadly, these figures reflect our experience for the 16 years that we have been open.

Even though Dublin city has a population of approximately 1.4 million, it has four refuges that are currently open currently and offer 31 spaces. Other counties such as Kilkenny, Cork and Galway have one refuge while some counties have none. The oldest purpose-built refuge in Ireland is in Rathmines but it has been shut for five years and has left a huge void in refuge accommodation in the wider Dublin city area.

Every person has been touched by the Covid-19 pandemic and none more so than the survivors of domestic violence. The shadow pandemic refers to the escalation of violence as a consequence of families being locked down with perpetrators during restrictions. Victims were unable to make a call to family, friends, a support service or even the Garda as their every move was monitored. Children were out of school due to Covid-19 so had to live 24-7 in an environment with no escape for even short periods or to get support from a grandparent or teacher, which has had devastating effects. The pandemic may be moving along but, unfortunately, the issue of domestic violence has not and will not. In addition, the escalation of the rate of domestic violence is not about to de-escalate even if the pandemic were to pass.

Operation Faoiseamh and the awareness raising programme, *Still Here*, by the Department of Justice are very welcome. They offered increased support and protection to victims during the pandemic and raised much-needed public awareness of domestic violence. We are keen that such operations continue and that real commitment across Departments to help and protect families is realised.

As Ms McDermott commented, we await the completion of the accommodation review by Tusla in terms of the provision of domestic violence and the future plan for same because the State has under met needs in terms of its *per capita* expenditure that should exist. I welcome any questions from Members and thank the committee for the invitation to make a presentation.

Ms Kathrina Bentley: I thank the committee for giving Men's Aid the opportunity to make a presentation. Men's Aid is delighted to represent the voice of men and their families on the topic of women's shelters and domestic abuse refuges.

Men's Aid is dedicated to supporting students, men, dads and their families who experience domestic violence. Our mission is to destigmatise intimate partner violence, raise awareness of the trauma that affects men and provide a victim-centric approach. As a front-line response service that actively engages with victims, Men's Aid is committed to supporting victims together with all stakeholders and working collaboratively towards the day that every citizen can enjoy a life free from the threat of partner violence. Our work is underpinned by an equality and human rights approach that has empathy and inclusion at its centre.

The current situation is as follows: in 2020, we supported more than 5,000 contacts; in 2021, we expect to support 8,000 contacts, which is a 32% increase; in quarter 1 of this year, we supported men who represented 24 nationalities; Government research from 2005 showed that 95% of the abuse experienced by men is not reported to the Garda so the under-reporting of domestic violence is a huge concern and highlights how difficult it is for men to report an abusive partner; and recent research by the Office of National Statistics in the UK presents that one in three victims of domestic violence is male.

The men who call our helpline range from in age from 18 to 88. They are schoolgoers, tradesmen, professionals, unemployed men, men from the LGBTQI+ community, farmers, men

with disabilities, men from the Roma and Traveller communities, men living on the margins, men in uniform, etc. Men in Ireland are aware that there are no refuge options so do not usually ask about a refuge when they call our helpline. However, to date this year, we have had 30 requests for a safe bed.

Men's Aid made a submission, including recommendations to the project called the provision of accommodation for victims of domestic violence that was led by Tusla. So far this year we have attended more than 14 meetings at Government level yet, despite that, vulnerable male victims appeared invisible. Following considerable engagement with Tusla, the Department of Justice and the office of the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, on 22 October we received confirmation from the Minister that addressed all of the concerns that we raised, and acknowledged that there is a need to provide shelter and support for men in domestic violence situations.

The Dublin Simon Community produced its annual report a few weeks ago. The report shows that two thirds of the homeless people who used its services are single men. Together with the disclosures that we hear from men who are sleeping in their cars, vans and tents, and those with suicide ideation, we recognise the importance and urgency of providing accommodation for men who must flee an abusive relationship.

We wish to continue our victim-centric approach, which is tailored to meet the needs of victims in this ever-changing landscape. Our approach has more focus on care, empathy, equality, inclusion and safety. We want to continue to work alongside our colleagues in a respectful and non-discriminatory way to deliver a service that helps make victims feel safe and delivers on their rights under law. We all need to work more closely to give confidence and encourage victims to come forward for information and support. We urge Oireachtas Members to prioritise this issue so that men and their families will have somewhere safe to go where they will be supported and by Christmas 2022 at the latest.

Finally, we welcome any questions and will follow up afterwards. I thank Members for their time.

Ms Christina Sherlock: Women's Aid welcomes the opportunity to offer its views to the committee on the topic of shelters and refuges for women escaping domestic violence and abuse. We wish to make some recommendations for change.

Women's Aid operates a 24-hour national freephone helpline and a number of other face-to-face domestic abuse services. Last year, in 2020, in excess of 30,000 contacts were made with our services, an increase of 43% on the previous year.

One in four women in Ireland has been subjected to domestic violence and abuse. It has serious, long-lasting, multifaceted impacts on the mental and physical health of women and children. Domestic violence also has significant impacts on women's finances, their employment prospects and their risk of being pushed into poverty and homelessness.

A lack of in-depth, up-to-date data and research on domestic violence makes it difficult to gain a thorough perspective on the prevalence, nature and scope of domestic abuse in Ireland, particularly in terms of younger people. Better data collection and more research is needed to ensure all victims of abuse are provided with high-quality specialised support tailored to their individual needs.

Ireland does not have enough refuge places available to meet the Istanbul Convention stan-

ard and nine counties have no refuges. This urgently needs to change. All refuges should also meet the needs of minority groups and those affected by all forms of gender-based violence.

Funding is a significant issue in the area of domestic violence and abuse. Funding for refuges needs to be increased urgently to meet the surge in demand brought on by the pandemic and maintain compliance with Covid-19 health regulations. Funding is also needed for the provision of specialist children's support in refuges and to fund qualified external supervision support for all domestic violence specialist support workers.

Women's Aid believe that the proactive, victim-centric approach embodied within Operation Faoiseamh should be part of Garda routine procedure. Women's Aid also believes that all members of An Garda Síochána should be briefed on their obligations under the Garda domestic abuse policy. Training on the dynamics and impacts of coercive control should be rolled out to all front-line members of An Garda Síochána to support responses to calls from victims and for the effective roll-out of new risk assessment tools. A comprehensive strategy for move-on, long-term accommodation for victims of domestic abuse needs to be developed to provide long-term options. The needs of domestic violence survivors must be included in any national homeless and housing strategy.

I wish to share one statistic from the Women's Aid national helpline. For two out of every three calls we receive from women asking us to help them find a refuge place in Ireland, the refuge is full when we call on those women's behalf. What option does that leave those women? They either sleep in their cars, they have to try to find a bed for that night to be safe, or they go back to an unsafe home.

I thank the committee for the time. I am happy, like all my colleagues, to answer any questions from the committee members.

Chairman: I thank Ms Sherlock for those remarks. A number of members have indicated and I am sure more will come in as the meeting goes on. The usual protocol is to start with committee members. I will first call Deputy Carroll MacNeill, followed by Deputy Niamh Smyth. Those Deputies were the main movers behind this session and expressed an interest in these issues at an early stage.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank our guests for their attendance. It is great to see so many of them again. The final statement Ms Sherlock made was the most important because it painted a picture of what women are going back to and the choices they have to make. I am constantly challenged by the premise that women have to leave. I spoke yesterday with a woman who is stuck in a family law situation going back to May 2019 when she and her three children left an abusive situation and she is still struggling to find accommodation while her former partner remains in their family home. That story is not new to any of our guests and they do not need me to tell it.

I will ask a couple of specific questions, as we are tight on time. I congratulate Ms McDermott of Safe Ireland on the No Going Back document, which I found powerful. I thank her for coming to Oireachtas Members to talk about the document. When she mentioned the delay in Tusla's audit, she described the situation diplomatically. She said was keen to see the audit and I am sure other providers are too. I would like to give her the opportunity to expand on that. Why does she think the publication of that audit has been so slow, when it was due in quarter 1 of this year? What is the issue?

Ms Mary McDermott: The simple answer is that we are not in Tusla so we do not know. However, we have participated in the work for more than two years and as part of the national monitoring committee, we had a preview of some of the early findings. There seems to be a large volume of material. The bigger question is where accommodation lies. That is a significant problem within government generally. Everybody is essentially passing the buck about who is responsible for those made homeless, either correctly or incorrectly, in the context of safe-at-home shelter, where women should be staying at home. Where they are made homeless, who steps in and takes responsibility for them? Tusla found itself facing a certain structural problem in that regard, in that it has no remit around accommodation. We have found ourselves passed from Billy to Jack. As is clear from the budget, if I might speak forthrightly, domestic violence was erased from the national budget. It is almost completely invisible, which is shocking given the fact it has been a national priority for the past two years during the pandemic. I am not sure if that answers the Deputy's question. The issue is the nature of homelessness as it arises from domestic violence and who, precisely, has responsibility for it.

On the publication of the review by Tusla, it was a thorough engagement. To the best of our knowledge, Tusla has taken on board the fact that wraparound services always need to be provided. The issue is not only about beds. Perhaps that is a response to the Deputy's question.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: That is important. If we think about a man or woman and his or her children going into a refuge, the behaviour of those children could be challenging for good reason. They have gone through a traumatic situation. Having that trauma-based response at an early stage is important.

I will move to Ms Bentley. It is important that she is here and her organisation is represented. The more I learn, the more I realise how little I know, particularly about violence to men. I do not, and never would, accept that abuse only happens in one direction or is only carried out by one gender. Abuse by any gender to any gender is unacceptable. The issues Ms Bentley highlighted around homelessness and suicide are important. Coming up to Christmas, I want to ask about short-term plans on a practical basis. Can she give the committee any information about anything that is going on in that regard?

Ms Kathrina Bentley: We have been getting more calls in recent weeks and we have reached out to a couple of our colleagues. Sonas, in particular, has come forward. We are speaking to Sonas about a short-term solution for Christmas. It is in addition to its portfolio of housing and will be on a case-by-case basis. It is not going to be a long-term answer, nor will it address the issue. We know that men are not even asking for a space in a refuge because it does not exist yet. We have dangerous cases where children are being left in the home in an abusive situation. We want to help those dads and children in the run-up to Christmas. We will work in the short term and on a case-by-case basis. We will run a pilot scheme with Sonas in the coming weeks and months. I hope we will be able to take learnings and roll the project over into 2022.

I have been helping a person in my constituency since Thursday. He was made homeless on Sunday. On paper, he is a millionaire but, as of Sunday, he is homeless. We have live situations every day. We are looking forward to working with Sonas.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I congratulate Ms Graham on her new position. I thank her organisation for allowing me to visit Saoirse Domestic Violence Services last November to see the work it is doing. I particularly thank Ms Nadine O'Brien in particular, with whom I spent time. I will ask Ms Graham about Tusla and the importance of multi-annual funding. I have a sense that the service level agreements are being agreed very late in the year and I do

not know if that is the experience of providers. That would make it difficult to plan. Ms Graham spoke about the spaces her organisation has and I know Saoirse has done some upgrades in recent years. How does the situation work, for the benefit of committee members? When is Saoirse sure about its budget?

Ms Alison Graham: I thank the Deputy. The confirmation of funding never happens in the year before you come into it.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Does Ms Graham mean she is never sure of a particular year's budget in that year?

Ms Alison Graham: The 2022 budget has not been discussed yet, or it has not been confirmed anyway. The confirmation happens in the year.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: How is the organisation going to make plans if that is the case? That seems ridiculous. It is now November 2021 and Ms Graham is telling me she does not have clarity on her organisation's 2022 budget and yet she has to plan staff, works and so on.

Ms Alison Graham: That is the case. It makes it extremely difficult to plan. To be honest, in some previous years, the confirmation has not come until towards the end of the year. That happened last year. Our budget was not confirmed, based on the service level agreement, until towards the end of 2020.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Ms Graham was operating in 2020 but did not have confirmation of and clarity on her budget until the end of that year.

Ms Alison Graham: That was the case.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am not saying it is actually unbelievable, but that sounds unbelievable.

Ms Alison Graham: It does. As the Deputy said, we have, for many years, been looking for a multi-annual budget confirmation and service level agreement. Tusla has said it is looking at that but nothing concrete is coming down the line. It makes it extremely difficult to plan anything. As an agency, we are in the middle of doing a five-year strategic plan from 2022 onwards and it is impossible to plan because we do not know what is going to happen, year-on-year. We do not know whether our core funding is going to be maintained, cut, or what is going to happen. It is impossible to plan future services.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: My time will expire shortly but I want to make one point that I also raised in the Dáil earlier regarding the importance of a new relationship and sexual education programme that is age appropriate from the earliest stage in schools. Is that something all the organisations represented here believe is important? I urge them to speak out on that issue as the weeks progress. That is more of a request in case I do not get back in during this meeting.

Chairman: That concludes the Deputy's time for the opening round of questions but perhaps we will hear from her again later in the meeting. I call Deputy Niamh Smyth, who was very keen for the committee to organise this meeting.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank Ms McDermott, Ms Graham, Ms Sherlock and all our guests for their presentations. I am from the constituency of Cavan-Monaghan and when we

are talking about this issue, we cannot help but think of Ms Clodagh Hawe and her three beautiful boys who lost their lives in these exact circumstances. In my constituency we have the Tearmann domestic abuse service with Siobhán McKenna and her amazing team there. If it were not for them we would have absolutely nothing. Somebody mentioned in the presentation to the committee the fact there are only nine counties without refuges. Two of them are in my constituency. We know there is under-resourcing. The Tearmann service could not possibly be in a position to respond adequately to all of the calls it receives. While it does respond and makes the best of what it has, none of it provides adequate or protective accommodation, about which all of the witnesses have spoken so eloquently today. I would like to get the views of the witnesses on this.

The witnesses have spoken about models of very good practice where this is being done in other counties. They spoke about wraparound services. Ms McDermott said something very concerning. She said that domestic violence was completely erased from the national budget. It is incumbent on those who are in parties that are members of the Government to address this. I will certainly seek to do so. Do local authorities have any role in this? Do they come in with emergency accommodation? Will the witnesses give me and other members an insight into constituencies such as mine that have absolutely no services whatsoever for protective safe accommodation? What can we do? I have to imagine it puts huge pressure on other refuges throughout the country. These women and children have to go somewhere so it must be putting immense pressure on other refuges outside of the counties.

Ms Mary McDermott: I will come in and then pass to my colleague Ms Marmion. Cavan and Monaghan have very few resources. If Deputy Smyth looks at our submission to the committee she will see the red block up the centre of the country in the Border and north-west region that is seriously underserved. It is a disgrace that we rely so much on charity and philanthropy. The Community Foundation for Ireland is funding us to do a project which we hope will target Monaghan and Cavan. It will be an innovative post-Covid response to domestic violence. I am not sure whether this will raise the Deputy's heart. We see the difficulties. The Deputy is absolutely right. Where counties have no services by definition it spreads pressure on an already very weak infrastructure. I will ask Ms Marmion to step in.

Ms Lisa Marmion: I echo what Ms McDermott has said on the additional pressure. We are aware that nine counties are completely without refuges. For many years, I had the experience of working in County Louth. Dundalk, Navan and Drogheda sought to address this deficit. With regard to local authorities, our experience across the membership is that the capacity to respond varies. As we are all too aware, we are still in a housing crisis. We are not where we need to be in terms of available accommodation. This also has an impact. A number of years ago there was a little bit more flexibility but it has become increasingly difficult to find safe and suitable accommodation for women and children who need it.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: With regard to wraparound services, I am looking for examples of where it is done really well to be able to do something about it in Cavan and Monaghan where there is very little. I commend Tearmann domestic abuse service. Siobhán McKenna is always flying the flag to try to get something done. Safe accommodation is one aspect to it. As the witnesses said, and as Deputy Carroll MacNeill said, children and families are traumatised, as is the wider family circle. What wraparound services do the witnesses advocate and champion having in refuges for women and families?

Ms Mary McDermott: We have developed very complex models on the provision of safe and transitional housing, emergency crisis housing, therapeutic supports, legal supports and

welfare support. This is a suite of supports that have to be provided at point of contact and along the journey. I will speak very plainly for a moment. Refuge is not the response to domestic violence. Refuge is the crisis point where it comes up to the surface of society and where people are pushed *in extremis* to make contact and ask for help. As Ms Graham said, the first refuges have been there for 20 years but there has been a response in communities for many decades. Many of us grew up in communities where we knew some woman or some family who would take in a woman and her children, or a man if it was the case, where there was abuse. We are talking about a response at a local level. Since Covid we can really see that community-led responses are the way forward but they cannot happen on their own. One of the reasons the response to domestic violence has been so effective, and we have had relatively low rates of femicide, for example, in this country relative to other jurisdictions, is because the community was there and the structural response was there. The Garda was on the ball. Operation Faoiseamh was successful. This has to be maintained and fully supported. It should be supported in this work.

To answer the Deputy on what are the needs, it is a specialist front-line response. All of our members around the country provide these responses in various ways relative to their resources. It is not that they do not know what to do or how to do it; it is a question of having the resources and support to do it. This includes accreditation and training, proper professional supports and being recognised as specialists in their own work. Ms Marmion or some of my colleagues will probably be well able to answer this question for the Deputy.

Senator Barry Ward: I thank the witnesses. Many of us have heard the details of the crisis that exists but it is stark to hear from Ms Sherlock about a 43% increase in the number of people seeking help. It is really striking that however bad the Covid experience has been for many of us it has been worse for some of us. I am particularly struck by what Ms Graham said about having to refuse 369 requests. This is a shocking figure. I was not aware of how many counties were without refuges. Coming from Dún Laoghaire I am aware it does not have one. I would have thought we were the most populous area without one. It is something I have raised with the Minister. I know there was a review earlier this year and I am still not clear on what the outcome of it is. I am conscious of what Ms Bentley said about men being one in three of the victims and not seeking refuge. My question is for Ms Bentley. There is no male refuge anywhere in the country. Is this something we need to address? Does she feel it would be a useful tool in dealing with the requests for help she receives?

Ms Kathrina Bentley: I thank the Senator. He is correct that there is no refuge in Ireland for men. There are zero beds. It is a stark reality. Men find it difficult to come forward because they know there are no supports. They know there is no accommodation. There is what we called “the invisible man”. It is like the hidden homeless. Even in recent days, I did the key work with a gentleman since Thursday. When he got in contact the situation was so dire and we are such a small team that I worked with him myself on Thursday and Friday. We knew he would be made homeless on Sunday. We also got him emergency counselling. It is only somebody’s good heart or a landlord’s kindness that is stopping him from going to the streets. The streets are not the answer because he is actually in the fog of domestic violence and fleeing an abusive relationship. There are also other complexities. This is why we are trying to find solutions. As Ms McDermott just said, there is a crisis. The man in question has been in his circumstances locally for two years. It took him two years to come forward and ring our helpline. There are also children and grandparents involved. It is so catastrophic for the whole family.

It is disappointing that, as a country, we are approaching Christmas 2021 without accommo-

dation and options for all victims. It is shocking that there is nothing for men. We are based in Navan and will be increasing our outreach services across Monaghan, Cavan, Navan, Trim and Dundalk between now and February because there was so much suicidal ideation in January of last year after Christmas.

We are where we are, and we can only go forward, but it is important to start giving confidence and encouragement to male victims to seek help and start the conversation. We will work on a case-by-case basis and link in with our colleagues to see what is possible. We are where we are but I remain hopeful. I have to.

Senator Barry Ward: I thank Ms Bentley for the work she does. She talked about the invisible man. It is an issue that has been highlighted here.

Ms Sherlock made a comment on the training of gardaí and the Garda domestic abuse policy. Does she feel there is sufficient training? If a man or woman goes to a Garda station seeking assistance, what are the chances that he or she will meet a garda who is trained properly, understands his or her needs, will be sympathetic, and will take the matter seriously? Is that still an issue? Is investment in greater training for gardaí needed? How does Ms Sherlock regard the current position?

Ms Christina Sherlock: I thank the Senator for the question. It brings me back to a conversation I had with somebody who said she was lucky she got the garda she did because she got so much support from that person and the best response, which supported her in her journey through the legal system to eventually becoming safe and free from her abuser. It should not come down to somebody being lucky to get a garda who understands or gets it. We certainly see a need for comprehensive training for all members of An Garda Síochána. At best, the system is *ad hoc*. The pandemic has interrupted some of the training that may have been planned. There is an urgent need to start the training again and fully resource it. It should reach all members of An Garda Síochána so everybody who rings the organisation will get the same response and receive the understanding and support they need.

There are issues with the Garda. According to our national helpline figures for last year, two thirds of callers mentioned that they found the response of the Garda helpful, but one third said it was unhelpful. An unhelpful response can be such a block to moving forward and becoming safe. Everybody should feel that when he or she rings the Garda, the call will be answered and acted upon. There have been stories recently of 999 calls not being responded to and logged properly as domestic violence calls. There is a lot of work to be done in this regard still.

There was an enhanced response during the Covid-19 pandemic, which was heartening to front-line service providers. We really felt the Garda, which is the first line of response in many cases, was there beside us responding. This level of understanding and the treatment of the issue with such seriousness should feature as a matter of course. We do not want to go back to the way it was.

Senator Barry Ward: When Ms Sherlock says one in three responses to calls is unhelpful, what does she believe “unhelpful” looks like?

Ms Christina Sherlock: It may involve not responding. The woman may be told she will receive a call-out but no one shows up. Where there is a call-out, the perpetrator of the abuse might be taken into one room and the woman into another and they might be asked whether they can sort the matter out themselves. The gardaí might ask those involved to calm down and sug-

gest that a garda take the man for a walk, thereby not treating the issue as the very serious issue it is. An unhelpful approach might also be taken by not acting on breaches of the protective orders in place under the Domestic Violence Acts. I refer to where breaches such as someone breaking the terms of his orders by showing up at a place he or she should not be, trying to gain access to the house or putting someone in fear of their safety are not treated as serious and as the criminal matters that they are.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I thank all the witnesses for their contributions so far. This is one of the issues that comes up all the time. I live in County Leitrim. My constituency, Sligo–Leitrim, includes County Sligo, County Leitrim, north Roscommon and south Donegal. I am very conscious of that red block on the map because I am right in the middle of it. Organisations such as DVAS in Sligo do tremendous work and do their very best. They have their own little network of people they can call on in an emergency. They have a couple of B&Bs and places where people can be assisted. I am sure that is the same throughout the country.

I would like the witnesses' reflections on the numbers because many of the people I have come across in the past 20 years who have experienced domestic violence have not gone to DVAS but to their family. They kept the problem in-house. They stayed with a sister or ran to their brother or brother-in-law. The domestic violence problem is often covered up, meaning we do not see the full impact.

I would like a little more information on the need for a refuge or safe place to which people can go and that they know will be there for them. What costs are involved in establishing a refuge of that nature based on the experience of counties that have one? I imagine such a refuge is good value for money. It is often crude to say it but, when it comes to government, we have to talk about the cost, where we are going to get the money and how we are going to use it.

Ms Mary McDermott: That matter was part of our pre-budget submission. Ms Marmion might like to respond.

Ms Lisa Marmion: It will vary depending on the response needed in the circumstances. In our submission, we said that in the event of further development, costs can be reduced, for example, by making public land available.

In reference to the Tusla accommodation review, our preview had pitched that the development of a single refuge would be between €2 million and €2.5 million. There would also be running costs. However, given the life-saving measure it can be and how it can change survivors' experiences and future, it would certainly be worth the investment.

Deputy Martin Kenny: It is, therefore, probably a matter of spending a couple of million euro in several counties around the country.

The other aspect, which was probably mentioned in all the witnesses' submissions, is that there is an issue with core funding or having funding in place that those concerned know they can survive on. That is fair. One of the organisations I have come across, Lifeline (Inishowen) Domestic Violence Service, has received no funding whatsoever from the Government. It depends solely on fundraising. There are many similar organisations in various sectors throughout the country. They do tremendous work. Despite their lack of funding, we expect a service. I have come across people who have gone with their difficulty to An Garda Síochána, the HSE or State agencies but who have been pointed in the direction of the organisations to which I refer, which get no public funding whatsoever and must fundraise as a consequence. There is a

dilemma that we certainly need to address because the matter is urgent.

I refer to training when it comes to identifying and understanding coercive control, particularly from the perspective of Men's Aid. I have come across situations where men find they cannot leave an abusive situation because they are controlled by the threat of self-harm or suicide by their partners. They are tied to situations from which it is difficult to extract themselves. How much training is required? Garda personnel and the staff of Tusla and a range of other agencies require training to be able to make the correct interventions and deal with such situations.

Chairman: Does Ms Graham want to come back in on this point? I notice she had her hand up a moment ago.

Ms Alison Graham: On the cost of establishing and running a refuge, from our experience, the majority of refuges across the country grew out of community groups or activists coming together because there was not a strong departmental approach or a dedicated budget in the past to provide capital funding to establish refuges. We opened the Rathcoole refuge in south Dublin at the end of 2019. The cost for building that came from the capital assistance scheme funding through the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications. We had to approach to Tusla to fund the staffing and running costs of the refuge. There is not a single pot of money that organisations can access in order to establish and run refuges. That is the main problem that many refuges, particularly in rural areas, struggle with because of the nature of the system. There is not one Department to which they can go for support that will help develop a refuge from scratch and help run it in the future.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Is there a requirement for a single Government agency to take charge here, rather than having elements of responsibility with the HSE, Tusla, the Department of Justice? An agency of Government needs to take charge, be in control of all funding for domestic violence and deliver assistance to people.

Ms Mary McDermott: I will come in briefly; I do not want to dominate proceedings. It is a repeated call of Safe Ireland that there must be a central, local position in respect this problem. Part of what is at stake is drawing up domestic violence from under the dark rock under which it lies. It is a large-scale social problem in need of an integrated and central response from the Government. As Ms Graham pointed out, we have relied on - this is worthy of much praise - local community activism that provides great learning, insight and expertise. Nonetheless, if we rely on philanthropic support in the context of major cases, we often end up being guided by the wishes, ideology or ethos of the funders. There is nothing wrong with that, but we need a State response to what is a large-scale social problem. We need systematic, integrated, sustainable roll-on funding for all the services in this area.

In support of Ms Bentley's position, Safe Ireland believes that sex-gender and sexuality constitute the axis around which all of this revolves. It needs close attention and resourcing for the training on the specifics of how it manifests itself across various lives. It also needs an integrated State response and large-scale funding. If domestic violence was put front and centre in social policy, an array of ancillary and what seem to be idiosyncratic social problems would be addressed in an integrated way. These include: addiction; child protection; housing; difficulties in the context of welfare; justice; and social protection. Putting this front and centre will unleash a lot of energy, imagination and creativity in erasing many of the problems we have as a society. I do not mean to dominate the room here.

Senator Lynn Ruane: I thank everyone for their contributions. We have already covered a wide area. I would like to focus on two separate issues. Safe Ireland spoke about refuge design, which is an issue that been raised in a number of women's groups I have worked with recently. I refer to the accessing of a refuge by women with disabilities, with additional needs and whose supports are local, and attend an outpatient clinic daily or a day service. These different aspects come into play at that crisis point when the decision has to be made as to whether refuge is required. It is also relevant for a mother with a child who has additional needs or intellectual disability etc. Will our guests from Safe Ireland speak to the importance of being able to design refuges in a way that make them accessible for all types of women?

Deputy Niamh Smyth took the Chair.

Ms Mary McDermott: That is certainly a core issue for us. I will be straightforward: our network of refuges around the country, and other organisations represented here, often have a problem. We are told we do not meet the needs of X, Y and Z cohort. There is not a single refuge manager, CEO, or staff member who does not want to be able to respond to the layered vulnerabilities and the marginalised groups that are in need of this support across the axes mentioned. However, we cannot do that without an integrated, sustained and developed infrastructure. The infrastructure is completely Dickensian and is outdated, and staff are pushed to the limit in, for example, the cases of addictions that arise from being in an abusive situation. That means there are complex and chaotic cases. We do not want to get caught into a situation where people are further victim blamed because they are self-medicating to try to cope and the resources are not available to help them. We encounter all of this.

I refer to the wider sense of design in terms of responding to domestic violence and refuge and support services. We understand that there will be a recommendation that refuges are built to meet the standards under the Istanbul Convention. The last thing we need is to throw up buildings and refuges that are not well designed for future proofing or that are not flexible buildings designed to become community engagement centres, where young people and children can come in and where all the vulnerabilities and layers are present. As a cautionary warning, this is not simply a question of throwing up beds - I use that expression in a slightly caricatured fashion. It is important that we sit down, design and plan it. I note Deputy Niamh Smyth's comment on the Monaghan-Cavan area. We hope to run a pilot project that will attend to some of these issues so that the architectural space is flexible and adaptable, that it contains a community development element and that best practice and robust understanding of the nature of domestic, sexual and gender based violence, and the skills that are needed to respond to it, are present. My colleagues might have more to say on this.

Senator Lynn Ruane: Ms McDermott has provided enough information. Given the time constraints, I will move on. The question has been well answered. What Ms McDermott said earlier about refuge not being the answer to domestic violence is going around in my head. I relied heavily on Saoirse in getting people refuge throughout Covid. What came up a lot in that - and as referred to by Deputy Carroll MacNeill earlier - was the number of women who would stay in the home if they could get the partner to leave. Are there any clear pathways or strategies for supporting women at that point in the context of the outreach piece? Safe Ireland referred to the safe at home sanctuary scheme. Perhaps it is something that can be developed as part of that. Even if women temporarily leave the home and want to get back into the home, how do we get him out? There does not seem to be any real way here. It would have cost one of the women I was supporting hefty legal fees to challenge this situation, something she would not have access to as she became a lone parent, was out of work and was on social work welfare.

Will whoever feels best in answering this tell me how we begin to solve this so that we take the pressure off refuges and manage to keep women and their families within the home, even if they do leave it temporarily but then work towards getting back to it? Do we need to fund free legal representation to be able to support women to return to the home?

Ms Alison Graham: In response to Senator Ruane, we all know refuges are not the answer. As Ms McDermott put it very well earlier, it is the last port of call for women and children to have to leave their home. Outreach services have been developing throughout the country. We are trying to take a different focus to try to support women to stay safe in the home, where possible, until they can source alternative accommodation or a barring order can be obtained or whatever.

Unfortunately, things like lack of training for the Judiciary are big issues still where we have often heard women coming to us asking what is the point in getting a safety or barring order as it will not be respected or responded to and the person will be dead before someone from An Garda responds to it. There is a very significant piece of work to be done across the Department of Justice in terms of the Judiciary and the courts, how perpetrators are held accountable and how all of that works. The way things happen is that victims of domestic violence feel that the refuge is the only option, the perpetrator is left living in a three- or four-bedroomed house and the lady is left homeless with her children. I hope I have answered that question in some way.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I thank all of the contributors for shining a light again on this heartbreaking crisis. I thank them also for the work that they do in this area. I am saddened and sickened by the lack of response from the State, and the manner in which the State is treating this problem is shameful. It would appear that what seems to be the problem and what has been touched upon by a number of contributions is that there are so many facets to this particular issue and nobody seems to be taking control of it. For that reason I would be one who would feel, as I believe was mentioned by Deputy Kenny in his earlier contribution, that we need one Department and one Minister to lead every aspect of this situation.

On the nine counties that were mentioned earlier, Deputy Smyth and I are from Monaghan and it is one of those counties where there is no service. I have known this for many years as I live quite close to Siobhán McKenna, former chair of Tearmann domestic violence abuse service, who has done Trojan work in this area for many years. The Tusla audit a number of members talked about earlier was due in the first quarter of this year, and here we are towards the end of the year and there is no word of it surfacing. This is just another example of how everything relating to this subject is let drift because nobody is taking control of it.

I have a number of questions or matters I would like people to comment on, please, as they wish. Ms Marmion has been rightly discussing symptoms to a problem and how those symptoms can manifest themselves across so many areas in a domestic violence situation, where someone who leaves the home can end up being homeless and socially isolated, leading to substance abuse in many instances. The stress and the load that family has to carry is unimaginable. I know we can talk about Covid-19 and how it has had an adverse effect on the numbers looking for help, but where are we going as a society when this problem seems to be getting worse year on year, ignoring Covid-19, if I may, for a moment? It seems things are getting worse, so what do we have to do to educate our society on this issue? Do we have to start in schools or where do we have to start the process of education on this issue? That is one question I would ask for some comments on, please.

Ms Lisa Marmion: I believe Ms Sherlock wishes to contribute here.

Ms Christina Sherlock: To go back to the point about Covid-19, it concentrated minds. As we were all told to go home and stay safe from this pandemic, organisations like Women's Aid and Safe Ireland members were able to say that is all fine and well but what happens when home is not safe? There was a light bulb moment then. This was an issue that existed before Covid-19 and it will continue after it.

I return to Deputy Kenny's comments a while back who talked about the prevalence and numbers. We know that all of the figures we have talked about here, the calls to Women's Aid and the admissions to refuges, are only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the prevalence of this issue throughout the country. Some research was done a good number of years ago, which is the case for most research in Ireland on this topic, which showed that approximately 7% of victims contacted a helpline and local service. When I say it is tip of the iceberg, it really is. The numbers we have presented to the committee are shocking. It brings it back to one of our recommendations on the need to do some whole-scale prevalence research for Ireland. From that will flow the information we need on the prevalence and types of abuse, including who perpetrates it and why. This will help feed into both service provision and those education pieces that need to happen at a very early age.

For Women's Aid, we have been working on a campaign that was specifically targeting 18 to 25-year-olds around recognising the signs and the red flags of abusive relationships in the hope younger people, if they became aware earlier, might be able to leave those situations and not become embroiled in marriages or long-term partnerships with children etc. that can trap someone even further.

We know we need to go younger and this needs to be an integrated part of the curriculum in secondary schools and, perhaps, even in primary schools where we are talking about the issues of respect, equality, respecting consent and others. If we do it right, it is to be hoped we will create a generation where there is not this inequality or attitude that allows domestic violence to be perpetrated.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I thank Ms Sherlock. Are there are many countries where people talk about best practice in respect of responses to all of the different facets of domestic violence and everything that springs from it? Are there any countries or models from whose experience our witnesses feel we could learn?

Ms Christina Sherlock: Is this about best practice in education?

Senator Robbie Gallagher: Yes, and by way of response generally.

Ms Christina Sherlock: Somebody else might wish to take that question, perhaps Ms McDermott.

Ms Mary McDermott: This pertains to the question raised earlier by Deputy Smyth as to what is the best response. Can I just step back for a moment in response to what Senator Gallagher is saying there, which is that from the point of view of Safe Ireland, this is a very dark subject and it can sometimes feel very heavy but we actually feel very hopeful because the first thing that needs to be done is that, as a society, we need to step away, as we have done in other domains around mental health. We must step away from the shame, stigma, secrecy and silence that surrounds this subject.

The second point relates to fear and fatalism. We do not believe in an oppressive home. For most of us, sitting for two seconds and saying a person does not have to live in an oppressive

home is a radical statement. Perhaps I am too old and younger people in the meeting might not feel the same way but there is the idea that if you make your bed, you lie in it. It is another tactic of blaming the victim so that victim stays in an abusive or coercive relationship. On the question of what is best practice, we have decades of experience of front-line workers on helplines and in front-line services. There are also gardaí, social workers and teachers. All that expertise is there. To pick up on what Deputy Kenny said, there is a need to pull this together into a coherent whole. We must pull together all the knowledge and expertise we have, along with the knowledge and expertise we have gained since Covid-19, as we have been able to speak about the matter. As a country we have had an imaginative and positive response but we must not take our foot off the pedal.

For example, we appear to sense there is a waning of support for Operation Faoiseamh. We must ensure this is not pushed back into oblivion. One of the heartbreaking elements of why we are sitting here this evening is that in the budget there was no clear delineation or funding and political decisions have yet to be made on the subject. It is a crucial matter. The expertise is there and we know about it; it is scattered and we just need for it to be pulled together in a systematic way and made available for everyone. I am getting a bit heated so my colleagues might step in and say something a little less rhetorical.

Chairman: We would be disappointed if Ms McDermott was not passionate about the subject. It is understood.

Deputy Pa Daly: I will be fairly brief as Deputy Martin Kenny covered much of what I was going to say. I thank each of the members for coming and Deputies Smith and Carroll MacNeill for suggesting this important module.

I agree with Ms McDermott about the State integrated response, which is definitely required. It is depressing to read that with ancillary services, community care, health and hospital care, we seem to have a non-integrated and non-strategic model across a range of services. I hope that can be changed. Ms McDermott mentioned statistics in her opening statement. It is the same with sexual assault and rape cases in that we find difficulty in obtaining up-to-date statistics through An Garda Síochána for recent domestic violence offences. It is easy to get them for public order and criminal damage-type offences but it can be difficult to get up-to-date statistics in this area. We mentioned this in meeting members of An Garda Síochána. Is that the case?

I have two questions for everybody but particularly for Ms McDermott. How do the 2020 statistics, indicating 23,000 incidents or 500 incidents per week, compare with 2019 and 2018? Of the 4,000 breaches, how many translated into prosecutions and convictions? The statistics for that may not be available. Do the witnesses have the same difficulty as we have in obtaining those types of statistics?

Ms Mary McDermott: I thank the Deputy. It is an open secret when it comes to domestic violence, sexual and gender-based violence that data is an absolute nightmare to obtain. There is centralised CSO functioning work in the area. That is across all domains of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence; it is all along the long list of names we have for the problem itself.

To speak more generally about the statistics for 2019 and 2020, Covid-19 had a major impact. For example, capacity in refuges was reduced by 25% and, at the same time, demand increased by approximately 23%. We are not sure about the reliability of data relating to calls to 999. This does not take away from the fact that the figures have risen consistently.

I do not want to give an impression comprising entirely of doom and gloom. Some of this will bring a positive result because people will have vocabulary and will be able to speak about it. If we look at the community and corporate response for example, Boots total health pharmacies offered safe spaces and Tesco put tag lines on its receipts. There was an absolute outpouring of response from individuals, communities, the commercial and cultural sectors to say they know there is a problem and they wanted to do something. From the data it is clear there were responses and surges from all kinds but they were not always entirely negative.

What is needed is a proper structure so that energy can be captured. This will lead to robust responses at community level, as the community is where this happens. We need the CSO to work on this at national level and we must create coherent definitions. We must align vocabularies and have clear categories we can all agree and work for that to happen. I am not sure if that gives the Deputy the response he wants but some of my colleagues may wish to comment.

Ms Christina Sherlock: Ms McDermott has addressed the question well and I am happy for it to stand.

Chairman: If nobody else wishes to make a comment and Deputy Daly is happy with the reply, we can move to Deputy Patrick Costello. He may have left temporarily as there are parliamentary party meetings ongoing. He might return later so we can continue with Deputy Thomas Pringle.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I thank all the witnesses for the submissions. This has been a very interesting and useful session. Most of my questions have probably been answered. Ms McDermott may have answered the question but she spoke about the need for a single Ministry to deal with domestic violence services. It is more a signal that the Government has failed. The Government is supposed to function with collective responsibility but we know everybody works in silos and tries to hold on to their budget. As long as nobody draws from those budgets it is grand for people. Any organisation that feels it is not getting a fair hearing or being dealt with properly looks for a single Ministry to deal with their matters. It is the only way things can work in this country, which is bizarre. Ms McDermott spoke about the need for a single Ministry so does she feel what I have said is true? From what she has said, it appears to be true.

Ms Mary McDermott: One of the features of a violent or oppressive relationship is that horizontal violence is created. In our sector we are often set against each other, which is ridiculous nonsense when we are all trying to solve a single social problem. This goes back to the requirement for a coherent single State response to the matter.

In the case of domestic violence, there is policy in one Department and services in a State agency outside central government. We are not casting aspersions anywhere but this is simply about structure, governance and efficient running and response that will create coherent and coordinated responses across the country for all the needs presenting. We are repeatedly calling for a coherent response. International research shows that a single location in a single Ministry, and indeed sometimes a dedicated Ministry itself, may well be an efficient response to this. It goes back to some of the questions about the history that came up earlier. We are looking at an organic network of local community responses and independent organisations, often charity-based historically, and often community-based, that need support and need to be pulled in. This is not an individualised problem; it is a large-scale social problem for which we need a large-scale social response.

I will stop speaking and ask my colleagues to come in.

Ms Alison Graham: I thank Ms McDermott. I wish to respond as well, if I may. I spoke earlier about how domestic violence refuges have developed over the years from community activists fundraising and trying to find money. There has not been a dedicated response from the Government or the Department. Then, unfortunately, your service gets split out into different sections and so on and you are looking to this place for this and that place for that. Several of us have reporting structures to different Departments, which is time-consuming, resource-intensive, etc. It does not lead to a standard approach to the services provided. Women go to refuges across the country and their experience of one refuge may be different from their experience of another because the policy and the service provision will be different, even down to how long they can stay. That is a big challenge in how we provide those services. A dedicated Department to look at this is what is needed; otherwise, we will continue as we are, a lot of the time trying to develop these services out of what is there and what we can scrape together. That is not the future we want for the provision of domestic violence services.

Chairman: Did Ms Sherlock want to come back in?

Ms Christina Sherlock: Yes.

Chairman: We will take Ms Sherlock first. Then we may go back to Ms McDermott. Is that okay?

Ms Christina Sherlock: Yes. I was going to add to what my colleagues have said both in their recent responses and previously. Thinking about people being subjected to domestic violence and abuse, the systems and the journeys they have to take to try to become safe and free of the abuse and to overcome all the other issues that arise once they may even have left an abusive relationship, that does not mean that the abuse ends and that they are totally free from the impact of it. Thinking about the need for housing, welfare and a statutory maintenance agency, a proper response from the courts, the Garda, the health service and Tusla is needed. Thinking about all those people who need to be around the table to respond properly to this issue, we believe that locating that issue within a single Ministry, or indeed having a Minister with responsibility for it, will bring about the leadership and drive needed to create a proper, co-ordinated and effective response. At the moment everything is siloed and you do not get a proper response. As for agencies such as ours that provide front-line services but also try to effect system change, from the problems we are hearing on the ground from callers and people using our face-to-face services, we often find ourselves going to each of those places to try to improve responses from the ground up. Sometimes you can be doing that for a very long time. It would be fair to say that change comes slow in this country. We have been doing that for a very long time. We need something radical, and this is a radical but a very well thought-out suggestion. I just hope that the couple of processes that are in train, with the third national strategy on gender-based violence due in the new year, the audit of responses that has been published already and the accommodation review, we are in a position where real change can happen.

Chairman: There are 30 seconds for Deputy Pringle to put a supplementary question.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: This is a quick question for Ms Bentley of Men's Aid. In her submission there is no mention of children. How many men leave abusive homes with children? That is vitally important because it is stark that the Women's Aid submission is all about women and children but in the Men's Aid submission there is no mention of children. Could Ms Bentley comment on that?

Ms Kathrina Bentley: We do have men reporting to us and disclosing abuse, and they

do have children. To date, they have found accommodation themselves with either family or friends. We do have dads with children. They took cover in hotels etc. during Covid if they could not sofa-surf. It is not that they do not exist; they are hidden and invisible. The dads and children have the same plight, experience and journey as the women and children, predominantly. I think we are all gathered here tonight to emphasise that we are all holding back a social pandemic literally with Sellotape. We are all trying our best but, because this is not all co-ordinated for all the reasons Ms McDermott, Ms Graham, Ms Sherlock and Ms Marmion have outlined, it really is a pandemic. I would call this a national emergency because, for us, with Covid and the restrictions easing, we are seeing the increase only now, so I am not looking forward to 2022. Likewise, we are looking at our three-year and five-year strategies now because we are really getting the heat of this only now because we have come out of lockdown. Yes, the male victim is there; it is about encouraging him to come forward, breaking down those silences and finding solutions to stop the silence for all victims.

Chairman: I am afraid I will have to cut this discussion off and move on to the next member at this point because the time for this round is up. Perhaps any of the witnesses who wanted to come in on that who did not get to speak can come back a little on the points later. I think all the members of the committee who are present and who wish to speak have now come in, so I will move on. We have a great interest in this topic, which is very encouraging, and we have a number of Deputies who are not members of the committee who wish to come in. I have noted the following in the following order: Deputies Cronin, Tully, Harkin and Murnane O'Connor. If there are any other Members of the Oireachtas on the call who wish to come in but who have not yet indicated, I ask them to do so before the end in order that I can include them in the speaking order.

Now I move to Deputy Cronin. You have seven minutes, Deputy.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I thank the witnesses for their presentations. I listened intently. Unfortunately, I am not a member of the committee so I did not receive the opening addresses but I listened to their presentations, for which I thank them. I am a Sinn Féin Deputy in north Kildare. My comrade in south Kildare wanted to join the meeting as well but, unfortunately, she had another meeting to attend. We have a refuge in Kildare town, Teach Tearmainn, that has done excellent work and we are extremely lucky to have that service for our women and children, but we need vastly more. We need more places, more services, more refuges and more accommodation. Particularly with the pressures we all faced in the lockdown, and sufferers of domestic violence with abusive partners more than most, psychologically, it is critical that our women in north Kildare know they have a place to go to and that the service providers have the comfort of knowing they can respond to women in crisis. I know that Teach Tearmainn has been working with the LEADER partnership in Kildare on a feasibility study for the additional stepdown beds it is looking for. Is this a big problem the witnesses come across, that there is nowhere to go and that people are told when they have spent a certain length of time in a refuge that they are being sent into homeless services?

We also have a severe lack of refuges in the midlands. Only last year I dealt with a woman who did not want to stay in Kildare. She wanted to leave, so I put her in touch with somebody I know in Louth because she did not want to stay too close to where she was previously. Is that a problem?

Ms Alison Graham: I will respond to that. There are women throughout the country who cannot stay in their own areas. Ms Marmion may have touched on this earlier. Unfortunately, in recent years it has become increasingly difficult for women to leave their own areas and to go

to a refuge in another area because trying to source follow-on accommodation in the new area is impossible as a result of local authority regulations, housing lists etc. We have spoken about the lack of refuge spaces, but the problem then is the lack of accommodation after refuge. Quite often, we in Saoirse find that women are staying longer in what is crisis refuge accommodation because there is no move on for them. They are homeless. They cannot go back to what had been their home for various reasons and then there is no move on. We have come across families going into hotel accommodation from refuge because they have nowhere else to go. It is a widespread problem.

Ms Mary McDermott: I might ask my colleague, Ms Marmion, to respond because she is well able to speak on this as both a practitioner and a national services manager.

Ms Lisa Marmion: As Ms Graham rightly stated, this is very problematic. Even as we speak, there are families in refuge accommodation who are ready to move forward but they are prevented from doing so by the lack of move-on options. On their journey towards refuge, sometimes insecure tenancies, a lack of choice and a lack of available accommodation solutions propel them to refuge accommodation. From pre-refuge experience to post-refuge experience, the lack of suitable, affordable, quality accommodation across various tenures is highly problematic. If we were to remedy those, we could take the pressure off refuge to a certain degree.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Could we do anything to help when it comes to liaison with local authorities etc.?

Ms Lisa Marmion: As Ms McDermott said initially when we talked about the Tusla accommodation review, the disconnect between in local authorities' responsibilities is quite problematic. Hence the real importance of an integrated cross-government response where we are all clear about the responsibilities and who leads which part, ensuring that we have a cohesive and coherent response to women and children across a variety of accommodation solutions. We are always very conscious that each person has their own individual journey and they require different things at different parts of their journey. We also need to have creative responses for them. Our experience working on the front line with women and children is that their needs can change across decades even. We need to ensure we have a fluid response that is tailored to their individual needs. There are great opportunities to develop that.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I thank the witnesses for their work and their contributions to the state of the country.

Chairman: I call Deputy Tully and welcome her to the committee.

Deputy Pauline Tully: I thank the Chairman for facilitating my attendance at the meeting and I thank the witnesses for their contributions. The reason I wanted to attend is that I also represent the constituency of Cavan-Monaghan and I am very aware of the lack of emergency accommodation available to at-risk women in this constituency. It is a large rural constituency which does not have a single refuge. Three staff are employed to assist vulnerable women. Like other speakers, I commend the work they do in the domestic abuse services. One of the main reasons that women or men do not leave abusive relationships is the lack of affordable available accommodation to enable them to be rehoused at short notice. Is there any indication that a refuge will be provided in either Cavan or Monaghan? It would be preferable if there were refuges in both counties. I am conscious that a refuge is not the entire answer and other supports are also needed. I welcome what Ms McDermott said about the initiative being taken in Cavan. I would like to hear more about that.

As other speakers have mentioned, better co-ordination of services is required, preferably under one Department. Do the witnesses have any indication that something like this is being considered? Do they think it can be achieved?

Ms Mary McDermott: I might respond to that. The simple answer to that is “No”. There are many moving parts and policy responses involving the Garda, the Judiciary, the family courts and welfare. We worked very positively with the Department of Social Protection on introducing the wonderful domestic violence rent supplement. We have had major blocks with housing and accommodation. It is just an absolute block. We also have difficulties with health and education in terms of really taking on this subject at a very profound level and addressing it directly.

The building of refuges can only be done at central government level. Some of the projects we are trying to support are philanthropically driven and as a result they are restricted according to the desires of the funders and so on. We are fighting away to ensure that is as widespread as possible, trying to make our analysis as broad as possible, trying to make our responses as robust as possible. However, the bottom line on this is even following the accommodation review by Tusla if Ireland is to meet its Istanbul Convention recommendations to have support for one in 10,000 of the population, we would need an extra 500 units. That goes back to Senator Ruane’s earlier question on design. We need to sit down and plan what that means and not plan it based on a 19th century Dickensian model.

As everyone in the room has said this evening, there is before refuge, refuge and after refuge. There are a range of responses. It is all about prevention. However, that does not happen in a hidden, secret, silent and stigmatised place. That needs to be placed front and centre in the community. The Covid pandemic has taught us that. I am relatively new, although I am an old hippie hack for social justice. I can see within the network of the extraordinary work that all these services provide, it actually provides at front-line community level a moment, a visible manifestation in the public arena where this issue can be spoken about.

At their best, these centres could provide the beds and so forth for people *in extremis*. However, they can also be places for young people from violent and oppressive homes and children who need therapeutic intervention. It is not only about parents; this happens to single men and single women who are in extreme distress in a coercive and controlling relationship and need support. That is true of all sorts of beliefs and cultural mores within our system that we are slowly phasing out. The mother and baby homes scandal is another remnant of this - to completely put the cat among the pigeons. This is all part of a major cultural trend that we are trying to address. We can do that, but it needs to be designed.

Deputy Pauline Tully: We know that awareness of domestic abuse is much better than it was. Previously, there was always a stigma attached to it and there was a sense that people had made their beds and needed to lie in them. There is more knowledge now and more people are seeking help and not staying in abusive relationships. Do our guests consider that the services provided overall are standing still or are they improving? I do not mean that as a slight on the services. Are the supports to the services improving or standing still?

Ms Mary McDermott: I will ask Ms Marmion to respond on this issue. From my perspective, the staff are exhausted and at the point of burnout. They are put to the pin of their collars. We must remember that during Covid they were not afforded the status of being front-line workers in the crisis. They maintained refuges and stayed open in the face of threats to them at a time when we did not know what the impact of Covid would be. All services stayed open

and did their absolute best to continue to provide to meet this crisis and the terrible suffering that was exacerbated by Covid. In terms of the responses of front-line workers, the staff and everyone sitting in this room and beyond, that is almost unassailable.

As regards the Deputy's question on the resourcing, sustainability and robustness of the resources, that is a much more serious matter. Sorry, I am going off on a rant again. I will allow my colleague to contribute.

Ms Lisa Marmion: I thank Ms McDermott. She is absolutely right. What came into sharp focus during Covid were the consecutive years of lack of investment in this issue and the infrastructure. Ms McDermott often says it is 19th century infrastructure for a 21st century problem. Even tonight, we have heard the uncertainty in respect of funding impacts the ability to plan. This is a contemporary observation. I have yet to come across a service that is 100% funded for everything it does. The services often rely on philanthropic donations. Some of them have generated income to address the gaps they have. I am biased because I come from a practice background, but it is not the best use of managers' time for them to have to try to raise money to fill gaps. We need to move forward on this issue. We need to create and deliver these responses to women and children so that we can future-proof for those who are living with this issue now. In summation, sufficient resources are not being allocated to this issue.

Chairman: Our next contributor is Deputy Harkin. She is very welcome to the committee.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank the Chairman for allowing me to speak and I thank the witnesses for their comprehensive but chilling testimonies. As the meeting has worn on, we are hearing more and more of the raw reality of domestic violence. As Ms McDermott stated, it is a very dark subject.

Deputies Niamh Smyth and Tully referred to the fact there is no refuge in their constituency of Cavan-Monaghan. It gives me no satisfaction to say that, in the constituency I represent, there is no dedicated refuge.

My colleague, Deputy Fitzmaurice, asked me to pass on his apologies. He is attending a meeting of the Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine but wishes to express his support and the need for dedicated refuge centres.

My question, which has partly been answered, is what progress, if any, is being made in the provision of dedicated refuge spaces in the nine counties in question? I am particularly interested in the situation in my constituency of Sligo-Leitrim, which includes north Roscommon and south Donegal. I know there is support from the local authorities and the Domestic Violence Advocacy Service, DVAS, but as Ms Graham and Ms McDermott stated, there is no one pot of money to which one can go. It often starts with community groups but we need an integrated State response, which is not happening.

I have a difficult question to ask. In the absence of such an integrated response, what dots can we, as legislators, join right now to try to start integrating the dispersed services that exist? I know that is an impossible question but we are dealing with what seems to be an impossible situation. My apologies for asking such an impossible question.

Ms Mary McDermott: We really do need the publication of the Tusla accommodation review. However, it is not as simple as that because Tusla has had great difficulty in trying to take action in the context of housing along with the various bodies that control housing, such as the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and so on. This is a large-scale

problem that needs to be responded to structurally. The simplest thing I can say in response to the Deputy's question is that there has to be a really deep commitment that is acted upon to integrate services and policy, allocate a budget and roll out a systematic response. From our point of view, we favour a slowing down of the process to ensure the design is correct, rather than simply lashing up a load of white elephants that do not meet the demands of this problem in the 21st century. The bottom line is that this is about political will. We are afraid it is no deeper than that. My colleagues may have more practical responses to make.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank Ms McDermott. As I said, it is an impossible question, but I think Ms McDermott got it in one. This is about political will to deal with this issue.

I will refer to some specifics. Has there been any expansion or extension of the emergency rent supplement pilot programme? How is it working? Senator Ruane referred to the safe at home sanctuary scheme. The idea is quite new to me. Are there models of good practice in other countries in the context of this type of model? As Ms McDermott stated, it is not just about refuge.

Ms Mary McDermott: Ms Marmion is best placed to answer those questions.

Ms Lisa Marmion: I thank Ms McDermott. As regards the safe at home initiative, there are promising findings coming out of countries such as the UK, where they have been working with this measure for some time. Essentially, it is about helping those who are experiencing abuse to stay in their current home, thus helping them to maintain some kind normality in terms of employment or children continuing to go to school, for example. It is a principle that is well evidenced in human rights discourse. In effect, it works through interweaving legal judiciary policy and, sometimes, extended safety measures to maximise safety. Where it works, it works really well. There is a cautionary note to be struck in that regard because it has been working really well for women - they tend to be older women and tend not to self-report a disability - but it does not work for every woman. It depends on the individual needs of the woman. There are clear reasons people are often safer to move on completely, such as the level of the threat. There are several variables that determine the success or suitability of the initiative.

Chairman: That rounds up the time, Deputy Harkin. Deputy Murnane O'Connor has seven minutes.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the witnesses. It is sad to see these cases in 2021. It is something we have to rectify. I raised this matter the week before last in the Dáil with the Minister, Deputy Humphreys. I am a proud Carlow woman, but Carlow does not have a women's refuge. It is a concern. The Minister told me that the review is being done. Is there a timescale for the review? Who is participating in the review? I will give an example, and I am dealing with this regularly. When somebody comes to me at the weekend I always find that I am caught. Women's Aid is not open and the local authority is not open. Where do I go? This is becoming a serious issue for me. There is nowhere to go if it happens at the weekend. At least, during the week I can advise somebody to go to Carlow Women's Aid or we can go to the local authority and try to get the person emergency bed and breakfast accommodation for a few nights until the situation can be resolved. How can we put some type of structure in place?

Local authorities can play a far bigger role. There are 31 local authorities and they deal with housing. Years ago, as the witnesses know, particularly those from Safe Ireland, it was always the local authority that would buy a house and it was always through housing that a refuge would be considered. Now we have no structure and we do not know, as the witnesses

said, who is responsible and who will get a house and who will try to get some type of building for a refuge. That is an issue for me. In defence of Carlow County Council, it leased a house which could accommodate two families but the problem is that during Covid it became a major issue because only one family could be accommodated. We need to look at emergency services. When something happens over the weekend, we do not have anywhere for people to go when we are trying to find some help for them.

The other issue, and this has been raised, is that we need to have greater awareness. It has increased more with Covid. I know women who are nervous. I do not know whether it is that they do not want their friends to know or something else. Do we need to consider an awareness campaign? Can women in the Oireachtas play a bigger role in raising awareness and engaging in a campaign? How can we make a difference? I have to speak about men too. The witnesses spoke about men, and I realise it is for men and women. However, I think we are missing something here. We should consider having a Minister with responsibility for this area and get a structure to ensure that when a man or woman needs that help, there is a service available.

Are all the different services, be it Women's Aid or others, fully staffed? Are there sufficient staff for them? Do we need to look at extra staffing? I believe there could be staffing issues. There is so much that has to be done here. As Deputies and Senators stated, and I have been dealing with sad cases, including children, now is the time for change. It is 2021 and we are approaching 2022 and we cannot have a society where a woman or a man has nowhere to go if he or she needs this help. We cannot allow this to happen anymore.

I again thank the witnesses. Now is the time for change and we need to make that change.

Ms Kathrina Bentley: I will respond first. I thank the Deputy for her questions. First, on whether we are fully staffed, in 2020 Men's Aid supported approximately 5,500 contacts with two full-time and four part-time staff and no refuge. The Deputy spoke about meeting somebody on a weekend. We never had the option of refuge in 2020. I can only speak for our organisation with regard to staffing. Our service level agreement is similar. We do not know if our funding is guaranteed month to month so we will find out in January or February. We do not know what the funding will be to hire and secure staff to join the team, so it is difficult to plan there as well. Considering the pandemic and that it is such a social issue, our contracts are predominantly year on year and almost at minimum wage, yet the front-line teams are changing and saving the lives of the most vulnerable people and children in our society. We are the third sector. Certainly, none of us is in it because of our package or anything like that, and absolutely not in terms of staffing. Men's Aid is not even staffed to do the key work with anyone even though we know those people are there and we support them daily and weekly. We have a lot to do.

Ms Christina Sherlock: On the provision of support over the weekend, I will not talk about Carlow Women's Aid as it is an organisation that is independent of Women's Aid, which runs the national helpline. Perhaps Ms McDermott and Ms Marmion would have a greater insight into the plans for refuge provision in that county. Women's Aid operates the national freephone helpline which is open 24 hours a day and seven days a week. It offers some level of support outside office hours to people who are experiencing this type of abuse. The male advice line run by the Men's Development Network also has opening hours over the weekend, as a point of information.

I will talk about the issue of stigma and shame. It can prevent people from coming forward. The all-too-prominent fear of people knowing one's business, treating the person in a different

way or blaming the person for what is happening is very prevalent. We hear that from women using our services and we heard it when we carried out a survey of service users a few years ago. What is very worrying is that we heard it again from younger people when we carried out a survey of 18-year-olds to 25-year-olds last year. That survey told us that one in five young women and one in five young men experience abuse from an intimate partner and in 50% of the cases involving women the abuse started before the age of 18 years. We are talking about young people in their first romantic relationships experiencing this type of abuse at the same level as we know it exists in wider society. Those fears - stigma, shame and fear of not being believed - are still there. They are the top reasons that the majority of the people did not tell anyone, be it family members, general practitioners or helplines, what was happening to them. They did not tell anyone. It is an issue that still exists and is ongoing. I do not wish to be too hopeless about it because we always try to provide hope, but it is an urgent issue that needs to be addressed. It is not going away.

Chairman: I know Deputy Murnane O'Connor is passionate about these issues so I thank her for her contribution. Deputy Patricia Ryan is due to speak next. The Deputy is welcome. She has seven minutes to engage with the witnesses and have her say.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I apologise for being late. I was at another meeting so I missed most of the presentations. I will generalise about my thinking. I listened to Ms McDermott speak about the absolute right to have a home. I agree with her. Unfortunately, where I come from in south Kildare, there are many people who do not have that. They are so beaten down and they are finding it difficult to access services. That is not the fault of the service; it is just that it is very limited. We also have to be aware that, as others said, the staff are absolutely exhausted. I do not doubt that. I am dealing with both males and females who come to my office. They are really struggling. It is extremely difficult to sustain housing after being in a situation like this. What can we do within the local authorities? Can we approach them to try to help? Where can we go? I am very aware of how difficult it is for people to move out of the situation.

I am rushing because I am due to be in the Dáil Chamber in a few minutes. I am also concerned about the education of children where they fall into that category. When we talk about schools, we are not only talking about education. Many children depend on schools for a warm breakfast or whatever is provided at lunchtime. I want to see what I can do in south Kildare to help. At the moment, we need more public housing to be built to sustain what needs to move forward from the refugees.

Chairman: I know the Deputy is under pressure; she mentioned she has to get to the Dáil Chamber. Does she want to request a response from any particular witness?

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I will take on board whatever response I get. I am grateful for the opportunity.

Chairman: You are very welcome. It has been good to have the Deputy at the meeting. I am not sure if any of our guests wants to respond to the Deputy.

Ms Mary McDermott: I will give a simple response. The Deputy should ask anyone to whom she speaks, regardless of the domain in which that person works, whether it is in housing, An Garda Síochána, social work, education, health or anything else, if there is a dedicated line for domestic sexual and gender-based violence. That would be a great help to us in this sector. My colleagues may have something more substantive to add.

Chairman: That is a good and practical point that we can all take on board. It is useful to get that steer. Would anyone else like to respond on that issue?

Ms Alison Graham: Unfortunately, the experience we have had, which I know from speaking to other services is common across the country, is that we still rely on who we know in the local authorities. There is no national daily strategy in terms of how local authorities respond to victims of domestic violence, whether they are men or women. It is unfortunate that is still the case. There are many factors involved, including the lack of training for staff. There is a lack of support and there is no strategy for local authorities that want to address these issues. There is also a lack of passion and desire to address those issues. In our experience, our refuge in Tallaght and our two safe houses are buildings that were given to us by the local authority, and we are thankful for that. However, in this day and age, the services in many areas cannot get those resources from their local authorities. They are fighting and up against a brick wall and, unfortunately, that is still the situation.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I will raise the issue in my area. I thank our guests.

Chairman: I thank members and our guests for their contributions. That concludes our engagement. All members have contributed and all our guests have engaged comprehensively and robustly, for which I thank them. I have learned a great deal from the meeting, as I am sure other members have. We will produce a report, as we always do, to try to capture the discussion today. We will make recommendations, going forward, and I hope they reflect the very valuable testimony and contributions from all who have participated in today's meeting. On behalf of the committee, I thank all our guests.

It is proposed that we will publish the opening statements to the committee. Is that agreed? Agreed. No other business arises.

The joint committee adjourned at 7.43 p.m. until 1.30 p.m. on Thursday, 4 November 2021.