

Amber Women's Refuge welcomes Government's new strategy to tackle Domestic Abuse amid rising demand for its services

"Zero Tolerance" the third national strategy to tackle domestic, sexual and gender based violence (DSGBV) was launched this week by Minister Helen McEntee TD. Containing 144 wide ranging actions, the strategy, for the first time, outlines a whole-of-government response to violence against women. Measures to tackle heavily gendered forms of violence will be led by a new statutory agency and implemented across Government departments including Justice, Education & Higher Education, Health, Housing, Transport, Defence & Culture.

The strategy launched amid the publishing of Amber's Annual Report 2021, in which it reported an 83% increase in demand for its Outreach and Court Support & Accompaniment services. 769 women requested support in 2021, the highest number of contacts Amber Women's Refuge has ever received for these community based services.

Other highlights from Amber's Annual Report :

- 395 women called Amber's 24/7 Helpline in 2021, a 46% increase on 2020
- *36 women received refuge in 2021, a 9% increase on 2020
- *58 children received refuge, a 161% increase on 2020
- 111 women who sought refuge in 2021 could not be accommodated because the refuge was full
- 213 counselling sessions were delivered to 43 women in 2021

*The refuge building was closed for the last three months of 2021 for essential building works. Amber operated refuge from an alternate site during these months at much reduced capacity.

Commenting on the launch of the new national strategy and the publishing of its own Annual Report 2021, Lisa Morris, Manager, Amber Women's Refuge said "Given the year on year increases in demand for our services, both at the refuge and in the local community, the new measures outlined in "Zero Tolerance", the third national strategy to tackle DSGBV are welcome and timely.

The strategy envisions a society which does not accept domestic, sexual and gender-based violence or the attitudes, which underpin it. It recognises both the top-down and bottom-up reform required, which we in Amber have always believed is essential to stamp out the scourge of domestic violence and abuse in our country.

It recognises that while both men and women can be victims/survivors, women and girls are affected disproportionately. The new strategy is based on a more cohesive and co-ordinated approach across Government departments and strives for an equitable balance between Prevention, Protection, Prosecution & Policy Co-ordination. This is a welcome progression from the more limiting frameworks of past strategies, which focused primarily on prosecution & protection.

Amber Women's Refuge broadly welcomes the strategy and applauds the ambition of the plan and the work done by Minister Helen McEntee TD, her team and all involved in shaping the strategy."

In particular, Amber Women's Refuge welcomes the following measures contained in the new strategy :

- The recognition of children as direct victims of Domestic Violence and Abuse.

- Acknowledgement of the range of Accommodation types required by women and children fleeing violence and abuse in their homes.

“The new strategy provides for an increase of 141 refuge spaces to at least 280 nationwide. This still falls well short of the requirements under the Istanbul Convention, but it is a significant step forward. Currently Amber has seven secure on-site refuge units, which can accommodate seven women and up to 23 children, to serve a population of 49,699 women in Kilkenny and 28,467 in Carlow (Census 2016). This remains wholly inadequate.

However, while the provision of new refuges and more refuge spaces is key, it is not the whole story and the new strategy acknowledges this. Transitional/step down housing is essential to support the journey of women and child/ren from trauma to recovery and meet their various accommodation needs throughout this process. In addition, for the first time, a DSGBV strategy acknowledges the intersectionality between Domestic Abuse, poverty (often arising from Financial Abuse) and the housing crisis and outlines measures to tackle this, which we welcome.” said Lisa Morris.

A study carried out last year found that refuges in Ireland are twice as likely to have to turn a woman away, as be able to accommodate her and possibly her children. There are currently no domestic abuse refuges for men in Ireland.

- DSGBV services to be supported with multi-annual funding and stabilised supports.

“Annual funding does not allow for the increase in demand for our services and rising inflation. Nor does it allow for any additional growth or expansion of services to meet the needs of at risk women and children in Kilkenny and Carlow. Ad hoc and inadequate annual funding, to date, has meant we are reliant on fundraising to deliver vital local services each year.

We welcome the news that Amber and other local DSGBV services will, in the future, be funded on a multi-annual basis. The new strategy commits €72.4m per year for all actions across all departments for all forms of violence. Until we see commitments in Budget 2023 it is too early to say whether it is an adequate budget or not.” continued Lisa Morris.

- Proposed reforms to the Justice and Family Law systems and to mandatory sentencing for Domestic Abuse crimes

Amber Women’s Refuge particularly welcomes the proposals for the provision of specialist, trained judges in the Family courts and the increase in maximum sentencing from five to 10 years for the charge of abuse causing harm.

- Proposals to include Education as a key component in tackling DSGBV.

“We have long believed that more needs to be done in our schools – both primary & secondary – to tackle the sexist attitudes and prejudices formed at a young age, which contribute towards an unjust and unequal society, the breeding ground for violence against women. In 2021, Amber launched its StartSafe schools programmes to support local teens to develop and maintain safe, healthy relationships. Proposals to provide more educational initiatives of this type are very welcome.” said Lisa Morris.

- The establishment of a statutory agency for domestic, sexual and gender based violence by 1 January 2024.

“Working with Safe Ireland, Amber has been calling for a dedicated, centralised focus in Government to tackle domestic, sexual & gender based violence. Minister McEntee listened and consulted with us and she has delivered an ambitious and visionary plan. Now the real work begins on implementing the strategy over the next five years.” concluded Lisa Morris, Manager, Amber Women’s Refuge.

Amber Women’s Refuge provides emergency refuge accommodation, support and information services and a 24hr Helpline to women and children in Kilkenny and Carlow who are victims of domestic violence and abuse. Amber also provides safe, inclusive, community-based support services in Kilkenny city and county and throughout county Carlow to women and children living with or fleeing the serious crime of domestic abuse. Amber Women’s Refuge works to achieve equality and the right to live a life free from violence and abuse for all in our community.

1 in 4 Irish women and 1 in 7 Irish men will experience abuse from an intimate partner in their lifetime. 1 in 2 women murdered in Ireland are murdered by an intimate partner. Donations can be made at www.amberwomensrefuge.ie.

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