



Charities Fear Social Fund Abolition Will Hit Women Fleeing Domestic Violence

Charities who work to support women and children who experience domestic violence are calling on the Home Secretary and Women's Minister Theresa May to intervene in plans to abolish the discretionary Social Fund and get rid of community care grants and crisis loans.

The charities – Family Action, Women's Aid and Platform 51 - all work with victims of domestic violence. They are concerned that changes to the Social Fund in the Welfare Reform Bill will mean more women and children facing hardship when they flee the family home. The Social Fund provides grants and loans to families in crisis. The Department of Work and Pensions are planning to abolish the Social Fund and replace it with localised, un-ringfenced provision by local authorities.

The charities are concerned that the move towards localised provision will mean that:

- Councils are tempted to dip into Social Fund provision to fund services instead of grants and loans to vulnerable groups like those fleeing domestic violence;
- There will be a postcode lottery of provision which does not reflect that tackling domestic violence is a priority;
- Councils could impose a local connection test which could disadvantage women fleeing domestic violence who are often forced to move into other local authority areas.

The charities are writing to the Home Secretary and Minister for Women to raise their concerns that these changes will mean women fleeing the home have even less chance of financial support to help them rebuild their lives. Many women fleeing the home have to leave everything behind – including household furnishings and essential items like cookers most families take for granted - to rebuild their lives and settle in a new home. Their children are consequently exposed to deprivation and poverty.

The organisations say that the Government's commitment to ending Violence Against Women and Girls which includes providing adequate support where violence occurs (link to be provided in final PR), will be called into question if action is not taken now to to safeguard support for this vulnerable group. Family Action, Platform 51 and Women's Aid are calling on Theresa May and the Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith to intervene to amend the Welfare Reform Bill. They want the Ministers to ensure that local eligibility criteria do not punish women suffering domestic abuse; and resurrect a plan by the previous Government to provide a mandatory resettlement grant to those who can demonstrate that they have fled the family home on grounds of domestic violence.

Platform 51 Chief Executive Penny Newman said: "The Home Secretary must intervene in these proposals to ensure women fleeing domestic violence are not left without access to essential funds. We know from our work how key financial support can be for women in

this situation. The Government must honour the commitments it made in its call to end violence against women and girls.”

Family Action Chief Executive Helen Dent CBE added: “Theresa May should stand up for women who are fighting domestic violence. They shouldn’t have to go cap in hand to local councils. We know from our family services and our welfare grants programme which helps families set up homes after fleeing violence how precious financial support is to them and their children. We are concerned that our grant fund will not be able to fill in gaps in Social Fund provision after the reforms.”

Women’s Aid Chief Executive Nicola Harwin CBE said: “The Social Fund is a vital resource for victims attempting to rebuild their lives after domestic abuse and, if it is not available, victims may be forced to return to their abusers. We urge the government to abide by the strategic commitment to support survivors of domestic and sexual violence and ensure there is this safety net when they desperately need it.”

Ends

For further information please contact Anthony McCaul on 0207 241 7632 or 0781 309 2040 or email anthony.mccaul@family-action.org.uk

About Family Action

Family Action has been a leading provider and services to disadvantaged and socially isolated families since 1869. We work with over 45,000 children and families a year by providing practical, emotional and financial support through over 100 services based in communities across England. A further 150,000 people benefit from our educational grants and information service.

About Platform 51

Platform 51 supports girls and women as they take control of their lives. Girls and women are at the heart of all we do. Our activities, services and campaigns are about things they need and want. We give them a platform to have their say and challenge discrimination.

About Women’s Aid

Women’s Aid was established in 1974 and as the first national domestic violence charity and is working to end domestic and sexual violence through:

- Protection - by influencing policy and legal changes and key decision makers
- Prevention - through raising awareness and education
- Provision of the services needed to help abused women and children

Women’s Aid coordinates and supports a network of over 340 local specialist domestic and sexual violence organisations, providing over 500 refuges, helplines, outreach services and advice centres, as well as national help line services. Last year, these services supported over 330,000 adults and children by providing advocacy, shelter, and safety and over one million people used our online help services