



Rape Crisis Network Ireland  
Carmichael Centre  
North Brunswick Street  
Dublin 7  
D07 RHA8

Tel: 087 2196447  
Web: [www.rcni.ie](http://www.rcni.ie)  
Email: [director@rcni.ie](mailto:director@rcni.ie)

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Dear Minister Coveney

### **A 2020 Programme for Government to address Sexual Violence**

RCNI works for an Ireland where everyone is free from sexual violence and the fear and threat of sexual violence.

Rape Crisis Network Ireland is a specialist policy agency on sexual violence. We are founded, owned and governed by our member rape crisis centres. We have been serving survivors' interests and working towards the prevention of all forms of sexual violence since 1985. RCNI holds considerable expertise on sexual violence and are at your disposal to identify, make the case for and implement priorities for a Government response to sexual violence.

RCNI has previously articulated the current set of priorities in our budget 2020 submission and our election manifesto (appendix below). **We would like to summarise here for you the top four items that we would welcome being in a Programme for Government.**

#### **1. That the government commit to putting in place a fit-for-purpose national infrastructure on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (DSGBV).**

While the NGO sector has built expert and specialist resources to support response, prevention, innovation and analysis, in the shape of the RCNI and Safe Ireland, no equivalent attention has been given to this significant issue by the State. The current gap in infrastructure has been evident in the mobilisation of a response in this area to the Covid-19 crisis.

At the very least the cross-government issue of DSGBV requires a statutorily established arms-length agency focused on setting standards, providing specialist advice and information, research, data collection and analysis, and advocacy to Government and others (eg NDA), and possibly one connected to the frontline and the evolving experiences of sexual violence and survivor needs (eg RSA).

All statutory DSGBV locations developed in the past and currently have gaps in the remit, expertise and independence. This is why we believe an independent expert body needs to be established to support policy making across government.

*Rape Crisis Network Ireland CLG Charity Status No.: 13236 Registered Office: Carmichael Centre, North Brunswick Street, Dublin D07 RHA8 Registered in: Dublin, Ireland no. 363350 Directors: Miriam Duffy, Anne Scully, Vera O'Leary nee Cronin, Grace McArdle, Loretta McDonagh nee Brosnan, Company Secretary: Cliona Saidlear*

We suggest the Programme for Government should set out to map gaps and agree the nature of agency required in year 1 and establishment of same thereafter.

This review of infrastructure needs, should be monitored at Cabinet level, preferably with a member of Government with express responsibility for the issue of DSGBV.

It is well past time that this issue was given dedicated, comprehensive, specialist infrastructure.

**2. Priority legislation** that we would like to see named in the Programme to include:

- Online Harassment and Harmful Communications [etc] Bill
- Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill
- Revised General Scheme of Criminal Procedure Bill (pre-trial hearings/case management)
- Sex Offenders (Amendment) Bill

**3. Sex education in schools:** That the Programme for Government state unambiguously that the reform of sex education in schools is a priority *and* that it will **address sexism and sexual violence**.

It is concerning to us that the current advice to the Minister for Education (Dec 2019 *National Council for Curriculum and Assessment review of Schools' Relationships and Sexuality Education report*,) on the reform of the sex education syllabus for 2<sup>nd</sup> level schools dropped the expert recommended modules on the prevention of sexual violence, without cause, namely;

- Pornography
- Gender and sexual discrimination and violence
- Social and cultural norms and expectations as they relate to relationships and sexuality

No other expert recommended shortlisted modules were dropped.

4. Ensure a **modern fit for purpose family law infrastructure** by: committing to building the Hammond Lane Court; developing and fully funding a Courts Welfare Service; ensuring court experts are qualified, specialist, experienced and regulated.

We need Government commitment to a substantial and significant national response to addressing sexual violence. This will see Government at the highest level taking regular and coordinated action. A whole of government capacity that is specialist informed, evidence based, resourced, and transparent and accountable by design. We are asking this Government to commit a level of resources to match the scale of the challenge. We are asking this Government to respect and honour all survivors of sexual violence, equally.

The time is now to turn the tide on sexual violence and to finally commit the necessary resources to end sexual violence.

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Dr Clíona Saidléar, RCNI Executive Director

[Director@rcni.ie](mailto:Director@rcni.ie)

087 2196447

## Appendix

### RCNI Election Manifesto Priorities 2020

#### RCNI Top Four Priorities

##### 1. Transforming Sexual Violence Together

**Build a national response. Fund and protect independent voices to participate and hold government to account. Repeat the national sexual violence survey every 5 years. Fund national data collection and development of working solutions from the frontline in Rape Crisis and specialist support organisations. Ensure every child has access to sex education that addresses the realities of gender inequality and discrimination. Address the cause and effect of sexual and domestic violence on the homelessness crisis.**

##### 2. Justice Matters

**Give victims support, protection and dignity in the justice system by reforming the justice process. Extend these protections to civil matters also. Fund a National Advocacy Service for survivors. Ensure specialisation across investigation, support and justice.**

##### 3. Dignity for all Survivors of Sexual Violence

**Ensure Survivors are treated with respect and listened to through transforming justice, child protection and support responses. Put Victims' Rights into practice across all statutory responses. Increase funding to Rape Crisis and other specialist services. Respect survivors' choice to engage with justice or services on their own terms and in their own time.**

##### 4. Family Law Supporting and Protecting Victims

**23% of sexual violence happens within the family. Private Family Law must change to support and protect victims. Provide specialist Family Law Courts. Build fit for purpose courts in Hammond Lane and nationwide. Develop and fully fund a Courts Welfare Service. Ensure court experts are qualified, specialist, experienced and regulated.**

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## Policy objectives

##### 5. Transforming Sexual Violence Together

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- Establish a high level, whole of government infrastructure for responding to Domestic Sexual and Gender Based Violence.
- Properly fund and protect the independent voice of the community to participate in shaping this transformation.
- Produce the sexual violence Central Statistics Office prevalence survey and put it on a five year repeat footing.
- Fund the collective voice of survivors through a national RCNI data system.
- Ensure Sex Education in schools for all children that addresses the reality of gender inequality and gender based violence.
- Integrate domestic and sexual violence into homelessness responses.

## **6. Justice matters**

- Reform the justice process to put in place adequate protections for vulnerable witnesses in criminal and civil proceedings related to sexual violence;
- Establish a funded National Advocacy Service for all sexual violence survivors in the justice process;
- Encourage further development of specialist justice professionals including DPP staff, prosecution advocates and judges;
- Ensure the child sexual abuse investigation and protection systems are appropriately coordinated, fit for purpose and specialised, through specialist Garda units and social workers and other relevant professionals.
- Ensure funded and sustainable emergency forensic, medical, accompaniment and advocacy supports are in place nationwide through adult SATUs and child Barnahus and CASATS.

## **7. Dignity for all Survivors of Sexual Violence**

- Legislate to respect the dignity, autonomy and privacy of survivors of all ages affected by mandatory reporting.
- Ensure survivors can access specialist Rape Crisis Centres when they need it by increasing the RCC budget from €5m to €8m.

## **8. Family Law Supporting and Protecting Victims**

- Provide Specialist Family Law Courts to meet the needs of family members where sexual and domestic violence within the family, is alleged.
- Develop Courts Welfare Service to support the needs of everyone accessing family law and to provide reports to the courts on the welfare of children and their carers;
- Ensure that experts advising the courts on issues relating to children's interests and related matters as well as the management of any risks arising from sexual and/or domestic violence, are appropriately qualified, experienced and regulated;
- Build fit for purpose Family Law Courts in Hammond Lane and nationwide.