

Rt Hon Alex Chalk MP

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State of Justice
102 Petty France
Westminster
London
SW1H 9AJ

18 November 2020

Dear Alex Chalk,

Review of the Presumption of Parental Involvement

We write to raise concerns about the membership of the advisory panel that will guide the Review of the Presumption of Parental Involvement announced on 9th November 2020.

As the review was established following the report Assessing Risk of Harm to Children and Parents in Private Law Children Proceedings (the 'Harm Report'), we are concerned that the membership of the panel lacks the same approach to representation taken within, and continuity with, the panel that guided that report. The membership of the Harm Report panel, which included a number of domestic abuse experts, have already considered evidence on this topic that led them to conclude the review was necessary. Furthermore, there is no expert representation on the panel for child sexual abuse, and there is no specialist sexual violence organisation represented. This is of particular concern, given that the Harm Report evidenced the issue of fathers sexually abusing their children, and the courts then facilitating access. It would clearly be prudent for the panel guiding the current review to have expertise from the Harm Report panel within its membership to ensure they are fully informed of the reasons the review was recommended and promote accountability through a consistent approach.

Furthermore, we are disappointed that the panel's composition does not reflect the commitment implied by the Government's announcement stating that the review panel will be "made up of diverse representatives who will be able to draw upon their expertise of working across the family justice system with victims, children and charities". Whilst we welcome the inclusion of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, there is no representation from domestic abuse/sexual violence support services, domestic abuse/sexual violence specialist lawyers or academics. Survivors from minoritised backgrounds, deaf and disabled mothers and those holding other protected characteristics are not directly represented despite the obvious need to include their voices and ensure their specific needs and experience of marginalisation are at the heart of the review. Without the presence of any of these specialist stakeholders the outcome of the review will lack vital perspectives on the way in which the presumption is implemented.

Finally, we raise our deepest concerns and seek an urgent explanation on the exclusion of any group that represents the views of mothers when the advisory panel includes membership from an organisation exclusively representing the views of fathers. This is a significant omission and risks the outcome of the review

overlooking the perspective of mothers impacted by it. This evident imbalance is not justifiable and risks undermining the purpose and credibility of the review. We urge Government to amend this swiftly and can offer our assistance in connecting you to organisations representing those perspectives.

We request the Government urgently addresses the deficiencies identified above before work with the advisory group is started.

We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Estelle du Boulay, Director, Rights of Women
Nicki Norman, Acting CEO, Women's Aid Federation of England
Baljit Banga, Executive Director, Imkaan
Ruth Bashall, Chief Executive, Stay Safe East
Sheila Coates MBE, Policy and Strategy, Rape Crisis England & Wales
Donna Covey CBE, Chief Executive, AVA (Against Violence and Abuse)
Fiona Dwyer, CEO, Solace Women's Aid
Dr Carole Easton OBE, Interim Chief Executive, Refuge
Sarbjit Ganger, Director, Asian Women's Resource Centre (AWRC)
Sarah Green, Director, End Violence Against Women Coalition (EVAW)
Vivienne Hayes MBE, CEO, Women's Resource Centre
Umme Imam, Executive Director, Angelou Centre
Suzanne Jacob, CEO, SafeLives
Medina Johnson, Chief Executive, IRISi Sara Kirkpatrick, Chief Executive, Welsh Women's Aid
Frank Mullane, CEO, AAFDA
Diana Nammi, Executive Director, IKWRO - Women's Rights Organisation
Pragna Patel, Director, Southall Black Sisters
Natasha Rattu, Executive Director, Karma Nirvana
Heidi Riedel, CEO, Woman's Trust
Dr Nicola Sharp-Jeffs OBE, Chief Executive, Surviving Economic Abuse
Jessica Southgate, Interim Chief Executive, Agenda
Anthea Sully, Chief Executive, White Ribbon UK
Jo Todd, CEO, Respect
Gisela Valle, Director, Latin American Women's Rights Service
Gurpreet Virdee, Director of Operations and Development, Women and Girls Network
Harriet Wistrich, Director, Centre for Women's Justice