



Supporting Women and Children  
24 Hour Helpline | Refuge | Support Service | Youth Service | Court Support

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Westmeath County Council  
Áras An Chontae,  
Mount Street,  
Mullingar,  
Co Westmeath

Roscommon County Council,  
Áras An Chontae,  
Roscommon,  
Co Roscommon

31st January 2024

**Re: Issues Paper – Athlone Joint LAP 2024 – 2030**

Dear Sir/Madam,

Esker House Women's Refuge and Domestic Abuse Support Service welcomes this opportunity to engage with Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils in the preparation of the Athlone Local Area Plan 2024 – 2030.

Esker House was established in 1982 by Athlone Community Services Council CLG., to provide a suite of services to women and children subjected to domestic abuse. A very brief summary of some of the Services we currently offer include:

- Short term Crisis Refuge Accommodation and 24-hour support for five families.
- A 24-Hour Helpline (090 6474122) offering support, advocacy, and a listening ear to women who may need someone to talk to, about the abuse they have endured in both past and current relationships.
- A Community Support & Outreach Service in the Athlone and South Roscommon area.
- Post Settlement Support for families who have moved on from the Refuge.
- Our Support Service provides access to Legal Supports and Court Accompaniment to Clients – both Resident and Non-Resident in Refuge, who are pursuing legal options for protection.
- A specialised Support Service for Children and Young people who are affected by Domestic Abuse.

The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, commonly known as the ***Istanbul Convention***, is a landmark international treaty that aims to eradicate violence against women and domestic violence in all its forms. It was adopted in 2011 and has since been ratified by 46 countries, including Ireland on International Women's Day in 2019. The Istanbul Convention states there should be one family place for every 10,000 of population, indicating there should be 476 family places provided in Ireland, based on 2016 Census data.

**Túsla**, the Child and Family Agency, Ireland's dedicated State agency responsible for improving wellbeing for children and young people, published a review in February 2022 of the provision of accommodation for victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (DSGBV).

<https://www.tusla.ie/publications/review-of-accommodation-for-victims-of-domestic-violence/>

The review found that there were significant gaps in the provision of accommodation for victims of DSGBV, with Ireland providing fewer than 30% of that recommended by the Istanbul Convention. **The midlands was identified as a Priority Area for the provision of additional accommodation as not only were the number of spaces insufficient, but also only 40% of the population of our Local Authority Area was within a 30-minute drive of a DV Space.**

In addition to the establishment of **Cuan**, the statutory Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (DSGBV) Agency, a key action to be delivered under [Zero Tolerance: Third National Strategy on DSGBV](#) is increasing the number of refuge spaces available in Ireland. It's now a priority of Cuan and the Department of Housing to have a purpose-built Refuge in Athlone, with a minimum of 8 Accommodation Units, but also a full suite of wraparound services designed to break the cyclical nature of Domestic Abuse and provide specialist interventions for Children and Young People affected by the issue.

In an analysis of data over the last 8 years, on average Esker House were unable to accommodate over 200 requests from families for Refuge every year. As the population grows and the issue of Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence is brought out of the darkness it's been shrouded in all these years, the demand for our services will grow even more.

A number of new Refuges will be built in Ireland and **Safe Ireland** (the National Network of Refuges and Support Services in Ireland) carried out extensive research and published their Document in 2023 - **Safe Place Designing Centres for Domestic Violence Prevention and Response**. Based on this report and on International Best Practice, Esker House Athlone will require a site size of a minimum of one acre to build the new Refuge, but we will also need a number of houses in the community that we can use as Transitional Houses for our families leaving Refuge, to allow a level of step-down care, prior to their full reintegration into the community.

We have already commissioned a Feasibility Study for the Development of Esker House Domestic Abuse Support which was finalised in December 2022. Please note in particular Section 9, which details our Site and New Build Requirements. [Feasibility Study.docx](#)

Esker House welcomes the opportunity of engaging with both Westmeath and Roscommon County Council to discuss any potential sites the councils might have that would fit the requirements for the new build. We also need to highlight the importance of having an allocation of specific social housing units to meet the transitional needs of women and children fleeing domestic abuse.

In preparation for the significant expansion of our service, we have already engaged closely with **Túsla; the Department of Housing; The Housing Agency and** now the new Statutory DSGBV agency **Cuan** – under the auspices of **the Department of Justice**. We have the full backing of **Aidan O'Reilly** and his team in **the Department of Housing** regarding the Capital Assistance Scheme process, but we cannot overstate the importance of local connections. We need to establish who the correct contacts are at local level in the respective councils, to streamline the process with the different CAS Stage Applications, Planning Permission etc.

Thank you for taking into account the needs of Women and Children fleeing Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence, when further developing your Joint Local Area Plan 2024 – 2030.

Best regards,

**Deirdre Berry,**

Head of Services

**Esker House Domestic Abuse Support Service**

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