



W.A.I.T.S CEO Challenges PM David Cameron

W.A.I.T.S CEO Marcia Lewinson took on Prime Minister David Cameron earlier this week on the issue of Housing Benefits for victims of domestic violence.

Panellists and attendees at last Thursday's Drum Arts Centre Black History Month debate (7th November 2013) were stunned to discover the surprise guest Chair was none other than David Cameron, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Unphased, Marcia used her position as a panellist to stand up for victims of domestic violence.

She challenged the PM on incoming changes to Housing Benefit rules which are set to have serious consequences for victims of Domestic Abuse and the refuges that support them. David Cameron, whilst unable to give a definitive answer, gave the audience his assurance that he would task some of his fellow MPs with investigating the matter.

Changes to the benefits system are a serious cause for concern, potentially placing both victims of Domestic Abuse (DA) and the refuges that support them at risk. At present when a victim of Domestic Abuse seeks a place in a refuge their housing benefit (if they receive it) continues to be paid to their landlord and they can receive an additional payment for their refuge accommodation. However, with the benefits cap, those DA victims with larger families may find their refuge rent puts them over the threshold leaving them potentially unable to access refuge services.

A second concern is the end of direct payments to landlords (except in very limited circumstances). This will leave it up to refuges to gain payment for their services from individual victims of domestic violence. The change from weekly to monthly payments will also make it difficult for refuges to collect payment, especially when survivors of DA often only use refuge services for a few days. These changes also come at a time when local authorities, Birmingham City Council in particular, are under increasing pressure to make cuts and reduce expenditure across all areas. This includes in offering funding to third sector and community initiatives, such as refuges.

Overall changes to the benefits system represent a very real risk that fewer women in serious need will be able to access refuge services. They also place the future of refuge services at risk by jeopardizing the funding they desperately need to continue supporting victims of domestic violence.

W.A.I.T.S is very proactive in its support for victims of Domestic Abuse through offering Support, counselling and empowerment services and its refuge, Iona House. As a result we know how important these services are for victims of domestic violence. We sincerely hope that Marcia's clear message to PM David Cameron is taken to heart and action taken on ensuring that the benefits system reflects needs of victims of DA and the refuges that support them.