

Barnardo's NI
Response to the Department of Justice Consultation on
Domestic Homicide Reviews

September 2018

Barnardo's NI is the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. We work with approximately 14,000 children, young people and families across more than 50 different services and programmes and in over 200 schools. We provide a wide range of services, from providing family support and early intervention to working directly with children and young people in need of support. We believe that every child deserves the best possible start in life, and our service provision reflects that philosophy.

Barnardo's NI welcomes the opportunity to comment on the proposed model for the introduction of Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHRs). Our comments are informed by our understanding of the issues experienced by families and children affected by domestic violence, gained by our direct work with those families through our family support and assessment services, and through our development of the Domestic Violence Risk Assessment for Children (DVRAC)¹. The DVRAC manual was developed to support practitioners working with families experiencing domestic abuse by a male perpetrator to: identify risks to children from domestic violence and begin the risk assessment process; decide whether a case needs a safeguarding response or family support; and identify appropriate interventions for the children, the non-abusing parents and the abusive father/ father figure.

Many of our comments on the DHR model reflect our position that the long term impact of experiencing or witnessing domestic abuse (including homicide) must be considered. Our answers to the questions most relevant to this aspect are below.

¹ Sneddon, H and Janes, M (2017) 'Domestic Violence Risk Assessment for Children: Guidance Manual', Barnardo's Northern Ireland. More information is available [here](#).

Q1: Do you have any comments to make about the purpose of a Domestic Homicide Review?

We welcome the proposed model and the commitment to learning from domestic homicides and preventing domestic violence and homicide. We also welcome the proposed model of cross-agency partnership. We urge that the Review model explicitly considers the impact of witnessing or experiencing domestic violence and/or homicide on children, and that learnings in relation to the impact on children are also sought through the DHR process. As the DVRAC outlines:

“Children can be affected by domestic violence, even if they are not in the same room as it is happening. ... Abusive partners may also show poor parenting skills such as lack of knowledge about child development, creating unhealthy dynamics within the family by undermining the mother and using negative control techniques with the children such as physical punishment.”
(p10-11)

Though the effect on children will vary depending on a number of factors, some examples of the risks of poorer outcomes for children living with domestic abuse situations include: insecure attachment; poor emotional regulation; symptoms similar to PTSD; physical disturbances e.g. stomach aches; increased aggression; social issues; mental health issues; and poorer educational outcomes (DVRAC, p12). We therefore recommend that the wider impact of a domestic homicide is considered within the DHR and the effect on the child throughout the timeline is also considered.

Q2: Do you have anything to say about when a DHR will or will not be commissioned?

Given the under-reporting of domestic abuse and its often hidden nature, we recommend that all possibilities are thoroughly explored before the decision is taken not to commission a review. Further, we recommend that particular scenarios should warrant a review regardless, including where the situation concerns children (e.g. a family situation, children in the house, separation issues etc.); and where the victim could be considered vulnerable whether through age, disability or other factors such as refugee status.

We welcome that the proposed DHR model recognises teenage intimate relationships and that 16-18 year old victims will be within the scope of DHRs. Whilst we understand the rationale for DHRs not

extending to young people under this age given other review processes in place, we recommend that this is not adopted as an absolute position, so that instances involving under 16s which would otherwise meet the DHR criteria are not automatically excluded.

With regards to cases involving the death of both an adult and a child, we welcome the proposal that “the DHR Chair would liaise with the other review body to ensure that good practice and engagement with service provision is identified and lessons are sought and shared in relation to the domestic violence and abuse”. We welcome this commitment to cross-body working, and recommend that there is wide dissemination of findings across both sectors and that recommendations are implemented jointly to ensure learnings are not lost.

Q3: Do you have anything to say about what may ‘typically’ be outlined within the terms of reference?

We recommend that clarification is given as to how the DHR model will work with the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland.

We welcome the proposal that the terms of reference will include “whether there are any evident equality and diversity issues for example, gender identity, ethnicity, disability, etc. that may require special consideration or if an outside expert will be needed to assist in understanding these crucial aspects of the case”; we recommend that this explicitly includes other factors such as language barriers, refugee status, care experience (particularly for young people), mental health issues, and learning disability.

We note that the terms of reference would also include “whether the victim made a disclosure at work and if it had a domestic violence policy in place”: we recommend that consideration is also given to the potential for a child to have made a disclosure, for example to their school or to a support agency.

Q5 + Q6: Do you have any comments to make about DHR panel membership? Do you have any comments to make about the consideration of equality and diversity issues by the Panel?

We welcome the commitment to incorporating the voluntary and community sector in the core membership of the DHR panel.

Barnardo's NI feels strongly that the voice and experience of children should be represented on the panel. We recommend that the ad hoc membership includes a voluntary organisation with significant expertise in supporting children who have experienced trauma or adverse childhood experiences, such as Barnardo's NI. Similarly, we also recommend that the ad hoc membership reflects organisations with expertise in refugee or asylum seeking issues and learning disability.

Q7: Do you have anything to say about family involvement in the process?

We recommend that children affected by the domestic homicide of a parent/caregiver are supported to have their voice heard as part of this review process, whilst avoiding re-traumatisation. We recommend that advice and facilitation is provided by an independent voluntary sector organisation skilled in trauma informed practice, such as Barnardo's NI, to ensure that children are effectively supported to participate when they feel they want to and where it is appropriate, without exposing the child to further harm.

Q8: Do you have anything to say about the involvement of other individuals in the process?

As above, we recommend that consideration is also given to the potential for a child to have made a disclosure, for example to their school or to a support agency, and that it may therefore be appropriate for those relevant individuals to be involved in the process.

Q11: Do you have any comment on the suggested approach around publication of the DHR report and do you have any views on the frequency of report publication?

Whilst we welcome the publication and dissemination of learnings from Domestic Homicide Reviews, we are mindful of the potential for this to add to the trauma of any surviving children. We urge this is considered on a case-by-case basis, with sensitivity and anonymity ensured where a case involves or could affect a child. In instances where reports are not publically published, we recommend that confidential versions are shared with professional partners to ensure learnings are not lost.

We also recommend that a report is published after each case to ensure the learnings from specific circumstances are fully captured.

We also support the proposal to produce brief thematic reports to highlight trends and general learnings.

Q13: Do you have any comment on the organisations that would make up the Senior Oversight Forum, particularly the additional bodies that could be considered, or others that should be considered?

As with the DHR Panel, we recommend that the voice and experience of children should be represented on the SOF through the inclusion of a voluntary organisation with significant expertise in supporting children who have experienced trauma or adverse childhood experiences, such as Barnardo's NI.

For more information, please contact:
Julia Buchanan
Assistant Director, Policy
Barnardo's NI
Julia.buchanan@barnardos.org.uk