

## **Barnardo's NI Consultation Response Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland 2013-2020**

### **Introduction**

Barnardo's NI is the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. We work with almost 11,000 children, young people and families in more than 40 different services and programmes, and in over 200 schools. Our services range from work with young people who have been sexually exploited, looked after children, and those affected by parental substance misuse and domestic violence, to early intervention programmes and family support. We identify key issues impacting on children, young people and families through our service delivery, research and consultation work. In turn we progress the evidence-base and learning from this direct work to usefully influence change at both a policy and practice level.

Barnardo's NI welcomes this consultation on the Northern Ireland Strategy 'Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in NI 2013-2020'. Our response has been informed by research linked to our practice; and also by consultation with Children's Services Managers who have considerable experience in both prevention and protection activity relating to domestic and sexual violence and abuse. We have provided comments on those areas where we believe our input will be most useful.

## **Background**

Barnardo's practice in Northern Ireland includes one service with a specific focus on tackling sexual violence in the form of child sexual exploitation<sup>1</sup>, and one therapeutic service for children aged 5-12 years old who have been affected by domestic violence and abuse.<sup>2</sup> Significantly however, every day across our services we are working with many babies, children, young people and parents whose lives have been impacted in some way by domestic and sexual violence and abuse. This includes our wide range of family, early intervention and therapeutic support services and also those working with looked after children, care leavers, young carers, BME families and young people at risk.

In our experience domestic violence and abuse is particularly prevalent and, alongside sexual violence and abuse, is a considerably under-reported offence. The negative impact of domestic violence and abuse on infant mental health and children's physical, emotional and psychological well-being can be significant and life-long. In recognition of this it is an area that we have been increasingly targeting in our work at both a policy and practice level. We deliver for example, specialised risk assessment training and consultancy to a wide range of professionals across the region working with children and young people affected by domestic violence. Through our Safe Choices service we are also delivering more training on child sexual exploitation following the risks of CSE identified in recent Barnardo's NI research on the issue.<sup>3</sup>

## **Overview**

Barnardo's NI currently sit on the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) Domestic and Sexual Violence Sub Group which is

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<sup>1</sup> Safe Choices provides support for children and young people who are going missing from home/care and are being sexually exploited.

<sup>2</sup> The Simpson Domestic Violence - What About Me? Service provides both recovery and safety work for children.

<sup>3</sup> Beckett, H (2011) *Not a world away: The sexual exploitation of children and young people in Northern Ireland*. Barnardo's NI, Belfast.

producing an Action Plan for integrated commissioning of supports and services for children experiencing (or may be at risk of experiencing) domestic and sexual violence and abuse. We welcome and support the strategic and collaborative approach being demonstrated in the CYPSP Action Plan and its priorities linked to improving the six high level outcomes presented in the NI Children and Young People's Plan 2011-2014 for children and young people impacted by domestic and sexual violence and abuse. In our view it is essential the Strategy clearly aligns with these Plans in order to ensure success moving forward and a truly integrated and collaborative approach.

Establishing a clear and comprehensive picture about societal attitudes and the nature and extent of domestic and sexual violence and abuse in Northern Ireland should be amongst the first priority areas of work if the Strategy is to effect real change and also target services where they are needed. The Strategy must be informed by accurate and more up to date, relevant statistical information, including how many children and young people are currently impacted. For example while statistics in NI are available in relation to high risk domestic violence cases discussed by MARACs (Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferences), Barnardo's NI recommends information should be collated and published on all children in families receiving social services where domestic violence is present, especially in respect of those on the child protection register; and also the number of children in every household attended by the police in relation to an incident of domestic violence.

In our experience there are gaps in the current system in terms of information sharing between agencies and this is another area requiring immediate attention to ensure that good practice is followed. While we acknowledge the issues overlap and the benefits of a joint Strategy, it is also important that domestic violence / abuse and sexual violence / abuse are each subject to a strategic, integrated approach. Furthermore,

Barnardo's NI recommends that the issues as specifically relating to children and young people must be more clearly distinguished throughout. In our view there also needs to be greater clarity throughout the document and priority areas about the processes and procedures in instances where the perpetrator is aged below eighteen years old.

Barnardo's NI broadly supports the definitions and general content of the Strategy. Given the traditional emphasis on physical behaviours we especially welcome the inclusion of coercion and control in the definitions. We would however highlight the following additional points which we believe need to be addressed in order to further strengthen the document.

## **Section 2**

- **Forced marriage / 'honour' based violence / female genital mutilation**

***Barnardo's NI recommends the Strategy document specifically highlights and addresses that forced marriage, 'honour' based violence and female genital mutilation (FGM) are unlawful activities and practices often perpetrated against children.***

The Strategy document correctly acknowledges at Point 2.50 the manifestation of domestic violence and abuse through unlawful activities and practices such as forced marriage, 'honour' based violence and female genital mutilation (FGM). However children are often the victims of these practices and given the associated child protection issues this should be clearly highlighted. Children as young as eight years old are at risk of FGM; and as evidenced in English research certain young people are at particular risk of forced marriage when they are aged 15 and can be suddenly removed from school to go 'on holiday.'

Although there is a low prevalence rate in Northern Ireland, there is some evidence of these practices existing here. In our experience they are areas where professionals and also children and young people need more education and guidance. Barnardo's NI welcomes the inclusion of FGM in Section 3 relating to building service provision and recommend the published NICE guidance is targeted at all the relevant professionals in a position to identify this form of abuse, notably midwifery, emergency services and GP's. We suggest that educators would be a particularly relevant group to target awareness-raising about the issue of forced marriage.

Barnardo's NI further recommends the Strategy considers the useful policies and procedures of the [London Children's Safeguarding Board](#) in respect of 'honour' based violence, forced marriage and FGM.

### **Section 3**

We agree that the Strategic Vision is reflective of what we all want to achieve; especially effective services and support provided to all victims and that perpetrators will be held to account. However, in order to have any realistic chance of success, given the prevalence of domestic and sexual violence in Northern Ireland, this requires immediate action through stronger measures to tackle perpetrators. For example, the programme for non-court directed alleged perpetrators of domestic violence needs to be implemented as a matter of urgency; this is essential to provide an effective response to the perpetrator and refocus the responsibility for the offence on the offender.

### **Section 4**

This section focusing on the Strategy's key delivery strands would benefit from more clarity and specific detail about the level of underpinning

actions to achieve each priority. There are a number of issues which should also be considered in the different strands:

### **Strand 1 – Driving Change**

Barnardo's NI believes that a collaborative, cross-departmental approach to issues affecting the lives of children, young people and families is critical in order to improve outcomes and minimise the need for crisis interventions. While we commend the commitment in the Strategy that Government Departments will work together to tackle domestic and sexual violence and abuse, we are concerned how this will work in practice. Barnardo's NI believes that without any statutory or legal obligation to cooperate the possibility of collaborative working is limited and early intervention and prevention work will not be effectively prioritised.

### **Strand 2 – Prevention and Early Intervention**

- **Multiple Adversities**

***Barnardo's NI recommends that the Strategy specifically highlights that domestic and sexual violence and abuse are significant and prevalent factors in the onset and development of multiple adversities across the life course.***

We know from both the research evidence and our direct practice that domestic abuse commonly presents alongside other key adversities such as substance misuse, mental ill-health, child protection concerns, long-term unemployment and poverty. Following publication of an international literature review on families experiencing multiple adversities,<sup>4</sup> we will also shortly be publishing findings from the next stage of this work which

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<sup>4</sup> Davidson, G; Bunting L; Webb M (2012) Families experiencing multiple adversities: A review of the international literature. Barnardo's NI: Belfast.

comprises in-depth qualitative interviews with seventeen families who have multiple and complex needs.<sup>5</sup>

The majority of those families commonly present with all or a combination of, the 'toxic trio' of substance misuse, mental ill-health and domestic abuse, alongside a wide spectrum of other adversities. However, domestic abuse has emerged as an especially notable and pervasive feature in their lives. Given that none of the research participants were drawn from domestic abuse services the levels and experience of domestic abuse reported is both stark and indicative of the need for better prevention and early intervention work.

Of particular concern is the evidence from this study of families experiencing a continuum of violence throughout the life course, with several growing up in violent households where their mother was regularly abused and then becoming victims of abuse themselves as adults. This included very serious incidents of domestic and sexual violence and abuse involving knives and other weapons, and for some participants they experienced violence in more than one personal relationship. The impact on children is considerable and there is some evidence in the study of child physical abuse in families where there has also been domestic violence. This issue is discussed further in the next section.

- **Child Physical and Sexual Abuse**

***Barnardo's NI recommends the Strategy specifically emphasises and addresses the strong links between domestic violence and the physical and sexual abuse of children.***

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<sup>5</sup> Publication pending in 2014 – this is the second stage of a partnership project between Barnardo's NI, NSPCC, NCB and QUB about families experiencing multiple adversities.

At Priority 6 the Strategy document correctly highlights the overlaps between the 'toxic trio' of mental ill-health, substance misuse and domestic violence. However in our view there also needs to be strong emphasis on the links between domestic violence and both the physical and sexual abuse of children. We know from research and our direct practice that many men who sexually and / or physically abuse children also perpetrate domestic violence in the home as well. We routinely stress in our training to social workers and other professionals when working with families impacted by domestic violence to be especially vigilant for the signs and symptoms of child abuse, including physical abuse perpetrated under the guise of physical punishment.

The link with sexual abuse may not be as visible when children are younger because it can be more difficult to detect and children often do not disclose abuse until they are older. Many of the sexually exploited young people we work with in Barnardo's NI Safe Choices report being sexually abused in their childhood by a perpetrator who was also violent towards their mother.

- **Education**

***Barnardo's NI recommends a consistent approach is taken across all schools in relation to staff training and the teaching of sensitive subjects, including domestic and sexual violence and abuse.***

***Barnardo's NI recommends that training for educators should also be provided across a range of agencies in youth and community settings.***

In our experience opportunities to learn about and discuss sexual and domestic violence and abuse in a meaningful way, including forced marriage and FGM, vary significantly from school to school. We agree that



schools are uniquely positioned to promote and safeguard the welfare of all children; as such it is important the Department of Education is fully committed to, and equipped, to deliver on priorities in the Strategy aimed at exploring sensitive issues such as domestic and sexual violence and abuse. Barnardo's NI believes relevant commitment from the education sector is a critical component to the Strategy's long-term success. Youth and community organisations are also well placed to discuss issues relating to domestic and sexual violence and abuse and we believe this should be given consideration in the Strategy. This Section also largely focuses on teachers, and we further recommend that other professions such as social workers and health care staff are included.

### **Strand 3 – Delivering Change**

- **Building Service Provision**

***Barnardo's NI recommends that children and young people are specifically highlighted in the Strategy as amongst those whose views will be sought to inform the commissioning and provision of services.***

In our experience it is important to seek the views of children and young people who are living in a violent household and also from those who are no longer experiencing domestic and sexual violence and abuse, because the responses are likely to be very different.

- **Child Sexual Exploitation**

The issue of child sexual exploitation (CSE) is not linked in or incorporated into the Strategy document in any meaningful way and should be revisited. We would also recommend that the Strategy uses the definition of sexual exploitation being developed by the NI Safeguarding Board.

## **Strand 3 – Delivering Change / Strand 4 – Support**

- **Risk Assessment**

***Barnardo's NI recommends that both the integrated pathways approach and the management of the consequences of domestic and sexual violence and abuse are explicitly outlined in the Strategy as comprising both safety and recovery work centred around ongoing risk identification and risk assessment processes.***

Managing the consequences of domestic and sexual violence and abuse is a large area of work and more detail needs to be provided about how this will be achieved in practice. In our view, two clear and distinct types of work are required in that victims need **safety planning** so they can protect themselves and their children, and when the perpetrator leaves or there is a change then they can also move into **recovery work**. It is also important to factor in the need to provide services for victims and children to deal with overcoming trauma in order for subsequent recovery work to be effective.

We recommend that **ongoing risk assessment which includes risk factor identification by multi-agency professionals** is explicitly highlighted as good practice and a core component of both safety planning and recovery work. This is particularly pertinent given the high rates of recidivism and the risks of relapse amongst perpetrators. The importance of risk assessment should be specifically incorporated at Priorities 13 and 14; in our experience disclosure cannot be effectively responded to, or safety planning best provided, without knowledge of the risk factors. In that respect, risk assessment should also feature at the top end of the diagram on Integrated Pathways at Figure 2 and not just in the final box.

- **Specialist Services**

***Barnardo's NI recommends there is greater investment in specialist services and that a parallel approach is taken to service provision for adults and children.***

At 4.63 the Strategy refers to actively encouraging individuals, partners and families to access more specialist services. In our view this will need to be matched by greater investment, as there are important services already struggling to access funding. Services should also be provided to family members at the same time,

*".....multi-agency professionals are very good at getting a woman into a supportive service, but it is more difficult to offer and engage the child in a service if the mother does not engage or the perpetrator is not offered a service. Services for perpetrators, adult victims and children must be available in a 'parallel' supportive multi-agency approach. If one adult gets a service, the other adult and child have to get it, especially when the perpetrator is receiving a service" (Barnardo's NI Children's Service Manager).*

- **Tiered Model Figure 3**

As a useful way of identifying gaps in service provision, it would be beneficial to populate the Tiered Model through a mapping exercise of current awareness training and expertise.

## **Strand 4 – Support**

***Barnardo's NI recommends that the language needs of BME groups are specifically addressed to ensure equality of access to support services for both victims and perpetrators.***

We have also become increasingly concerned at the barriers to service provision experienced by members of the BME community, mainly due to a lack of resources for interpreters and service availability,

*"....it is nearly impossible to get a man if he speaks Polish or he is from Latvia on a perpetrator programme even if he is convicted because of resources for interpreters and treatment programme availability.....male perpetrators from BME communities can't go on the programmes, the women can't go on the supportive programmes without the use of interpreters....and what happens then is that social services and voluntary support services are left to try and support the mother and the child with a child protection plan which may not be effective, due to lack of service provision for BME families" (Barnardo's NI Children's Service Manager).*

Barnardo's NI also believes outreach and advisory services are a priority; however while domestic violence provision is better provided for it is limited in terms of sexual violence, particularly in rural areas.

## **Strand 5 – Protection and Justice**

***To effectively address current gaps in service provision Barnardo's NI recommends urgent progression of the Strategy's intention to develop and introduce programmes and interventions aimed at changing the harmful, violent and abusive behaviour of offenders.***

We are very concerned that perpetrators are not being dealt with appropriately by the criminal justice system, and at the lack of services

targeted at reducing offending and reoffending behaviour. While we welcome recognition that there needs to be a comprehensive and coordinated legal approach, and that perpetrators need to be challenged and held to account for their actions, more detail is required in the Strategy about how this will be achieved.

In our view if the appropriate preventative work is not in place then domestic and sexual violence and abuse cannot be effectively addressed in the long term. There are many gaps in current provision; preventative work is a particular challenge in respect of perpetrators not motivated to make changes and who still present a serious risk,

*".....perpetrators are often not being held to account. From my perspective, I am aware in my work that in order to get offered a group treatment programme for the perpetrators of domestic violence, the man has to be prosecuted and have a conviction, and even then, due to his lack of motivation or levels of denial, the probation service cannot engage him in a group treatment programme, so that leaves social services, the victim and the child in a very difficult and risky position. Social services often assess these men as too 'high risk' to be in the family home and social services are often left with managing the risks to the child in these circumstances which is very difficult. Then there are the non-court mandated men who are not prosecuted and when they come to the attention of social services as fathers/father figures through child protection there is no group treatment service at the minute for these men" (Barnardo's NI Children's Service Manager).*

Barnardo's NI welcomes plans for a regional programme for non court mandated perpetrators and recommends it is implemented quickly and properly resourced to be effective. Suitable programmes and interventions must also be targeted at perpetrators of sexual violence as current provision is patchy.

There is much good practice through the Domestic Violence Partnerships and it would be useful if something similar was in place specifically for sexual violence and abuse. In our view existing good practice with fathers

needs to be built on and expanded, for example through preventative work in a prison setting,

*“when the abusive men are in prison, it is the safest time to do work with them and their partners and children....the abusive man goes to prison and often does not get any treatment...if prosecuted, some get offered the perpetrator programme when they are released from prison but when they are in prison I am not sure of what actual work is being done with them, some of which are fathers too and will pose a future risk to their children if they are not offered treatment while there.....” (Barnardo’s NI Children’s Service Manager).*

- **Domestic Homicide Reviews**

Barnardo’s welcomes the commitment to establishing Domestic Homicide Reviews in Northern Ireland as an important step in best practice. We recommend this area of work is progressed quickly in order to improve service provision and partnership working.

- **Responding to Harmful and Violent Behaviour**

To effectively protect themselves and their children from risk, Barnardo’s NI believes that people should be able to find out from the police if a partner has a history of domestic violence. The Strategy indicates at 4.127 its commitment to monitoring developments in other jurisdictions and Barnardo’s NI would welcome consideration of a Domestic Violence Disclosure pilot scheme (Clare’s Law) in Northern Ireland.

- **Vulnerable Individuals**

The Strategy refers only to male on female violence in teenage relationships at Point 4.128 and Barnardo’s NI recommends this also includes female on male violence. According to that same research cited in the Strategy, which reported a quarter of girls aged 13 to 17 experienced violence from a boyfriend, 18% of boys stated their female partner had been physically violent to them.

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