

Barnardo's Northern Ireland

The Executive Office

Public Consultation on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategic Framework

Barnardo's NI is the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. In the past year we worked with approximately 18,000 children, young people and families across more than 45 different services and programmes. We are a leading provider of schools-based support, reaching more than 32,000 children in schools across the UK and Ireland through our NI-managed social and emotional literacy programmes.

We deliver a wide range of services, from providing family support and early intervention, to working directly with children and families who have experienced adversity and need our support. Our goal is to achieve better outcomes for more children. To achieve this, we work with partners to build stronger families, safer childhoods and positive futures.

Barnardo's NI welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the Executive Office's draft Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls, and the Foundational Action Plan. We were pleased to engage with the department's Call for Views in March 2022 and participate in the subsequent co-design process. Our comments and recommendations to this consultation are informed by our work with the diverse communities of children and families that we support through our 45+ services in Northern Ireland.

The primary emphasis of the Strategic Framework is on prevention, including a focus on building knowledge and skills of individuals to form healthy relationships. Barnardo's NI delivers a range of social and emotional literacy (SEL) school-based programmes. This includes the *PATHS® Programme for Schools (UK & NI Version)*¹ - a manualised programme for teachers designed to facilitate the development of SEL skills in primary school aged children. Findings from the implementation of the *PATHS® Programme for Schools in Northern Ireland (2014-2018)*² show the efficacy of the programme, across areas including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Our response will provide some general comments and then look at each of the Strategic Framework's six outcomes in turn.

¹ For more information on PATHS, see ['Using The PATHS Programme & Social Emotional Learning to mitigate the effects of ACEs'](#) (2020)

² See [Findings from the implementation of The PATHS Programme for Schools in NI 2014-2018'](#) (2018)

1. General comments

- 1.1. Barnardo's NI welcomes the development of this Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAWG) and the Foundational Action Plan. We are pleased with the Department's collaborative and comprehensive approach to the development and co-design process on this essential piece of work.
- 1.2. EVAWG is one of the most important and pressing challenges facing society. This Strategic Framework and Foundational Action Plan sets out an ambitious roadmap to achieving the vision of 'A changed society where women and girls are free from all forms of gender-based violence, abuse and harm, including the attitudes, systems and structural inequalities that cause them'. We welcome this vision for transformational change and the draft Strategic Framework.
- 1.3. A key element in ensuring the success of the strategic framework will be the implementation of the action plan and the resource committed to delivering this. We are concerned that as yet, no funding been allocated to delivery of the action plan. We strongly urge the department to ensure that, in finalising and implementing this Strategic Framework, it is fully resourced and properly funded. We understand there are budgetary pressures facing all government departments, however commitment, determination, proper resourcing and funding is necessary for this Strategic Framework to be effective.
- 1.4. Many of our services and systems in Northern Ireland are stretched beyond their capacity. This has been the case for several years, and the impact of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis has only heightened the challenges we face. Resourcing and funding of services has not increased to match the increased pressures and demands on services and the workforce. It is essential that the implementation of this Strategic Framework does not become another item on a long list for already stretched services. By comprehensively resourcing and funding this framework, services will be able to effectively and meaningfully bring it to life and work towards achieving its outcomes.
- 1.5. Additionally, services must also be accessible and available to all communities. This means ensuring that awareness-raising goes beyond mainstream or conventional approaches and engages with different communities and groups to understand how best to engage and raise awareness among different populations.
- 1.6. Barnardo's NI welcomes consideration of the particular needs of children and young people throughout the Strategic Framework. It is imperative

that where support and services are made available for children and young people, they are age appropriate and tailored to their needs.

- 1.7. The tailoring of support is also very important when we consider the diversity of Northern Ireland's population. It is important that implementation of the Strategic Framework does not take a one-size fits all approach and it must take into consideration the different experiences and needs of our communities. The Strategic Framework must be truly intersectional to be effective, including for example, our LGBT+ community, minority ethnic communities and disabled community.
- 1.8. We believe that there is a lot of potential for this Strategic Framework to make a positive impact on the everyday life of women and girls. It is important that as it is implemented and rolled out, there is consistency throughout Northern Ireland in terms of support available and access to services.
- 1.9. We are pleased that the Strategic Framework and Foundational Action Plan set out an approach to delivery, including a Year 1 Action Plan. We recommend that the roles and responsibilities of each department are clearly outlined upon finalisation of the Strategic Framework so that there are clear lines of accountability. Actions should be assigned to specific leads in each department who are responsible for co-ordinating the implementation, resourcing and funding of the Strategic Framework.
- 1.10. In addition to accountability within government, Barnardo's NI also recommends that professional accountability is built-into the implementation of the Framework for those services commissioned or working under the Framework to ensure outcomes are monitored and achieved.
- 1.11. Barnardo's NI welcomes the eight 'Guiding Principles for the Implementation of the Strategic Framework' established by the co-design group. It is important that these principles form the basis for the outworking of the Framework. Any evaluations of the Framework should include consideration of whether implementation is being carried out in line with these guiding principles.
- 1.12. Barnardo's NI strongly supports a trauma informed approach being infused throughout the implementation of the Strategic Framework. A key theme running throughout the Strategic Framework is the impact of trauma, both in the everyday harassment and prejudice that women and girls face, as well as the significant and complex trauma of a person who has experienced abuse. A trauma informed approach to implementation

means that services will take into account the impact of trauma on individuals and consider that each person may have particular needs that must be addressed alongside the support they are receiving.

- 1.13. Adopting a trauma informed approach also means considering what adverse childhood experiences or other life experiences might impact a person's attitudes and behaviours, making them more likely to perpetrating violence. This is an important consideration as this Framework seeks to address the root causes of VAWG and help to prevent violence taking place in the first place.
- 1.14. Barnardo's NI also welcomes that opportunities for review have been outlined in the Strategic Framework's delivery plan ('Our Approach to Delivery'), including an independent mid-term review to assess the impact of the strategy and review governance arrangements. We recommend there is also continuous review of the Strategic Framework to ensure it is effective and responsive. It is important that examples of good practice are shared and replicated throughout Northern Ireland in a timely and accessible manner, and that we learn the lessons from actions that have been less successful.

2. Outcome 1: Changed attitudes, behaviours and social norms

- 2.1. Barnardo's NI welcomes this outcome and the focus on prevention and early intervention in the Strategic Framework, which is crucial to tackling the issue of VAWG long term and for future generations. Violence and abuse experienced by women and girls is a public health issue and prevention and early intervention is fundamentally important.
- 2.2. Schools based programmes like LifeSkills, delivered by Barnardo's NI, align with the actions under *Outcome 1*. LifeSkills is an evidence based, early intervention and prevention programme that reduces risk taking behaviours to include a focus on violence reduction. The programme develops emotional literacy, critical thinking, problem solving, healthy relationships and strategies to prevent risk taking behaviour in primary and secondary school children. LifeSkills trains teachers who deliver the programme to children in their classrooms. The programme has been proven to change children's attitudes, behaviours and social norms, and can illustrate this through the production of class, school and community level impact reports.
- 2.3. We are pleased that *Outcome 1.1* specifically commits to involving young people and children in the co-creation of campaigns to change attitudes, behaviours, and social norms, to prevent VAWG and interrupt

the cycle of violence. We strongly recommend that any such campaigns consider how the younger generation engage with and respond to public messaging and the best ways to reach them, including online, with lessons continually learned to improve the effectiveness of such campaigns.

- 2.4. While *Outcome 1.1* does state that those with lived experience of abuse, harm and violence will be involved in the co-creation of such campaigns, we recommend that specific mention is made to involving women and girls with lived experience.
- 2.5. The commitment to delivery of campaigns aimed at all kinds of people across all stages of life in *Outcome 1.1* is important and must include campaigns aimed at boys and men. It is also important that such campaigns don't just focus on highlighting negative attitudes and behaviours, but also include examples of positive male role models for boys and men demonstrating healthy attitudes, behaviours, and relationships.
- 2.6. We welcome *Outcome 1.2* and the Strategic Framework's position that every sector across society has a role in preventing violence against women and girls. This includes the important role of the Community and Voluntary Sector, which must be supported and have access to resources that allows the sector to build on work that promotes positive attitudes and behaviours, through the strong relationships built with children, young people, parents, carers, and communities. Barnardo's NI also welcomes the specific mention of sharing resources and good practice, as this is important for achieving greater impact.

3. Outcome 2: Healthy, respectful relationships

- 3.1. Barnardo's NI welcomes this outcome and the focus on equipping everyone in society to enjoy healthy, respectful relationships. We particularly welcome that this outcome acknowledges and focuses on early intervention, recognising the importance of equipping our children and young people to have the right knowledge and skills to have fulfilling and safe relationships throughout their lives.
- 3.2. *Outcome 2.1* raises the point that parents and carers of young children have a very important role in modelling respect and equality in the relationships. However, there is no discussion within the Strategic Framework of parental ethno-theories and the impact of culture on how parents may model relationships. It is important that the final Strategic

Framework speaks to, and meets the needs of, the wide range of experiences in Northern Ireland. For example, Barnardo's NI has over 25 years' experience supporting children and families who are new to Northern Ireland, some of whom are refugees or asylum-seekers. Since 2015, we have delivered the Northern Ireland Refugee Support Service (NIRSS) and work with displaced children and families through several programmes of support. NIRSS provides intensive support to refugees placed in Northern Ireland, supporting families and children to cope with both past trauma and integration into Northern Ireland. We have used this breadth of service experience to inform our comments and recommendations. It is important to acknowledge that healthy, respectful relationships can look different in different cultures, whilst also addressing that cultural norms should never be an excuse for violence, abuse, or harm towards women and girls.

- 3.3. Additionally, further consideration should be given within *Outcome 2.4* how best to train and support front line staff to distinguish between cultural differences in how relationships are modelled and in identifying harmful cultural practices, for example child or forced marriage, and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). It is important that where frontline staff become aware of concerns, these are addressed in a respectful and safe way, so as not to put women and girls at any increased risk of harm. Any development of training for practitioners should be undertaken in partnership with the representatives from those communities to ensure the balance between cultural respect, and protection of women and girls.
- 3.4. In delivering the Independent Guardian Service (IGS) in Northern Ireland, we see first-hand how cultural norms and experiences can impact on a young person's views and behaviour. Through IGS we support children who have arrived in Northern Ireland from a wide range of countries throughout the world. It is essential that we work alongside and with these children to understand their experience and ensure they are receiving the right support.
- 3.5. The first 1001 days of a child's life (conception to age 2) are critically important in a child's emotional, social, and cognitive development and in forming healthy, secure attachment. Barnardo's NI recommends that *Outcome 2.1* is strengthened by including this point, so that the opportunities to promote healthy relationships, even before a child is born, are not forgotten within this Strategic Framework.
- 3.6. Barnardo's NI welcomes commitments made in *Outcome 2.2* to strengthen and mainstream education on strong and healthy relationships throughout the curriculum for all ages and learning needs,

including relationships and sexuality education (RSE). Barnardo's NI strongly believes that providing standardised, inclusive, well-informed Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in all schools as part of the core curriculum would play a key role in educating young people about healthy relationships, consent and boundaries. We recommend that RSE is developmentally appropriate and supports children and young people to recognise signs of abuse and exploitation. Barnardo's NI believes that whole-school approaches to well-informed RSE in schools would be invaluable in challenging myths and stereotypes from a young age, as well as encompassing topics such as mental health, wellbeing, and resilience.

- 3.7. We recommend that RSE should explore digital citizenship, including an understanding of online safety, privacy and ethics. For children growing up in Northern Ireland today, there is little separation between their online and offline worlds, and this has been compounded by the pandemic and shift to online learning. It is essential that children are provided with the knowledge and skills to understand how their interactions online can impact their life, and that of those around them.
- 3.8. It is also important that RSE includes developmentally appropriate discussion of online harms such as pornography. Research by the Children's Commissioner for England found that 10% of nine-year-olds had viewed pornographic content, and the average age for viewing pornographic content was 13 years old. Tackling pornographic harms is an important element of prevention and early intervention as we know that viewing pornography can normalise abusive behaviours by impacting the way boys see and treat girls and women, and by causing girls to be less able to identify abusive behaviours. It is positive that the UK Online Safety Bill will now mean that pornography sites and social media companies which host pornographic content will need to age verify this content, however it is still important that RSE discusses the harms of pornography.
- 3.9. The Barnardo's NI Botvin LifeSkills programme is a universal, highly effective, early intervention and prevention programme, designed for whole class, in-school delivery for primary and secondary schools. LifeSkills concentrates on a preventative approach which shares age-appropriate information with children and young people, providing them with the skills, knowledge and attitudes to make healthy choices. These are the core components necessary to change children's behaviours.

Studies have shown that LifeSkills can reduce the prevalence of risk-taking behaviours by up to 75%, with effects lasting 12 years³.

- 3.10. Good quality RSE has an important role to play in addressing and preventing harmful sexual behaviour in children. Children who display harmful sexual behaviour should be treated as children first and foremost. Rather than regarding this as a justice matter, this is a safeguarding issue and children who display harmful sexual behaviour should be referred to appropriate early intervention services to prevent the escalation of these behaviours and address the underlying factors. We believe that prevention, via effective early intervention, based on understanding the motivators and causes is an effective approach.
- 3.11. We welcome that *Outcome 2.2* includes a focus on introducing whole school approaches to developing healthy and respectful relationships. Barnardo's NI believes that whole-school approaches to well-informed RSE is important for children to receive consistent messaging in every classroom throughout the school day. A whole school approach should include involvement with parents and carers on the journey, since they have such a key role in educating children and young people about relationships. For example, an important element of the *PATHS® Programme* is parent information sessions in which parents are provided with relevant information about the SEL language and skills their children are learning in class, and how they can model and support the development of these skills at home and beyond.
- 3.12. We welcome that *Outcome 2.4* recognises that helping those at higher risk of using violence is also an important element of early intervention to EAWG. Pharos⁴ is a Barnardo's NI service that supports children, young people and their families affected by parental substance use. Feedback from Pharos indicates a correlation between substance use and increases in violent behaviours. Another observed trend is that trauma is often an influencing factor for substance use. Adopting a trauma-informed approach is crucial in the implementation of this strategy. While trauma is never an excuse for VAWG, it is important that we understand what is driving harmful behaviour, that the subtleties of influencing factors are identified and that these are ultimately addressed to break the cycle of violence.

³ For more information on LifeSkills, see '[LifeSkills - Findings from the implementation of Botvin LifeSkills within North Down and Ards](#)' (2019)

⁴ <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-02/Pharos%20Leaflet%202021.pdf>

4. Outcome 3: Women and girls feel and are safe everywhere

- 4.1. We welcome the areas of focus identified within *Outcome 3* to prevent VAWG and ensure women and girls are safe and feel safe everywhere, however we recommend that detail is provided on how to improve safety of women and girls in private spaces, particularly at home. While the outcome's introductory text refers to homes as a place where VAWG occurs no specific action to tackle this has been included in *Outcome 3*.
- 4.2. The home should be a safe place for everyone, however we know that sadly this is not the case for many women and children. This framework should consider how women and children are supported to identify when they do not feel safe at home, and ensure that support is available and accessible to anyone who need to find a place of safety away from the home, or get the support and they need to make their home a safe place.
- 4.3. More must be done to improve the safety of women and girls in the night-time economy. Barnardo's NI welcomes that *Outcome 3.1* identifies this. We recommend that specific mention is made to ensuring the safety of not only consumers, but also women and girls who work in the night-time economy. Anecdotal evidence from our services, suggests this group suffer VAWG regularly and this must change.
- 4.4. Furthermore, those who work within the night-time economy should be provided with adequate training to spot signs of VAWG and how to report it. This training should be developed alongside organisations who work closely with women and girls who have experienced VAWG in the night-time economy and ensure that it reflects the reality of their experience. Additionally, it is essential that where concerns are reported, this is done in a way that keeps the women and girls safe from further harm.
- 4.5. Barnardo's NI welcomes commitments made in *Outcome 3.2* to support development of policies, procedures, and tools that help women and girls be safe online. SEEN (Sexual Exploitation Ends Now) is a specialist child sexual exploitation service run by Barnardo's NI. It supports children, young people and families affected by, or at risk of, sexual abuse, including providing specialist therapeutic support for children who have experienced sexual exploitation. Anecdotal evidence from this service points to the alarming rise in women and girls receiving abuse online, and online tools and platforms being utilised by abusers for coercive control. One example is girls being asked by their partners to keep their device's camera on while sleeping so their partner can monitor them throughout the night when they are not physically present.

- 4.6. The online world continues to develop at a fast-pace and in order to protect our children and young people, we must have the most up to date and effective action plan in place. Barnardo's NI is concerned about emerging technologies such as virtual reality and artificial intelligence, and the harms that they can cause children. The EVAWG strategic framework should allow space to maintain a watching brief on emerging trends, as the online world continues to develop, to ensure that we can respond flexibly and quickly to best protect children and young people online.
- 4.7. We recommend greater focus within *Outcome 3.2* on making the online space safe for children and young people, given the increased risks children and young face online. All children should be safe online and they trust adults to do this for them. Yet far too often we put the onus on children to keep themselves safe. As a society we understand that children are not responsible for physical or sexual abuse that is inflicted on them, however the same cannot be said for online harms. While it is important to educate children on healthy relationships and online safety, the responsibility for this abuse lies with the perpetrator. While responsibility for regulating tech companies lies with Westminster, there is work to be done in Northern Ireland in changing attitudes and supporting children who experience online abuse. This should include clear public health information and resources that signpost children, parents and carers to appropriate support.
- 4.8. Children who experience abuse online are not offered the same support pathway as children who have been abused offline, despite the harm to children being the same. There must be parity in the support offered to children to help them recover from the trauma. Additionally, there must be better and consistent support for all types of child abuse especially as they often overlap.

5. Outcome 4: Quality frontline services, protection, and provision for victims and survivors of violence against women and girls

- 5.1. The delivery of responsive, accessible, and effective services will be crucial to the success of this Framework. Support must be available for women and girls when and where they need it. Women and girls must not be excluded from accessing support because of their postcode. We know that violence against women and girls is a problem right across NI and therefore frontline services must be available on a equal footing throughout NI.

- 5.2. The emphasis in *Outcome 4* must go beyond responsive services. Services must have expertise which is continually developed and refreshed. This piece of work must also reflect people's experience of engaging with services, rather than focusing solely on functionality. From our experience, children and young people have a wide range of experiences interacting with services, from having very positive experiences to other who have had a negative experience and as a result have stopped engaging with professionals.
- 5.3. We welcome the commitment made in *Outcome 4.1* to undertaking a gap analysis in general frontline services provision, including for those with complex needs facing additional barriers to support. We recommend that this includes a review of access to translation support in public services. Anecdotal evidence from our services have reported a lack of access to suitable translation services for those who speak little/no English. Even when the request for translation support is given in advance of appointments, such as medical, children and young people we support have often struggled to access them, resulting in cancellations and/or rescheduled appointments. This problem is even more acute for immediate specialist services, such as those required by victims and survivors of VAWG.

6. Outcome 5: A justice system which has the confidence of victims, survivors and the public in its ability to address violence against women and girls

- 6.1. We welcome the focus of strategic framework not only on challenging stereotypes and public attitudes, but also on challenging stereotypes and attitudes within Northern Ireland services and delivery teams, especially statutory bodies. Barnardo's NI has supported young people who have asked to withdraw a complaint or case against someone as a result of their experience interacting with justice officials or statutory bodies. This could also impact on a person's decision to report acts of harassment, abuse or violence in the future if they feel they won't be believed or listened to or "won't survive it" – an feeling voiced by young people supported by Barnardo's services.
- 6.2. Therefore, we strongly support the commitments made in *Outcome 5.1* to focus on considering specific measures to enhance the confidence, of victims, survivors, and the general public in the justice system, and to trauma informed training for professionals. These actions are important in order to achieve attitude and culture change within our services, in particular the trauma informed training, and additional inequalities faced by some groups of women and girls.

- 6.3. *Outcome 5.2* notes that delays in the justice system in cases involving women and girls add to the trauma inflicted on victims and survivors. This is apparent from our service experience with children and young people. Delay is a central and systemic problem in the investigation and court process for sexual offences in NI, noted by the Gillen Report (2019). It is particularly worrying that the longest delays are seen in the cases of children, the most vulnerable victims for whom a delay may have a disproportionately negative impact. Through our services, children and young people involved in this legal process report feeling stunted in their personal, academic, and professional growth and interactions, including their personal relationships.
- 6.4. *Outcome 5.4* commits to focusing on ensuring appropriate adjudicated and non-adjudicated perpetrator behavioural programmes are available. Barnardo's NI strongly supports the availability of effective, well-resourced, evidence-based non-adjudicated perpetrator programmes. We are concerned that recent funding decisions have weakened the provision of non-adjudicated perpetrator programmes, and the knock-on impact this could have on victims as perpetrators are not receiving the right support to address their behaviour.
- 6.5. Barnardo's NI recommends that when the impact of non-adjudicated perpetrator programmes is reviewed in individual cases, both the perpetrator and victim should be consulted. This is because it is important to understand from the victim's point of view, whether there is any real change to their perpetrator's behaviour behind closed doors, rather than solely focusing on feedback from the perpetrator themselves or the professionals working with them.
- 6.6. The Barnahus model has been demonstrated as an effective model of supporting child victims of sexual abuse or exploitation, and the Gillen Report (2019) recommended that the Department of Justice give consideration to the Barnahus scheme in Iceland. Barnahus is a child-friendly, interdisciplinary, and multiagency centre, whereby different professionals work under one roof in investigating child sexual abuse causes and providing appropriate support for child victims.
- 6.7. Barnardo's NI recommends that the Barnahus model is considered in the implementation of the Strategic Framework as leading trauma informed practice in ensuring children who are victims of violence, harm and abuse are not re-traumatised by participation in justice and supported on a path to recovery.

7. Outcome 6: All of government and society working better together to end violence against women and girls

- 7.1. Barnardo's NI welcomes the commitment set out in *Outcome 6* to a whole of society and whole of government approach to implementation. VAWG is a whole of society problem. Effective cross-departmental working and collaborative resourcing will be essential to effective delivery of this Strategic Framework.
- 7.2. The Children's Services Co-operation Act (2015) is a key piece of legislation which should be utilised in the implementation of the Strategic Framework. This Act places a duty on government departments to work together to deliver the best outcomes for children. This Strategic Framework is a clear case of where this Act could be used to the best effect, to encourage and facilitate cross-departmental working to achieve shared objectives, and also to pool resources to ensure the funding matches the stated commitment.
- 7.3. We welcome the commitments made in *Outcome 6.2.* to data collection, data mapping and disaggregation of data, for robustly evidence based and data informed policy development. This data collection must incorporate all groups, including children and young people, and allow for disaggregation of data to understand trends and challenges within different communities.
- 7.4. It is positive that *Outcome 6.2* highlights the need to explore the gaps in data. This must include consideration of how it will account for underreporting of violence and prejudice against women and girls. No data collection method, even using anonymous approaches, will truly reflect the reality of the situation. Therefore, we would encourage the department to consider how underreporting will be factored into data analysis.
- 7.5. We strongly welcome the commitment made in *Outcome 6* to a whole system approach with collaboration and cooperation across government departments and with, within, and between community, voluntary, and other sectors. A great foundation for this has been laid through the approach adopted in the Framework's co-design process, where CVS organisations were at the table as equal partners to statutory bodies. We encourage this to continue and be built upon for effective delivery of the Framework.

Barnardo's NI welcomes the opportunity to respond to this draft Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls, and Foundational Action Plan. In particular, we appreciate the Department's approach and commitment to the co-design process and the in-depth conversations facilitated with a wide range of stakeholders.

Ending violence against women and girls is one of the most important and pressing challenges facing society, and this Strategic Framework has the opportunity to create real transformational change if implemented fully. The current political and budgetary environment provide a challenging context for implementation, however it is essential that proper resource and funding is assigned to the Framework and that momentum is maintained to deliver on it.

Barnardo's NI is keen to continue working alongside the Department throughout the implementation and delivery of the Framework and reflecting the experience of the women and girls we support through our services to address and meet their needs.

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