

Barnardo's Northern Ireland

Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy (Department of Health, Department of Justice)

Barnardo's NI is the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. Every year we work with more than 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 our response to the joint departmental consultation on the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2023-2030. Our comments are informed by our work with the diverse communities of children and families that we support through our 45+ services in Northern Ireland. As previously stated within our Call for Views response in March 2022, it is important this strategy speaks to, and meets the needs of, the wide range of experiences in Northern Ireland, and we have used this breadth of service experience to inform our comments and recommendations.

Barnardo's NI also provide specialist support to children, young people and families affected by, or at risk of, sexual abuse or exploitation. Our regional service, SEEN (Sexual Exploitation Ends Now), is a specialist child sexual exploitation service, which supports children, young people and families affected by, or at risk of, sexual abuse, and can provide specialist therapeutic support for children who have experienced sexual exploitation.

We ask that this consultation response is read in tandem with our previous Call for Views reply sent in March 2022.

1. General comments

- 1.1. Barnardo's NI welcomes the vision and aim set out for this strategy in creating a co-ordinated response to domestic and sexual abuse informed by victims' voices and community engagement. Furthermore, we agree with the development of a performance framework with specific key performance indicators achieving the eight outcomes which are built around four pillars within this strategy and look forward in influencing the delivery mechanisms in order to achieve its visions values and goals.
- 1.2. However, Barnardo's NI is very concerned that after a lengthy Call for Views and engagement process, the strategy lacks specificity on how the framework will be achieved with no detail on deliverable actions, departmental responsibilities, resourcing the strategy and how its outcomes will be implemented, monitored and measured. We are concerned that the initial years of this strategy will be spent agreeing deliverables without progress on implementation or delivery. Furthermore, specific recommendations such as the implementation of the Barnahus model or the introduction of universal, standardised Relationship Sexuality Education included in our response and others from the sector have not been suitably addressed.
- 1.3. 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 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 strategy does not become another item on a long list for already stretched services. By comprehensively resourcing and funding this strategy, services will be able to bring the strategies effectively and meaningfully to life to work towards achieving the outcomes.
- 1.4. Barnardo's NI is concerned that while the draft strategy is well intentioned, the content of the strategy is lacking in clarity or detail and therefore it is challenging to understand how it will be implemented and what real-life impact of the strategy will be. Without attributed departmental responsibilities, there is no strategic accountability or oversight and therefore outcomes are at risk of being lost due to lack of leadership.
- 1.5. The tailoring of support is also very important when we consider the diversity of Northern Ireland's population. These strategies cannot take a one-size fits all approach and must take into consideration the different experiences, demographics, intersectionality and needs of our

communities. These strategies must be intersectional to be effective, including for example, our LGBT+ community, minority ethnic communities and disabled community. In order for this strategy to be successful it must resource and implement support services that include early intervention and specialised support is accessible to all those who need it, when they need it.

- 1.6. One of the biggest challenges currently in Northern Ireland is the legislative, policy and resource gap compared with other nations within the UK; this has been exacerbated by the lack of a functioning Assembly and Executive.
- 1.7. Feedback from our teams highlight that workforce shortage of social workers in statutory teams to sufficiently support and safeguard within the community. Staff often lack the time to effectively engage between organisations, this can curtail holistic assessments of domestic and/or sexual abuse cases, and as a result detrimentally impact the decisions made in family courts.
- 1.8. In order to achieve the aim of achieving societal change, the strategy requires cross-departmental commitment, determination resource and funding. Barnardo's NI has consistently advocated the importance of longer-term sustainable funding and a costed delivery plan in order to fully implement the strategy and associated action plans. Whilst we are mindful of the barriers due to the lack of a finalised budget, we reiterate our asks for a clear outline of departmental responsibility, and leads being identified to ensure accountability against outcomes. If budgets cannot be allocated at this time, then fully costed funding options should be available for comment and mechanisms such as the Children's Services Co-Operation Act (2015) should be utilised in the implementation of this strategy.

2. Definitions

- 2.1. Language and context are very important. Section Two states '*Teenagers can experience domestic abuse in their relationships*', this could give the impression that only teenagers experience domestic abuse, and that younger children do not. The strategy highlights forms of child to adult abuse, but does not acknowledge child to child abuses

that may be carried out (this is relevant to both domestic and sexual abuse)¹.

- 2.2. Furthermore, Barnardo's NI reiterates that not all forms of violence are physical. For example, controlling or coercive behaviour where a perpetrator subjects a spouse, partner, or close relative to a sustained pattern of controlling, threatening, or humiliating behaviour².
- 2.3. Barnardo's NI broadly agrees with the strategy's definition of domestic abuse. However, given the strategy outlines a number of different forms of domestic abuse can take, we recommend it acknowledges 'Honour' Based Violence, such as punishment for perceived family shame or embarrassment³, and different forms of neglect are referenced within the strategy.
- 2.4. Barnardo's NI broadly agrees with the definition of sexual abuse within the strategy. However, given the strategy outlines a number of different forms sexual abuse can take, we would recommend it acknowledges Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and Forced Marriage. We also recommend that a definition of child sexual exploitation should be included, we would suggest the following:

'Child sexual exploitation is a form of sexual abuse in which a person(s) exploits, coerces and/or manipulates a child or young person into engaging in some form of sexual activity in return for something the child needs or desires and/or for the gain of the person(s) perpetrating or facilitating the abuse⁴.

3. Strategy Pillars

- 3.1. Barnardo's NI is in broad agreement with the four pillars and eight outcomes, particularly around their interdependence. It is imperative that this strategy takes a trauma-informed child centred approach both in the strategy development and in the implementation and delivery of services and support. This means that the strategy and services will take into account the impact of trauma on individuals and consider that each

¹Sibling violence/abuse is the physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse of one sibling by another Michalos, Alex C. and SpringerLink (Online service). "Sibling Violence." *Encyclopaedia of Quality of Life and Well-being Research*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2014.

² <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/coercive-control/>

³ <https://www.met.police.uk/advice/advice-and-information/honour-based-abuse/honour-based-abuse/>

⁴ [SBNI 2014, adopted from CSE Knowledge Transfer Partnership NI.](#)

person may have particular needs that must be addressed alongside the support they are receiving.

- 3.2. Within the strategy, statistics highlight that 1 in 4 cases of reported domestic abuse involved a parent-child relationship, and 57% of sexual abuse victims were under the age of 18.⁵ Despite children being disproportionately represented as victims of domestic and sexual abuse, the draft strategy outlines a more adult centric approach. In order to achieve the outcomes, we recommend including specific child friendly policies and listening to experience and views of children and young people. Whilst we support the recognition of the importance of including the voice of victims, further detail is needed on what methods will be used to include the voice of children and young people, and ensure their voices are embedded within the strategy.

Pillar 1: Partnership

- 3.3. Barnardo's NI welcomes the key priorities of Pillar One, particularly the importance of disaggregated data, acknowledging the need for adopting a cross-departmental approach and its commitment to working with statutory, voluntary, community and faith organisations. We reiterate our comments above that resources must be aligned with this commitment.
- 3.4. It is essential that the data collection reflects not just the general population statistics, but also disaggregates for different groups to ensure the right support is reaching people at the right time. In addition, we would encourage the departments to consider how they may ensure the statistics account for, and reflect, the nature of underreporting of these issues.
- 3.5. Children are often left out of statistics which report on the impact of domestic abuse in families, thereby masking the issues that many children and young people are facing. For example while statistics in NI are available in relation to high risk domestic abuse 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 abuse 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 abuse.

⁵ DOJ/DOH (2023) Draft Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy, page 15-17.

Pillar 2: Prevention

- 3.6. Barnardo's NI welcomes Pillar Two and its commitment to developing an understanding of healthy relationships from an early age. However, the strategy does not address Barnardo's NI previous recommendation for universal mandatory Relationship Sexual Education (RSE) as part of all school's core curriculum. 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. Please see our previous submission for further detail.
- 3.7. The Barnardo's NI LifeSkills programme is a universal, highly effective, early intervention and prevention programme, designed for whole class, in-school delivery for 8-14 year olds. 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. Studies have shown that LifeSkills can reduce the prevalence of risk-taking behaviours by up to 75%, with effects lasting 12 years⁶. The LifeSkills programme builds capacity by equipping teachers with the skills to prevent risky behaviours.

Pillar 3: Support

- 3.8. Barnardo's NI welcomes the explicit references to children in the outcomes underneath Pillar Three, acknowledging their unique and distinct needs as victims of domestic and sexual abuse.
- 3.9. Establishing a clear and comprehensive picture about societal attitudes and the nature and extent of domestic and sexual abuse in Northern Ireland should be amongst the first priority areas of work if these strategies are to effect real change and ensure services are targeted where they are needed, including addressing underreporting.
- 3.10. The reasons for under reporting are complex and many, however from the experiences gathered in Barnardo's NI services, one of the main reasons women do not speak out sooner is fear of how the safeguarding system often re-victimises them, seeing them as responsible for the trauma they and their children have been exposed to. The current cost-of-living crisis is also creating additional financial dependence, as well

⁶ For more information on LifeSkills, see '[LifeSkills - Findings from the implementation of Botvin LifeSkills within North Down and Ards](#)' (2019)

as stress within already vulnerable families and must be considered within the implementation of this strategy.

- 3.11. Whilst Pillar 3 references children who need to access accommodation, it frames this in the context of 'victims and their children', rather than recognising children as victims in their own right. Additionally, specific reference should be made to young people who need to access accommodation as a result of domestic and/or sexual abuse. Young people are often housed in unsuitable accommodation at key stages of their life, for example during their final years of education or starting out in their work life. Barnardo's NI recommends that services and support provided to children and young people must be safe, age-appropriate and tailored to their needs.

Pillar 4: Justice

- 3.12. Barnardo's NI welcomes Pillar Four's objective specifically in the linkages that early prevention can often curtail cycles of offending. The experience of children in the justice system is often overlooked or forgotten entirely. Barnardo's NI recommends that training for justice professionals should include specific guidance on working with children, particularly children who have experienced trauma. For those professional working with children who are victims or witnesses, this training should examine the balance between getting the best evidence vs. re-traumatising the child. It is very concerning that the Barnahus model is not explicitly referenced within the draft strategy.
- 3.13. Barnardo's NI is concerned about misuse of the justice system in relation to 'contact' with children and coercive control, as a means of perpetuating abuse. There is a lack of research on the impact of contact arrangements on children, both in terms of the benefits and the risks regarding the need for balance between the rights of the parents and the needs of the child. Contact must always be in the best interests of the child. There is a clear training need in relation to contact and coercive control and Barnardo's recommends this strategy addresses these concerns.
- 3.14. The moment of separation, and the time following it, can be a high risk period for children and victims of domestic abuse. Feedback from our Family Resource Centres indicates that families need a high level of support during this time; in cases of post separation abuse seen by our Family Resource Centres, one third involved child contact issues.
- 3.15. Contact visits with children can often be used as a means of continuing a pattern of abuse or exerting control. As a result, contact visits can

become a stressful and potentially traumatic experience for children; this can impact on other areas of a child's life, including their mental health and capacity to engage in education.

- 3.16. The needs of children and young people who are victims of domestic and sexual abuse are often unmet within the justice system. Expert knowledge is required to ensure appropriate child centred service provision and child friendly language is being used. Barnardo's NI recommends that this Pillar reflects this and makes a commitment to a culture of continuous learning and improvement, and that professional accountability is built-into the implementation of the strategy for those services commissioned or working under these strategies to ensure outcomes are monitored and achieved.
- 3.17. Barnardo's NI recommends this strategy requires tackling the lack of expertise within the judicial system around the complexity and risk in families where there has been domestic abuse/sexual abuse. As such professional social workers are often undermined and their assessments increasingly requiring further validation from a range of independent 'experts', leading to delays and additional stress for families, children, and young people.

Barnardo's NI welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation on the draft strategy. We welcome the intentions of both Departments to develop a strategy that is broad and inclusive. However, without the necessary detail and specificity, it is not clear how this strategy will be practically implemented and realised. Barnardo's NI recommends a redrafting of the strategy to reflect the in-depth knowledge provided by organisations in the 'Call for Evidence', and the inclusion of tangible actions with clearly defined roles and responsibilities for the relevant departments, agencies and organisations. Given the statistical significance of children and young people at risk or have experienced domestic and/or sexual abuse, this strategy should emphasise clear child-centred policies and actions throughout the document.

We hope our comments have been useful and we would welcome the opportunity to continue engaging with the Department on the development of this strategy.

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