Department of Health
An Roinn Sláinte
Männystrie O Poustie
www.health-ni.gov.uk

Department of Justice
An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt
Männystrie O tha Laa
www.justice-ni.gov.uk

DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL ABUSE STRATEGY

2024–2031

Tackling Domestic and/or sexual abuse is **everyone's business**

SEPTEMBER 2024

Accessing support

If you have been affected by domestic and/or sexual abuse, you are never alone and it is not your fault. Help and support is available to help you break free from abuse.

The **Domestic and Sexual abuse Helpline** can be contacted free of charge, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year on **0808 802 1414** or help@dsahelpline.org.

This is a confidential service available to both women and men. Web chat and a telephone translation service is also available. Trained helpline workers can talk about the help and support that you could get. You can also contact the Helpline if you are worried about a friend or relative and you want support on how to help them.

For more information visit **www.dsahelpline.org**.

Contact details of other support services, including Carafriend, HERe NI, Men's Advisory Project, NSPCC, Victim Support NI, Women's Aid etc. can be found at **https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/support-services-victims**.

Anyone who feels in immediate danger should dial 999.

If it is difficult to talk, use the **'silent solution'** by pressing **55** when prompted (if phoning from a mobile phone). This allows police to know it is a genuine emergency.

If the incident does not involve immediate danger, or for less urgent matters. dial 101 or report online at **https://www.psni.police.uk/advice_information/**.

Alternative formats

Hard copies of this document and copies in other formats (including Braille, audio, large print etc.), can be made available on request. If it would assist you to access the document in an alternative format, or language other than English, please let us know and we will do our best to assist you.

Please email **VAP@justice-ni.gov.uk**

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Foreword by Minister of Health and Minister of Justice

As Ministers for Justice and Health, we are delighted to introduce the new 7-year Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024-2031.

Building upon the groundwork laid by the previous 7-year Strategy, this Strategy has been developed in collaboration with the Department for Communities, the Department of Education and the Executive Office, as well as stakeholders in the voluntary and community sector. Critically, it is informed by those with lived experience of domestic and sexual abuse. We extend our sincere appreciation to all those involved in its development.

Partnership is a key thread running through this Strategy. It acknowledges that, if we are going to tackle domestic and sexual abuse, we need to work together – none of us can do this alone.

We have worked closely with the Executive Office to ensure alignment with the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy (EVAWG), which has been developed and will be implemented in parallel. Both strategies will support and complement each other and have the real potential to be even more impactful as a result.

We know that domestic and sexual abuse transcends boundaries of gender, age, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. It is insidious and pervading - leaving an indelible mark. Its victims are those who have been directly impacted by it and those who have witnessed it, or who live in its formidable shadow.

We acknowledge the right for everyone to live a life free from the fear of domestic and sexual abuse. That is the ultimate aim of this Strategy. We are building on what we know works, on evidence-based practice and we continue to listen to the voices of those with lived experience.

We are committed to create a society in Northern Ireland where domestic and sexual abuse are not tolerated, where victims receive the support they need and where those responsible are held to account. This Strategy is our sincere attempt to deliver on that aim, so that no one has to live in fear of abuse.



Mike Nesbitt MLA
Minister of Health



Naomi Long MLA
Minister of Justice

The voice of victims including children and young people

The views and feedback received from victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse were crucial throughout the Strategy development process and guided the development of our vision and priorities. We are indebted to the many inspiring and courageous people who shared their experiences and ideas for change both directly with us and through local support services. Some of these comments are captured below and relevant quotations capturing the views and insights of victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse have also been included throughout the Strategy:

"At a basic level victims need to be heard"

"People need to realise the seriousness of domestic and/or sexual abuse the more they know the more they can learn how to stop it"

"Women who are disabled are more vulnerable to many types of abuse ... Rural women are at increased risk of physical violence"

"Health problems from the abuse they suffered? It also has mental health impacts and impacts on children ... all costly for the health service"

"Domestic abuse is a massive issue ... There's so much of it going on that is hidden that no one knows about"

"Recovery from domestic and/or sexual abuse often requires long term, intensive therapeutic interventions"

"A kind word, a smile it makes all the difference"

"Believe those that say they have been abused. Build a culture of belief"

"Victims of domestic abuse should be supported throughout all their journey"

"There is no point in increased awareness and referrals to services if those services are not there or are under-funded and under-trained"

"Needs to be more training for the Police / Courts"

"Zero Tolerance on Domestic Abuse"

"Support by trained staff is vital and having the opportunity for supported accommodation is a key to recovery. This has be available to all victims of DSA"

"There are no services for gay men if you live rurally... I was completely isolated"

"Services do not see men as victims"

"Workplace policies. Make them mandatory – employers have a duty of care"

"Mental abuse is really hard ... gas lighting me and controlling me which was making my life difficult and isolating me"

"People should be properly taught about different forms of abuse"

"The more people that know, the easier it is to support people and intervene"

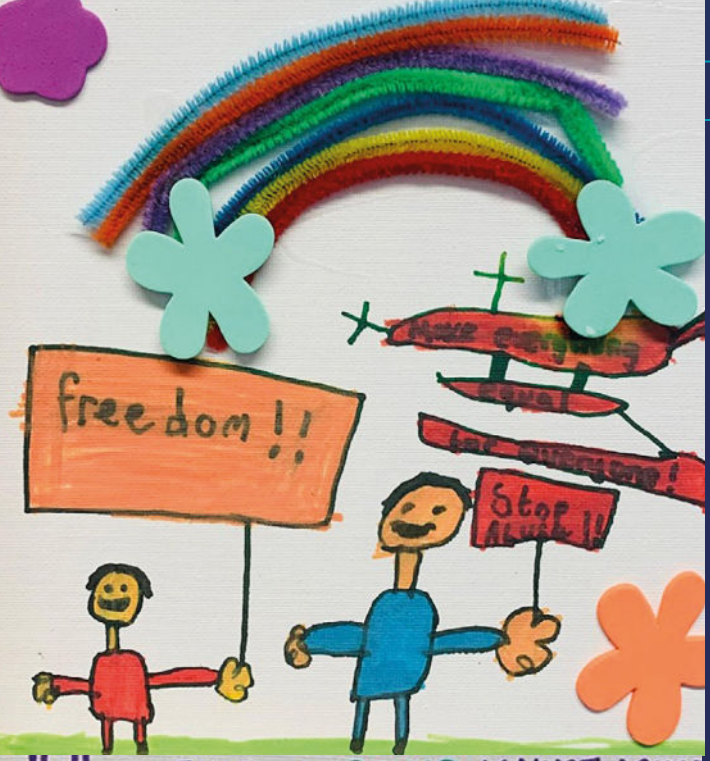
"It took years for me to realise that what happened was abuse"

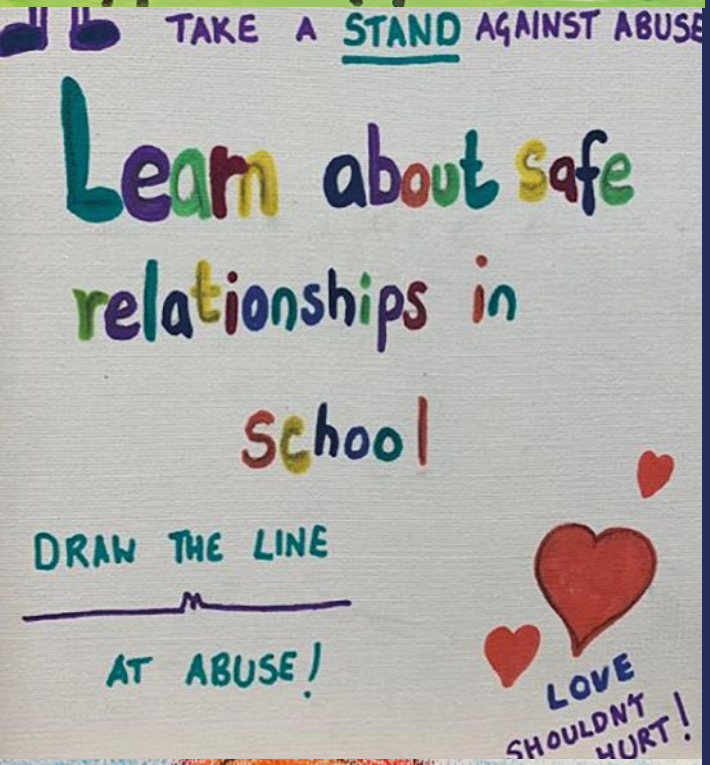
"Needs to be recognition that the victim and their children are more likely to return if they cannot financially support themselves"

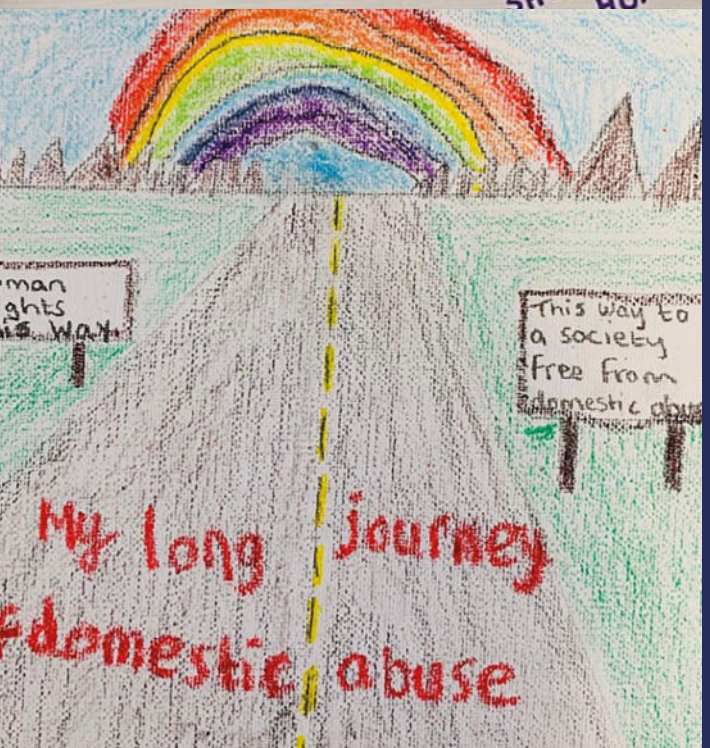
"I just wanted it to stop"

"The housing is so so so important"

"I felt so much shame and I didn't know what to do"







We would also like to say a special thank you to each child and young person who shared their ideas for change, including through their wonderful creative artwork, as we developed the Strategy. The artwork and quotes below have been provided by Women's Aid Federation NI by those children and young people using their services.

"Children who live with domestic violence sometimes can't concentrate on their work and they don't want to tell the teacher in case the teacher or principal rings home and the child might get in trouble"

"I was 16 and thought it was normal"

"There should be signs in public places to show where to go or who to call"

"A young person wants a safe future"

"Add more laws about abuse e.g. more jail time"

"I think it is essential that Government departments, organisations and charity work together"

"Make schools give out more information on domestic and/or sexual abuse and how to spot the signs"

"Voices NEED to be heard"

"Listen Up Government!"

Your feedback really helped us to see things from your perspective and has shown us that we must “listen up” to what victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse, including those who are children and young people, are telling us as we continue our work.

In return, we have a responsibility to learn from, and build on the experience and expertise that has been shared, to improve and strengthen our services and response to domestic and/or sexual abuse. This will be important as we take forward work through this Strategy and associated action plans. Regardless of age, gender, race, sexual orientation or ability, we have heard your concerns.

As Government Departments we are committed to doing as much as we can to end domestic and sexual abuse and further empowering not only you, but also professionals who work in this area and people across the wider community. By collectively and collaboratively working together, we can make a meaningful difference and change our response to domestic and sexual abuse for the better.

In doing so, we will ensure lived experience is at the heart of what we do and we will continue to work closely with expert partners to build on the excellent work that is already underway. Together we can ensure that domestic and sexual abuse is treated seriously, victims are supported and the root causes are tackled.

The Strategy at a glance

Our vision is that Northern Ireland is a place where:

- **Domestic and/or sexual abuse is not tolerated, and everyone can be safe and free from fear.**
- **Domestic and/or sexual abuse is everyone's business, where partnership work and collaborative approaches create lasting change across our communities and provide hope.**
- **The voice of victims, including children and young people, is valued and central to decision making.**

We want to ensure that the voices and experiences of domestic and/or sexual abuse victims, including children and young people, shape the implementation of this Strategy. This means really listening to what it feels like for victims, and understanding the challenges and barriers they face to accessing help and support.

The Strategy is designed around five pillars:

PILLAR 1: PARTNERSHIP

Driving change together through joint commitment, leadership and partnership working.

OUTCOME	KEY PRIORITY AREAS
A coordinated response to domestic and/or sexual abuse informed by victims' voices and community engagement.	Working collaboratively across all government Departments and with statutory, voluntary and community and faith organisations to tackle domestic and sexual abuse.
	Having effective governance structures underpinning the Strategy's delivery with a performance framework to monitor outcomes and impact.
	Informing policy, legislation and service development with better quality data, research and shared learning.
	Having increased opportunities for victims' voices to be heard and ensuring the Strategy's delivery is underpinned by intersectionality recognising that many people have multiple needs and face multiple barriers.

PILLAR 2: PREVENTION*

Preventing domestic and/or sexual abuse from happening by challenging the attitudes and behaviours that foster it and intervening early where possible to prevent it.

OUTCOMES	KEY PRIORITY AREAS
The public is informed about the different types of domestic and/or sexual abuse and its impact on victims, including children and young people.	Raising cross-sectoral and public awareness, so that those at risk of, or experiencing, domestic and/or sexual abuse, recognise it, its various forms and know that help and support is available.
	Preventing domestic and/or sexual abuse from happening by empowering people to safely challenge attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that foster domestic and/or sexual abuse.
Domestic and/ or sexual abuse is identified and responded to earlier.	Building capacity among people working in frontline and public-facing roles to identify and respond effectively to domestic and/or sexual abuse, including in relation to children and young people, at the earliest opportunity. This includes learning from Domestic Homicide Reviews, improving practice to identify, support and safeguard.
	Supporting and encouraging employers in the public, private and other sectors to make workplaces safer by raising awareness of domestic and/or sexual abuse and promoting workplace policies with effective measures to support staff.

***Measures to address abusive behaviours, under the Justice pillar are also relevant to Prevention.**

PILLAR 3: CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

Preventing domestic and/or sexual abuse from happening and ensuring children and young people, who are victims, are seen and heard; and can access services and receive support, helping them to recover and taking account of their particular needs.

OUTCOMES	KEY PRIORITY AREAS
An increase in the knowledge and skills of children and young people, and of supporting adults in their life, about forming healthy relationships, helping to prevent domestic and/or sexual abuse.	Supporting the education sector to build capacity, knowledge and skills to promote understanding about consent and healthy relationships and to teach about sensitive subjects such as domestic and/or sexual abuse, in an age-appropriate and inclusive way, across schools and other youth settings, training facilities, Further Education Colleges and Universities.
	Improve understanding of domestic and/or sexual abuse and building capacity among parents, guardians and carers, supporting them to be able to confidently discuss the issue of healthy relationships with their children and young people.
Children and young people are supported, feel safe regardless of diversity of need, are guided into services quickly and can access safe accommodation-based services.	Providing tailored, responsive and specialised support for children and young people in an age-appropriate manner, as well as wider family, to reduce the risk and impact of abuse; recover from trauma; understand their needs; and improve their health and well-being, including further implementation of the Gillen Review and consideration of a Barnahus-type model for Northern Ireland.
	Ensuring all children and young people can access sufficient accommodation, or housing support, that is safe and appropriate to their needs and circumstances or supporting them to remain in their home if they want to and it is safe to do so.
Children and young people feel confident to report domestic and/or sexual abuse, barriers to participating in the justice system are reduced and justice responses are effective.	Providing children and young people with accessible information and services to support engagement in the criminal justice process, in a way that ensures they feel protected and safe, including further implementation of the Gillen Review and consideration of a Barnahus-type model for Northern Ireland.

PILLAR 4: SUPPORT AND PROVISION

Ensuring that all victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse can access tailored, responsive and specialised support and provision to recover and rebuild their lives.

OUTCOMES	KEY PRIORITY AREAS
Victims are supported, feel safe regardless of diversity of need and are guided into services quickly.	Providing tailored, responsive and specialised support for victims, as well as wider families, to reduce the risk and impact of abuse; recover from trauma and improve health and well-being; and engage in the justice system in a way that ensures they feel protected and safe.
	Enabling services to better understand intersectional needs of individuals to ensure victims get the responses and support they need.
All victims of domestic abuse can access safe accommodation-based services.	Ensuring all victims can access accommodation, or housing support, that is safe and appropriate to their needs and circumstances.
	Supporting victims of domestic abuse to remain in their home if they want to and it is safe to do so.

PILLAR 5: JUSTICE*

Ensuring justice responses are effective, supporting victims and holding individuals who are abusive to account, at the earliest opportunity.

OUTCOMES	KEY PRIORITY AREAS
Victims feel confident to report domestic and/or sexual abuse, barriers to participating in the justice system are reduced and justice responses are effective.	Understanding better the factors contributing to high attrition levels (where a victim withdraws from criminal justice processes) and under-reporting in domestic and/or sexual abuse cases in order to improve these.
	Providing victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse with accessible information and services to support engagement in the criminal justice process, including continued implementation of the Gillen Review.
	Improving the efficiency of the justice system and how domestic and/or sexual abuse cases are dealt with in criminal, civil and family courts.
	Strengthening the police and criminal justice response to domestic and/or sexual abuse.
Individuals are held to account for their abusive behaviour and supported to change, with the risk of harm reduced and victim safety enhanced.	Supporting individuals to address and manage their abusive behaviours, sustain positive change and facilitate participation by a wider range of individuals.
	Working collaboratively to target the most prolific offenders, improving risk assessment and management.
	Providing integrated safety and support structures for victims where programmes to address abusive behaviours are undertaken.
	Improving protections for those at risk of abuse.

*** Measures to address abusive behaviours, under this pillar are also relevant to the Prevention pillar.**

The outcomes and key priority areas identified will inform future action plans that will outline clear responsibilities and timelines for implementation. Similar to the previous Strategy, this Strategy covers a seven year period, from 2024 – 2031.

1

Introduction

1. Introduction

Purpose and vision

1.1 This is a seven year, cross-departmental Strategy that will run from 2024 - 2031. It is intended to tackle domestic and sexual abuse. The Strategy has been developed by, and its delivery will be overseen by, the **Department of Health** and the **Department of Justice** in conjunction with the **Department for Communities**, the **Department of Education** and the **Executive Office**.

1.2 The Strategy has been informed by significant engagement with key stakeholders and by listening to those with lived experience, including through an initial call for views and subsequent public consultation. Its development has also been informed by gap analysis, taking account of the strategic context in Northern Ireland as well as best practice in other jurisdictions and international standards. The Strategy will be a platform for shared commitments and actions to ensure a systemic and comprehensive approach to tackling domestic and sexual abuse across Northern Ireland.

1.3 As we have developed this Strategy, we have worked closely with the Executive Office to ensure that it is aligned with the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAWG) Strategy, which has been developed and will be implemented in parallel. We acknowledge that the strong interdependencies between both strategies, but that our Strategy applies for all victims of domestic and sexual abuse, not just women and girls. In delivering the Strategy, we will ensure that we will continue to work closely, will incorporate EVAWG principles and learning in future responses and work together to ensure that those responses reinforce and complement each other and are more impactful as a result.

1.4 Domestic and/or sexual abuse cannot be tackled in isolation. A whole society approach is needed. It also requires joint working across a wide range of bodies - departments, statutory agencies, local partnerships, and specialist organisations working in the voluntary and community sector. We have already built strong foundations with extensive stakeholder engagement across the statutory, voluntary and community sectors, the general public and, most importantly, with victims themselves who are experts with lived experience. We will continue to build on that engagement to ensure delivery of this strategic vision. We want to ensure that this Strategy will underpin and drive ongoing communication, listening and collaborating with stakeholders and those who have been affected by domestic and/or sexual abuse.

Our Vision

That Northern Ireland is a place where:

- domestic and/or sexual abuse is not tolerated, and everyone can be safe and free from fear;
- domestic and/or sexual abuse is everyone's business, where partnership work and collaborative approaches create lasting change across our communities and provide hope; and
- the voice of victims, including children and young people, is valued and central to decision making.

1.5 Achieving this vision means we need to address the root causes of domestic and/or sexual abuse; ensuring that those affected get the right support at the right time; and that individuals who are abusive are held to account.

1.6 At its core is the need to ensure that the voices and experiences of victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse, including children and young people, shape how we take forward work to deliver this Strategy. It means really listening to what it feels like for victims and understanding the challenges and barriers they face both in reporting domestic and/or sexual abuse and in accessing help and support.

1.7 To support delivery of the strategic vision the Strategy is structured around **five pillars**:

1. PARTNERSHIP

Driving change together through joint commitment, leadership and partnership working.

2. PREVENTION*

Preventing domestic and/or sexual abuse from happening by challenging the attitudes and behaviours that foster it and intervening early where possible to prevent it.

***We acknowledge that measures to address abusive behaviours, under the Justice pillar are also relevant to Prevention.**

3. CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

Preventing domestic and/or sexual abuse from happening and ensuring children and young people, who are victims, are seen and heard, and can access services and receive support, helping them to recover and taking account of their particular needs.

4. SUPPORT & PROVISION

Ensuring that all victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse can access tailored, responsive and specialised support and provision to recover and rebuild their lives.

5. JUSTICE

Ensuring justice responses are effective, supporting victims and holding individuals who are abusive to account, at the earliest opportunity.

***Measures to address abusive behaviours, under this pillar are also relevant to the Prevention pillar**

1.8 These pillars set out at a high level the strategic approach and direction. They are intended to provide the basis and foundation for a detailed series of action plans that will outline clear actions, responsibilities and timelines for implementation over the next seven years. Against each strategic pillar we have identified the outcomes that this Strategy is intended to deliver, as well as the key priority areas that we will focus on in order to deliver these outcomes (see **Section 3**).

1.9 It also incorporates an integrated performance framework that sets out the indicators that will help us to see whether the Strategy is having the impact that we intend, as well as measures to help us evaluate that impact.

1.10 The strategic framework needs to be dynamic and to be flexible enough for it to evolve and respond to new opportunities, challenges and emerging issues over its lifespan, in order to deliver meaningful change in the longer term.

What this Strategy covers

Scope

1.11 The focus of this Strategy is on tackling **domestic abuse and sexual abuse**, as defined in **Section 2**. We recognise that there are overlaps and interdependencies with certain other crimes (for example, 'honour-based' abuse including female genital mutilation, modern slavery, and human trafficking as well as wider violence against women and girls). The Strategy is intended to take account of these interdependencies; however these offences and issues are already subject to separate strategic interventions and responses and as such, this Strategy does not make specific provision to address them. However, we recognise the importance of sharing information and working in partnership with other lead Departments in relation to specific actions and issues arising from this Strategy. We are committed to collaborative working to ensure better outcomes and to minimise duplication. This includes working effectively across relevant governance structures, such as those in place to provide strategic oversight of work related to child protection/exploitation or work related to ending violence against women and girls. Links with wider areas of work are considered in **Section 5**.

An inclusive approach

1.12 This Strategy recognises that **anyone can be a victim** of domestic and/or sexual abuse regardless of age, ethnicity, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, or any form of disability. As such the Strategy adopts an inclusive approach. Women, men, people from the LGBTQIA+ community, disabled people, young people, older people, and people from ethnic minority communities, for example, can all experience domestic and/or sexual abuse. The Strategy is intended to be inclusive of all aspects of domestic and sexual abuse and, in doing so, it also recognises that abuse can take place in family relationships and between generations. We also recognise that individual victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse are likely to have multiple characteristics and that we therefore need to recognise that these groups are by nature intersectional. Through the work that we progress under this Strategy we will seek to understand better and respond to the intersectional needs of victims.

Terminology

1.13 Within this Strategy we refer to those affected by domestic and/or sexual abuse as a 'victim' (typically of a crime but not always), while acknowledging that some prefer the term 'survivor' or 'person with lived experience'.

What we have done so far

1.14 Over the past seven years, a great deal of work has been taken forward and services delivered across the statutory, voluntary and community sectors, to drive real improvements in tackling domestic and/or sexual abuse. Considerable progress has been made across government and its partners over the lifetime of our previous Strategy[1] which is outlined below. However, we acknowledge that much work remains to be done if we are to stop domestic and/or sexual abuse. This Strategy builds on previous work and is intended to support and guide as we continue to connect with and learn from each other and find new ways to energise collective action to tackle domestic and sexual abuse.

Legislation

- **A new domestic abuse offence** was introduced in 2022, criminalising a pattern of non-physically abusive behaviour.
- Provision for an entitlement to **paid safe leave** for victims of domestic abuse under the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Act (NI) 2022.
- **Protection from stalking legislation** was brought forward (which may also be outside a domestic or family context) as well as the Justice Act (NI) 2022 which provides for **new offences of up-skirting, down-blousing, non-fatal strangulation** and preventing the so called **'rough sex' defence.**
- Preparatory work progressed to introduce **Domestic Abuse Protection Notices and Orders**.

Training and awareness raising

- **A new e-learning package** supported the introduction of the new domestic abuse offence. This is available across the public sector, developed in partnership with our voluntary sector experts.
- **Raising awareness** of the new domestic abuse offence through a multi-media campaign 'Still Abuse', along with other campaigns delivered by PSNI (Police Service of Northern Ireland) including 'No Grey Zone', 'Behind Closed Doors' and 'Walking on Egg Shells'. Sexual Abuse and Sexual Violence Awareness Week and 16 Days of Action have also raised awareness.
- **Guidance for employers** on how to develop a **Domestic and/or sexual abuse Workplace Policy** was developed and issued.

1 *Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategy*, published by DoH and DoJ in 2016.

Funding

- **Funding key services** including the Domestic and/or sexual abuse Helpline; emergency refuge provision; other accommodation-based services; floating support; advocacy; and Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences.

Learning and Review

- **Domestic Homicide Reviews** were introduced in 2020 to learn lessons from those tragic deaths arising from domestic violence.
- **The Gillen Review** into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in NI was undertaken and made recommendations for systemic reform which are now being progressed.
- **Establishment of a Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime** who, as well as representing the interests of all victims of crime, has specific functions in respect of victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse.
- **Learning from the challenges presented during the COVID-19 pandemic** and adapting to new ways of working.

Governance

- **Improvements in how we work**. Including enhanced governance structures with biannual progress reports to Executive Ministers; expanded Strategic Delivery Board membership; problem solving workshops held with stakeholders; and expanding the work of Local Partnerships to include sexual violence.
- **A MARAC Operational Board** was established, and a **MARAC review** undertaken.
- **A mid-term review** of the previous Strategy, a ten-week **Call for Views** and a 12-week consultation, were undertaken to inform the strategic direction of this Strategy.

Schools

- **I-matter resources** for schools have been updated and new subjects added including healthy relationships, consent and sexual harassment.
- **Operation Encompass** was rolled out so that police can share information with schools where there has been domestic abuse involving a child.
- DE have issued guidance to schools on Displaying Sexual Behaviour Circular - 2022/02 - Children Who Display Harmful Sexual Behaviour | Department of Education (education-ni.gov.uk) on 22 February 2022, which includes Safety plans for a child or young person who has been harmed as well as Risk Assessment Management Plans (RAMP) for Education Settings where there are concerns about Sexual Behaviours.
- **Development of the CCEA Wellbeing Hub** providing a repository for wellbeing, resources, information and guidance for schools, teachers and pupils. The hub promotes understanding of the place and importance of wellbeing within the curriculum and enables effective delivery and consolidation of wellbeing in schools.

Prevention

- **Delivery of behavioural change programmes** across NI for men showing concerning behaviour, who have not yet reached the criminal justice system and where children are at risk. This builds knowledge and skills to develop healthy, non-abusive relationships.
- **The Domestic Violence and Abuse Disclosure Scheme** was established in 2018 to enable individuals to ascertain whether there is a risk posed by a partner/ former partner and make informed decisions about the relationship.

Services

- **A new advocacy support service** for victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse who are engaging with the criminal justice system, ASSIST NI, was established in 2021. Advocates provide a central point of contact for those affected by abuse, by providing support, risk assessment, safety planning, information and signposting services.
- **Piloting Identification and Referral to Improve Safety ('IRIS')** to train and support GPs to recognise and respond to domestic and/or sexual abuse and refer patients to specialist advocacy support.
- **Free public transport** for those going to refuge or temporary accommodation as a result of domestic abuse.
- **Ask for Ani Code Word scheme** was introduced to allow those at risk or suffering from domestic abuse to discreetly signal to pharmacy staff that they need help to access support.
- **A Sexual Offences Legal Advisers Scheme** was launched and offers free objective legal advice to complainants in serious sexual offence cases.
- **The Sanctuary Scheme** is operational across all Housing Executive properties, where appropriate. The scheme is voluntary and provides enhancements such as the installation of grills, cameras etc. to a designated room in tenants' properties.

Working in partnership to deliver services

1.15 We acknowledge the significant role played by expert voluntary and community sector partners in delivering core services for Government, which are central to how domestic and/or sexual abuse is being tackled. Below is an example of the work taken forward by the voluntary and community sector over the course of the last seven year Strategy.

- 518 women and 342 children stayed in **Women's Aid refuges** during 2022/23.
- During 2022/23, **7,543** women received support from Women's Aid whilst staying in their homes, and **2,887** women with complex needs were supported by Women's Aid.
- **The mothers of 5,948 children were supported** in Women's Aid services during 2022/23.

- Helping Hands training was provided by Women's Aid with 143 teachers accessing the two day in-person Social Guardian training and 87 teachers accessed 'next steps for Social Guardians' Refresher Webinar training,
- A regional 24/7 Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline, equally funded by the Communities, Health and Justice Departments. In 2023/24 there were 19,970 calls answered and outgoing calls connected, in addition to 36,526 web chat messages sent and received with 949 e-mails sent and received.
- An advocacy support service for victims of domestic and sexual abuse engaging with the criminal justice system, is provided by ASSIST NI, with funding of up to £800k per year provided jointly by the Department of Justice and PSNI. For the 12 month period from September 2022 to August 2023, 1891 individuals had used the service (1759 adults and 132 children).
- A Sexual Offences Legal Advisor (SOLA) scheme is delivered by Victim Support NI to provide adult complainants in serious sexual offences cases with access to free independent legal advice. During 2023/24, funding of up to £188k was provided by the Department of Justice to deliver the service. The SOLA scheme received 873 referrals with a 78% engagement rate.
- In 2023/24 NSPCC received referrals for 396 young witnesses, with funding of up to £457k from the Department of Justice. Out of this, 126 cases were for sexual offences and 8 cases were for domestic abuse.

1.16 Community and voluntary sector partners will continue to play an important role as we take this Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy forward. We also recognise that there is a wider range of equally important services delivered across the voluntary and community sector, which may not be explicitly referenced here.

1.17 We want to thank all our partner organisations who have delivered and who continue to deliver services for, and on behalf of, the Communities, Education, Health and Justice Departments. This work is invaluable in ensuring that we can collectively reach out to and support those most affected by domestic and/or sexual abuse.

Why change is needed

1.18 We want to provide a future where everyone can live safe lives, without the threat or experience of domestic and/or sexual abuse. While recorded levels of domestic and/or sexual abuse continue to increase, in part due to increased confidence in reporting, we want to do all that we can to help and support those who are affected, taking account of their particular needs.

Impact of domestic and/or sexual abuse

1.19 We know that many victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse live their lives in fear and are significantly impacted by the abuse they have suffered. It can have an enormous impact on all aspects of a person's life: their physical and mental health; their identity and relationships with friends and family; housing and their finances. The issues involved are complex and need, for that reason, a multi-faceted response.

1.20 Many victims may feel that there is a stigma associated with being subject to domestic or sexual abuse, which can be more significant for certain groups, particularly those who already face additional barriers to reporting and seeking support, as outlined later in this section.

1.21 Despite having done nothing wrong, victims may internalise what has happened; they may fear blame and judgement from others and as a result, they may be reluctant to tell anyone, report the abuse to the police or seek support.

1.22 We also know that children's experience of domestic and/or sexual abuse can result in lifelong trauma and may in some cases lead to abusive relationships in adult life. Too often those experiencing domestic and/or sexual abuse grow up not recognising abusive or unhealthy relationships, meaning that the cycle of abuse may be repeated.

1.23 This Strategy is intended to support the development of a stronger systemic response: improving how we respond to domestic and/or sexual abuse and how we work together to support those affected with a trauma informed approach.

Public consultation

1.24 As noted, this Strategy was informed by an initial Call for Views, which ran from 10 January to 21 March 2022, and by full public consultation on the draft Strategy, which ran from 7 February to 2 May 2023. The Call for Views asked a number of questions to gather ideas and experiences, a summary of which was published in July 2022.[2] Consultation on the draft Strategy asked questions on the draft vision, definitions of domestic and/or sexual abuse, the proposed pillars of Partnership, Prevention, Support and Justice and the Rural and Equality Impact Assessments. A summary of responses was published in July 2023.[3]

1.25 In response to the Call for Views the Departments received 91 written responses and 661 surveys were completed online. Views were also shared at 22 stakeholder engagement events and five public events. We listened to and spoke with victims, frontline services, including those working to support victims, and other interested groups. These, as well as the many research reports submitted,[4] helped us to identify the outcomes we want to achieve.

2 Call for Views – Domestic and Sexual abuse Strategy and Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy | Department of Justice (justice-ni.gov.uk) | Department of Health (health-ni.gov.uk)

3 Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy - 2023 – 2030 | Department of Health (health-ni.gov.uk) | Department of Justice (justice-ni.gov.uk)

4 An overview of the research referenced can be found at Call for Views – Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy and Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy | Department of Justice (justice-ni.gov.uk)

1.26 There were 90 written responses to the consultation on the draft Strategy. Views were also shared at five public events, as part of which we further engaged with victims and frontline service providers. The Strategy and subsequent action plans are intended to translate what you have told us into positive action.

1.27 We listened to what you told us and have made a range of changes to the Strategy as a result of the consultation, to reflect comments made. We have included a section on the voice of victims, including children and young people in order to better reflect the views of those affected by domestic and/or sexual abuse, as well as expanding on how we will take account of expert and lived experience advice. We listened to concerns that children and young people needed to be more clearly covered by the Strategy and have developed a new Children and Young People Pillar which is now included. To reflect concerns that the Strategy needed to reflect the range of Government funded work that is underway, delivered by our expert partners, we have included a section on how our expert partners deliver Government services.

1.28 We have also responded to comments that greater clarity was needed on the various forms that domestic and/or sexual abuse can take, including sexual abuse within relationships, and have included additional sections on these. We also noted concerns that the Strategy did not adequately reflect the impact of abuse on both men *and* women and in response we have added an additional section on gender-based domestic and/or sexual abuse, as well as a further section on targeted actions for different groups. More generally, each of the strategic pillars has been further revised to take account of comments made during consultation. We have included an integrated performance framework to set out the outcomes we want to achieve; indicators of success; and the measures we will use to assess impact.

1.29 We have taken account of views that the Strategy needed to reflect more clearly the roles of all relevant Departments, including the Communities and Education Departments, and additional references have been made to these Departments and the wider Executive.

What you have told us

"Reach more people"

"Greater ownership and response within all organisations"

"All victims must be heard and supported"

"The real scale of it is not being captured"

1.30 The development of the Strategy has also been informed by the mid-term review of the previous *Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategy*, which was undertaken by the Strategic Investment Board in 2020. The findings of that review have helped us to consider where energy should be focused over the next seven years and, importantly, how we will measure our success to ensure that actions taken forward are impactful.

1.31 We would like to extend our gratitude to every individual and organisation that has contributed to the development of this Strategy.

Other linked areas of work, strategies and action plans

1.32 We acknowledge that there are many cross-cutting issues and work areas that link closely with this Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy, that are being taken forward separately which are likely to have strong interdependencies with this Strategy.

1.33 Some of these areas are highlighted below, although this is not an exhaustive list and we will undertake to continue to work collaboratively to ensure that there is alignment with other existing and emerging interdependent areas.

1.34 The Executive Office has led on work to develop a parallel **Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy** that identifies priorities and actions to stop violent and abusive behaviour that is directed at women and girls because of their gender. This includes crimes and unwanted behaviour in the physical and online world. PSNI has also published a Violence Against Women and Girls Action Plan.

1.35 Although violence against women and girls can include domestic and/or sexual abuse, it is not limited to these offence types. Similarly, we acknowledge that women and girls are disproportionately affected by domestic and sexual abuse, however we also know that these types of abuse are not limited to women and girls but can affect anyone regardless of gender. That is why we believe that it is appropriate that there should be two separate, but interdependent strategies to address domestic and sexual abuse, and violence against women and girls, respectively. We acknowledge the important interdependencies between both strategies and recognise the need for continued alignment between them to ensure that there is a comprehensive and joined up response.

1.36 The Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy also has close linkages with work being taken forward under the **Gillen Review into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences**, which contains 16 key priority areas including work in relation to remote evidence centres, Sexual Offence Legal Advisors, support for child victims and addressing delay in the criminal justice system. While much of the work to tackle these issues will be undertaken outside this Strategy there will be cross over with actions under this Strategy dealing with these work areas.

1.37 Relevant work is also being taken forward under the Department for Communities **Supporting People Programme**, through which delivery partners provide housing support services, including the Supporting People Three Year Strategic Plan 2022 – 2025. This housing related support includes provision for those at risk of domestic abuse as well as a range of vulnerable groups. The services can help people living independently or move onto more independent living.

1.38 In respect of the future plans for the Supporting People Programme, the Housing Executive has developed a Supporting People three-year Strategy for 2022-25. Its strategic priorities are driving Covid recovery and preventing lasting adverse impacts from the pandemic; investing in innovation to achieve better value for money; strengthening relationships with key partners; and working towards closing the 14% gap between need for Supporting People services and supply.

1.39 The Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy also has interdependencies with the suite of **Social Inclusion Strategies** led by the Department for Communities**:** including in relation to **Anti-Poverty, Disability, Gender Equality and Sexual Orientation**.

1.40 There are also links with the work of the Department for the Economy in relation to new Safe Leave provisions that are to be brought forward, which will introduce a right to at least ten days paid leave for workers that are victims of domestic abuse, for the purpose of dealing with issues relating to domestic abuse.

1.41 There are also other existing strategies and programmes of work that are also relevant to the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy at the time of drafting. This is not an exhaustive list but some examples include:

- Ending Homelessness Together – Homelessness Strategy 2022–2027 and Interdepartmental Homelessness Action Plans;
- Digital Justice Strategy 2020;
- Keeping Children and Young People Safe: An Online Safety Strategy for Northern Ireland 2020–2025;
- Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services;
- Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Strategy 2024-2027;
- the Department of Justice's programme of legislation to deal with stalking and sexual offences
- Action Plans to implement Criminal Justice Inspections Reports;
- Mental Health Strategy 2021–2031;
- Victims and Witnesses Strategy 2021–24;
- Safeguarding arrangements for children and adults at risk of harm including the development of new adult protection legislation;
- PSNI and PPSNI Serious Sexual Offences Strategy.

- The Child Protection Senior Officials Sub Group (CPSOG) is a cross-departmental strategic forum which provides direction on existing or emerging child protection issues which require cross-departmental consideration and co-ordination. Its current work programme includes actions to address Child Sexual Exploitation as well as consideration of the Barnahus model, Female Genital Mutilation, Child Criminal Exploitation, the Executive's Online Safety Strategy, Information Sharing Guidance and consideration of Joint Child Protection Inspections; and Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland work on harmful sexual behaviour and domestic and/or sexual abuse, including developing a Domestic Violence and Abuse Learning and Development Framework.

1.42 As we work to deliver this Strategy and its associated action plans, we will also continue to take account of our obligations under domestic and international conventions. These include:

- the transposition of the EU Victims Directive (and associated Victim and Witness Charters that placed this on a statutory footing);
- the UK's ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention);
- the European Convention of Human Rights;
- the UN Convention on Elimination and Discrimination against Women;
- the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child;
- the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children Against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (the Lanzarote Convention); and
- the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.

1.43 Since this Strategy is to apply over a seven-year period, we will also consider any future developments or changes which may be of relevance to its implementation and associated action plans.

2

Understanding Domestic and Sexual abuse

2. Understanding Domestic and Sexual abuse

What is domestic abuse?

Within this Strategy, domestic abuse is defined as: threatening, controlling, coercive behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, virtual, physical, verbal, sexual, financial or emotional) inflicted on anyone (irrespective of age, ethnicity, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation or any form of disability) by a current or former intimate partner or family member

2.1 Domestic abuse can take many forms, which may often involve physical violence. However, in many cases domestic abuse will not involve physical violence but may involve a wide range of non-physically abusive behaviour including what is often referred to as coercive control.

Coercive control is controlling behaviour intended to increase dependency on an abuser. It can include things such as:

- Isolating you
- Monitoring what you do
- Denying you freedom
- Gaslighting you
- Controlling your finances
- Making you live by their rules
- Regulating your sexual relationship
- Blackmailing you

"If I had a choice between being physically or mentally tortured, I'd choose the beating."

Forms of domestic abuse

2.2 Domestic abuse is complex in terms of who is involved as well as what, where, when and why it occurs. It can affect anyone regardless of their social standing or socio-economic class; no one escapes or is immune to abuse because of who they, or their abuser, are. It is important to stress that domestic abuse can take place across many different relationships and locations.

Children (under the age of 18) as victims of domestic abuse:

- Children's experiences of domestic abuse are distinct to them but also are often connected to the abuse of their parent or carer.
- Domestic abuse is recognised as an Adverse Childhood Experience.
- A child may also be used to abuse someone else.
- The Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (NI) 2021 also includes two child aggravators, where the offence is aggravated by virtue of the involvement of a young person. The first aggravator applies to the domestic abuse offence where the victim is under 18. The second aggravator applies where:
  - a child saw, heard or was present during an incident of abuse;
  - a child is used to abuse another person;
  - abusive behaviour is (or threatened to be) directed at a child; or
  - a reasonable person would consider that the behaviour would be likely to adversely affect the child enabling the sentencing to be increased up to the maximum available. **The child does not need to be aware of the abusive behaviour and it does not need to cause them harm.**
- The Act also makes provision that a child cruelty offence will apply in relation to non-physical ill-treatment of a child aged under 16.
- With the right support, children and young people can recover and go on to enjoy happy and healthy childhoods.

Intimate partner abuse[5]:

- Domestic abuse most commonly takes place in intimate partner relationships, including same sex relationships.
- This includes those in a current, or previous relationship (which does not have to be sexual) or marriage regardless of whether they are living together.
- Intimate partner abuse accounted for 62% of domestic abuse in 2022/23.
- Pregnancy can also be a trigger for domestic abuse, and existing abuse may get worse during pregnancy or after giving birth.
- Abuse often continues or intensifies when a relationship has ended, which can be a dangerous time for a victim and when the risk of domestic homicide is highest.
- In 2022/23 just over 60% of intimate partner abuse related to former partners; almost 40% for current partners.
- Post-separation abuse, including stalking, harassment and controlling and coercive behaviour often continues and causes ongoing harm.
- The abuser may also attempt to use the court process, including family court, to carry out further abuse.

5 Current or former intimate partner or family member has the same meaning as the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021

Abuse by family members (including child to parent abuse):

- Familial abuse may be perpetrated by children (child to parent abuse), grandchildren, parents or siblings.
- Familial abuse accounted for 35% of domestic abuse crimes in 2022/23, with almost two thirds of these involving parents and children.
- The victim and perpetrator may not be living together.
- Abuse within a family can encompass a number of different behaviours, such as coercive control, physical violence and limiting access to money and other resources.

Young person relationship abuse:

- Young people can experience domestic abuse in relationships, regardless of whether they are living together or how long they may have been together.
- This abuse need not involve contact.
- Normalisation of this abuse can carry into adult life.

Abuse outside the home or country:

- Domestic abuse doesn't have to take place inside your home. It can happen when you are out socialising, at work or on your own away from the abuser.
- It can happen when you are on holidays, either at home or abroad.
- Domestic abuse can take place anywhere.

Abuse involving multiple needs:

- Domestic abuse can affect anyone but some people may be more at risk.
- This could include any combination of age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, etc – for example an older, female, lesbian migrant living in a rural area.

"People should be properly taught about different forms of abuse and made to know that they don't have to stay quiet when they have been a victim of this."

What does domestic abuse look like?

2.3 Domestic abuse can take many forms. It is a traumatic experience, which for some can be life changing as well as life limiting. It can include, but is not limited to:

- **controlling or coercive behaviour**, which may make a person dependent on the individual abusing them by isolating them, exploiting them, and/or regulating their everyday behaviour;
- **psychological/emotional abuse**, that can include verbal abuse (yelling, swearing and insults), gaslighting (making the victim doubt themselves by manipulating the truth), put downs, publicly embarrassing them or blaming them for everything;
- **physical abuse** (including violent – physical and sexual – or threatening behaviour) and/or indirect physically harmful behaviour. This may include hitting, kicking, slapping, choking, threatening with a weapon or physical assault;
- **sexual abuse**, when a person is forced (without consent) to participate in unwanted, unsafe or degrading sexual activity. It does not matter that there may previously have been consensual sex. Sexual abuse can also occur online, for example, through grooming and sharing of sexual images;
- **economic and financial abuse**, where one person deprives their partner or family member of financial resources or ability to make money, which could include restricting access to food, transport and clothes. This creates financial dependency and control, preventing them from leaving the relationship. This is particularly important in the context of the cost of living crisis where many people are facing greater financial difficulties than ever before and may be more vulnerable to this type of abuse;
- **online and technological abuse**, where technology, social media or other online means are used to control or coerce victims; or
- **abusive behaviour** (which may encapsulate the above):
  - making the victim dependent on the individual abusing them;
  - isolating them from friends, family members or social interaction or support;
  - controlling, regulating or monitoring their day-to-day activities;
  - depriving or restricting their freedom of action; or
  - making them feel frightened, humiliated, degraded, punished or intimidated.

2.4 Abusive behaviour may take a wide range of forms and could be physical or non-physical; in person or making using of technology or digital means; it may be caused directly or indirectly, including making use of another person; or making use of their religious beliefs to further exacerbate abuse. It may also include when one parent withholds a child from another parent, or uses them to abuse the other parent, regardless of gender.

2.5 Other forms of abuse such as **stalking and non-fatal strangulation** may occur alongside both domestic and/or sexual abuse. Much of the work to tackle these issues is being delivered separate to this Strategy, however there are of course interconnections which we acknowledge. We will ensure that we take account of and remain aligned to ongoing work to address these issues, where there is cross over with actions under this Strategy dealing with these specific areas.

2.6 For the purposes of this Strategy, abusive behaviour is not deemed to be domestic abuse where this occurs in the context of abuse in a group care setting (such as a care home); or where two individuals are close acquaintances, or are living at the same address, but there is neither a familial or intimate partner relationship. As highlighted in Section 1, while there are interconnections with other crimes (for example, 'honour-based' abuse including female genital mutilation, modern slavery and human trafficking as well wider violence against women and girls) these crime types are being addressed separately and as such, this Strategy does not make specific provision to address them, although again, in delivering the Strategy we will ensure that we take account of them.

Domestic abuse is a crime

2.7 Until 2022, domestic abuse as a crime was largely limited to physically abusive or violent behaviour in Northern Ireland, with offenders dealt with through charges such as assault, grievous bodily harm, criminal damage etc. A domestic abuse offence was introduced in February 2022. This closed a gap in the law by criminalising a course of abusive behaviour (such as that set out above) that occurs on two or more occasions, against an intimate partner, former partner or close family member. The offence applies both to adults and to those under 18. Abuse against a child under 16 by a parent or guardian is dealt with under the law relating to child protection. However, the domestic abuse offence may be committed where a person makes use of a third party (including their child) to abuse another person.

2.8 The legislation also includes sentencing aggravators which can allow the court to impose harsher penalties. Sentencing for the domestic abuse offence may be increased where a young person was involved (see box above page 22). In addition, where there is a single incident involving domestic abuse, any other offence (for example criminal damage) may be aggravated by domestic abuse, meaning again that sentencing may be higher than what it would otherwise have been had the offence not involved domestic abuse. The maximum sentence is 14 years imprisonment in the most serious cases.

2.9 In the 25 months of operation up to March 2024, there was over one thousand seven hundred domestic abuse offence crimes recorded by police, with almost 37% having a child aggravator attached.

Non-fatal strangulation is a crime

2.10 Prior to June 2023, strangulation could only be prosecuted as a strangulation offence if there was evidence of intent to commit another indictable offence. This was often not present, or could be difficult to prove, making the evidential test for prosecution difficult to satisfy.

2.11 An offence of non-fatal strangulation or asphyxiation is now in force, strengthening the law and recognising the serious harm caused by this type of crime, which can be a factor in (but is not limited to domestic and/or sexual abuse cases). Similar to the domestic abuse offence it carries a maximum sentence of 14 years imprisonment in the most serious cases. This crime can affect anyone and can occur in a number of circumstances. However, we know that there are those who use strangulation and asphyxiation, to exert control and fear, in cases of domestic abuse. Research shows that this type of abuse is eight times more likely to result in domestic homicide. The offence will apply to any case where intentional asphyxiation or strangulation occurs. Where it results in serious harm, the fact that the victim consented in the context of a sexual act will not be a defence.

2.12 Work continues to ensure awareness of the offence and the potential seriousness of injuries that can result, even when no visible injury is present. A PSNI Toolkit on non-fatal strangulation has been made available across the Health and Social Care Trusts, with additional resources to be shared with health and social care professionals. Awareness raising and training for first responders, hospital staff and other medical professionals will be ongoing.

Stalking is a crime

2.13 An offence of stalking is now in force, strengthening the law and recognising the serious harm caused by this type of crime, which can be a factor in (but is not limited to domestic and/or sexual abuse cases). It is focused on recognising stalking behaviour that can be fixated, obsessive, unwanted and repeated. This can have devastating outcomes for those who are affected. The offence carries greater penalties and protections than those available under harassment legislation. There is a maximum sentence of five years imprisonment in the most serious cases. Stalking Protection Orders have also been introduced.

Prevalence of domestic abuse

2.14 An overview of the context of domestic abuse in Northern Ireland, as reported to the police, is set out below. However, the true figure is likely to be much higher due to underreporting by those who cannot or do not feel able to report to police.

In the 12 months to the end of March 2024, domestic abuse crime accounted for 19% of all police recorded crime.

32,763
domestic abuse
INCIDENTS
responded to
by police

19,954
domestic abuse
CRIMES
recorded
by police

On average every
16 mins
domestic abuse
was reported to
police

Took place
EVERY DAY
of the year

Tragically there were
3 domestic homicides[6]

ONE
of the victims
was female

TWO
of the victims
were male

1,727
domestic abuse
OFFENCE CRIMES
37% with a child
aggravator attached

38%
of relationships
involved a former
partner, **24%** a
current partner

24%
of cases
involved a
parent child relationship

94%
of offenders
were aged
18 or over

1 in 4
lesbian and bisexual women
experienced
domestic abuse

4 in 10
gay and bisexual men
experienced
domestic abuse

69%
of victims of
domestic abuse
crimes were **female**,
31% were **male**

83%
of offenders
were **male**,
14% were
female

6 As of 16 September 2024, the total number of domestic homicide reviews that have been commissioned in NI since the introduction of the legislation is 19. Of these, 13 (68%) were female and 6 (32%) were male.

What is sexual abuse?

Within this Strategy, sexual abuse is defined as: any behaviour (physical, psychological, verbal, virtual/online) perceived to be of a sexual nature which is controlling, coercive, exploitative, harmful, or unwanted that is inflicted on anyone (irrespective of age, ethnicity, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation or any form of disability).

2.15 Sexual abuse can occur in intimate partner relationships, that is, with a current or former partner. It may also happen within families and could involve immediate family members such as parents or children or others such as grandparents or grandchildren. It can also involve colleagues or friends or may be carried out by strangers. The majority of sexual abuse is committed by someone who the victim knows or trusts, rather than by a stranger. As with domestic abuse, sexual abuse can take many forms, which can be both physical and non-physical. Any behaviour of a sexual nature that occurs without consent is considered to constitute a form of sexual abuse. It may also include harmful sexual behaviour.

2.16 Within this Strategy the term 'sexual abuse' is used. This term includes both sexual violence and abuse and is not restricted to one or the other. Importantly, the term sexual abuse is not limited to child sexual abuse, intimate relationships or only violent behaviour. It is intended to capture a wide range of sexually abusive behaviour, physical and non-physical, violent and non-violent, regardless of who it is carried out between. It may include any sexual act or activity that was unwanted or that involved one or more of the following: pressure, manipulation, bullying, intimidation, threats, deception or force.

Forms of sexual abuse

2.17 Sexual abuse can take place across many different relationships, between strangers and acquaintances and in various locations. It may or may not involve someone that the victim is close to.

Contact sexual abuse:

- Sexual abuse may include where there is direct physical contact.
- This includes rape, physical sexual assault, being touched or being made to touch someone else where this is unwanted.
- It can also include being forced or coerced to take part in sexual activities that you are not comfortable with or that are unwanted.

Non-contact sexual abuse:

- Sexual abuse can still occur even where there has been no direct physical contact.
- There do not have to be any visible injuries.
- This can take a wide variety of forms and can occur in person, online or over the phone.
- It may involve being made to take sexual photos, look at sexual images or watch sexual activity that the victim has not agreed to.
- Individuals may not necessarily be aware that abuse has occurred, for example, In the form or upskirting or downblousing.

Sexual abuse of children and young people:

- We know that victims of sexual abuse (56%) are under the age of 18.
- A further 13% are aged between 18 and 24.
- This also includes sexual activity against young people under the age of 18 which is unwanted or involves pressure, manipulation, threats, bullying, etc.
- It can be carried out by an adult of another child or young person.

2.18 Sexual abuse can take many forms. It can include, but is not limited to:

- penetrative sexual activities such as rape (vaginal, anal or oral), including attempted penetration;
- sexual assault such as intentional touching, rubbing or groping;
- being made to perform masturbation on self or on someone else without consent;
- sexual threats or harassment including unwanted sexual advances;
- indecent exposure or cyber flashing;
- sexual activity that the victim has not or cannot consent to (including where a drink has been spiked);
- stalking (both physically and digitally);
- grooming (including via the internet);
- being made to look at/be involved in the production of sexual images and abusive material;
- virtual abuse including use of any technological mediums;
- being made to watch sexual activities (including pornography); and
- sexually exploiting someone for personal, commercial or financial gain (including sextortion).

Sexual abuse within relationships

2.19 There can be close linkages between domestic and/or sexual abuse. Sexual abuse can take place in relationships, including where people are or have been married. It can be used, along with coercive control, to humiliate and gain power and control over another person. This may take the form of explicit abuse or a threat that something will happen. It is important that people recognise that sexual abuse can take place in a relationship, that they are never to blame and that they know where to get help. Being in a relationship does not mean that another person has control over your body. That autonomy rests with you.

"I didn't really understand what was going on, and I didn't really get it, because I didn't understand within marriage that it was a 'thing' that could happen ... It got to the stage where I didn't go to bed at night until about two, three o'clock in the morning because I knew what was coming ... even though I knew it was happening, I didn't understand that within marriage that it was something that happened."

Trauma response to sexual abuse

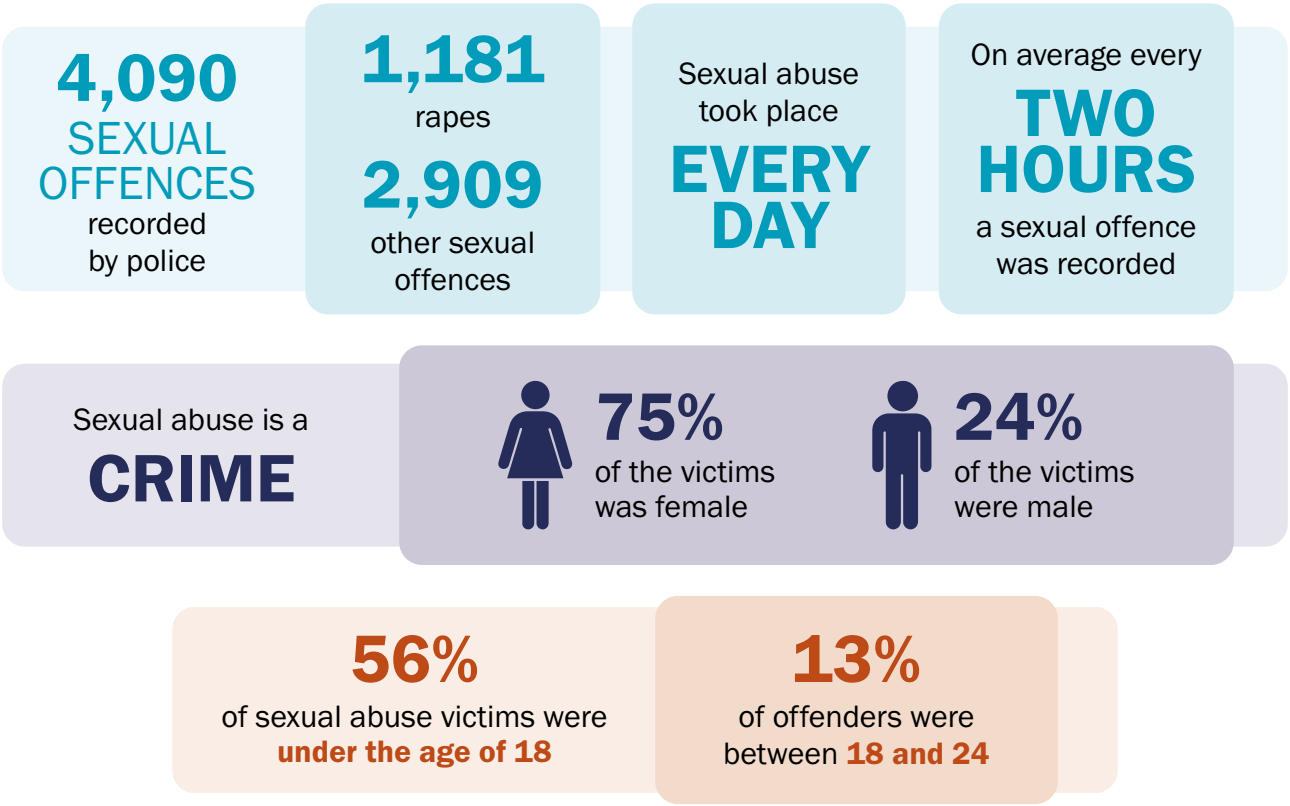
2.20 Sexual abuse is trauma and as such it initiates a traumatic response like a fight, freeze or flop response. Any individual person is likely to respond differently, and there is no predictable textbook response, nor is any response more right or wrong or acceptable than any other. Just because someone did not scream, try to run away or fight back does not lessen what has happened. For many people it can be a number of years before they report sexual abuse; for some people, they may never tell anyone.

Prevalence of sexual abuse

2.21 As is the case with domestic abuse, anyone can be affected by sexual abuse whatever their age, ethnicity, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation or any form of disability. Similarly, while anyone can be a victim or an abuser, statistics show us that victims of sexual abuse are more likely to be women and abusers are more likely to be men. Children and young people are also more likely to be affected by sexual abuse.

2.22 An overview of the context of sexual abuse in Northern Ireland, as reported to the police, is set out below. Given the nature of these crimes, and the impact on those affected, we know that the true figure is likely to be much higher due to underreporting.

In the 12 months to the end of March 2024 sexual abuse crime accounted for almost 4% (3.9) of all police recorded crime.



Gender-based Domestic and/or sexual abuse

2.23 The European Commission defines gender-based violence as violence directed against a person because of that person's gender or violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately.

2.24 We know that the majority of those affected by domestic and sexual abuse are female (69% of victims of domestic abuse crimes; 75% of victims for sexual abuse crimes) and that the majority of offenders are men (83% of domestic abuse offenders are male; figures are not available for sexual abuse offenders).

"Domestic Abuse is a massive issue for women. There's so much of it going on that is hidden that no one knows about."

2.25 However both men and women may experience domestic and/or sexual abuse and every victim, regardless of gender, must be taken seriously and offered support. Many men do experience domestic and/or sexual abuse in both heterosexual and gay relationships and, like women, may suffer long term damage to their mental health as a result of this.

2.26 Almost a third of victims of domestic abuse are male (31%), with around 14% of offenders female. In terms of sexual abuse 75% of victims are female, 24% are male. There are also gender specific issues that are likely to impact on men and boys, simply because they are men and boys and because of associated cultural and societal norms and expectations, such as increased stigma and shame, being unaware that they can experience abuse and not recognising non-physical abuse as abuse.

"There needs to be more support and recognition for both women and men."

2.27 Work on improving our response to domestic and/or sexual abuse will need to take account of gender differences in terms of prevalence, experience and impact.

"Patriarchal structures and power dynamics also impact on men and boys; some men hold more status and more power than other men … understanding inequality through the lens of power and social identity theory allows meaningful analysis of domestic and/or sexual abuse experienced by men and boys, LGBTQIA+ groups and non-binary people"

Additional barriers for different groups

2.28 Domestic and/or sexual abuse can, and does, happen to anyone. Its impact is personal to each individual affected and many people have multiple needs and face multiple barriers, including:

- barriers to reporting (such as fear of not being believed, concerns about access to private information, a feeling that they are somehow to blame (with shame arising from this) and delays in the system);
- barriers to accessing support; and
- barriers to engaging with the criminal justice system.

2.29 We are committed to working together to help break down these barriers. This will include engaging with stakeholders and delivery partners in Northern Ireland and with the Home Office, for example in relation to the challenges for those who have no recourse to public funds.

"Speaking directly with these groups and ensuring they have a voice is important."

What you've told us

2.30 During the Call for Views we heard from a wide range of people across Northern Ireland, from different ethnicities, ages, genders, sexual orientations and backgrounds who highlighted the particular issues that are faced by some groups. Many highlighted the barriers that are faced by those victims who present with a range of protected characteristics. There was a particular focus on the following groups and communities:

Women:

2.31 Women are disproportionately affected in terms of prevalence and more likely to experience multiple incidents and different types of domestic and/or sexual abuse. Women also face barriers to disclosing abuse and finding help. They can feel locked in a relationship, reliant on the person abusing them in many ways, such as financially and in relation to housing, or they may fear that their children will be taken away should they leave. Many also fear that they will not be taken seriously when they disclose abuse and are worried that they will face comments like "why doesn't she just leave" if they are in a relationship together. Victims are at the highest risk when they leave a relationship or are thinking/planning to leave and for about 12 months after they have left. Domestic abuse can also get worse during pregnancy.

"We need to start looking at policy and strategy through a gendered lens rather than a one size fits all."

Men:

2.32 Men also suffer from domestic and/or sexual abuse. Societal norms and expectations may mean that some men do not seek help because of embarrassment or feeling "less of a man" because of the abuse. They may also that they will not be believed; that they may be accused as the perpetrator; or that they may lose contact with any children they may have with their abuser. Some men do not realise that support is available to them but may believe that services are for women only; this can act as a significant barrier. In some consultation responses, increased general and male-victim-centred services were considered to be needed.

"Men do not recognise they are victims in the first place. Even if they do, they feel ashamed."

LGBTQIA+ community:

2.33 Whilst domestic and/or sexual abuse can happen to anyone, LGBTQIA+ people may face additional challenges and barriers which are different to those experienced by heterosexual people. We know that some LGBTQIA+ people are afraid to report incidents of abuse and seek help due to fear of discrimination. They could also be facing coercive control, where they are in a relationship with their abuser, with threats to be 'outed'. Another significant barrier is not recognising that what they are experiencing is abuse, due to a lack of awareness and open conversation on what constitutes a healthy relationship. This can increase isolation of individuals who already lack family support or safety nets.

"The first barrier an individual has to face is having to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity to someone from a mainstream organisation."

Children and young people:

2.34 While children's experiences of domestic and/or sexual abuse are distinct to them, they often may also be exposed to the abuse of their parent or carer. They can also be victims in their own right and can have complex needs. The impact of seeing, hearing or experiencing the effects of abuse is significant and the long-term consequences of this trauma can last into adulthood. Adverse childhood experiences can have lasting, negative effects on a child's development, health and well-being, leading to behavioural problems, difficulties at school and increased risk of difficulties in future relationships. Around 400 children may be in refuge annually due to domestic abuse. They often present with complex needs and may face additional barriers in getting support, as well as dealing with the perceived stigma that some children may feel is associated with attending school from a refuge (around 80% of those in refuge told us that the stigma attached to abuse needs to be taken away). Children with special educational needs or disabilities may also face increased risk or domestic or sexual abuse.

2.35 There are many barriers faced by child victims of sexual abuse. It can be difficult for children and young people to talk about what has happened to them. They might worry about the consequences of their disclosure, or fear that they will not be believed. Some children may fear more violence, while others might not have someone to tell. Not all children will realise they are being sexually abused, particularly if they have been groomed.

"Children and young people... need to be recognised as equal victims in their own right."

Ethnic minority communities:

2.36 We know that domestic and/or sexual abuse is commonly under-reported in ethnic minority communities. People may be at particular risk because of language barriers and a lack of local connections or because they do not fully understand how to navigate local services. Cultural values can also prevent disclosures of abuse out of fear of dishonouring family or their community. An individual may also be dependent on the person abusing them for immigration status, lack financial independence and have no recourse to public funds.

"Migrant and ethnic minority victims of domestic abuse may be uniquely or particularly vulnerable to certain forms of coercive control."

Older people:

2.37 Domestic and/or sexual abuse can happen at any age and older people face a number of additional barriers to seeking support including generational views about faith, loyalty, shame and guilt. In many cases older people may wish to protect family members. In some cases, they may find it difficult to report if the person abusing them is also their carer or they are financially dependent on them. They may also have normalised abuse that has been going on for a long period of time.

"The challenge is making people aware that it is okay to talk about domestic abuse, and that it is never acceptable."

Disabled people:

2.38 Deaf and disabled people are of greater risk of domestic abuse and sexual abuse than people who are not disabled. Disabled people experience disproportionate levels of domestic and/or sexual abuse and face barriers to accessing appropriate support, including physical, attitudinal and communication barriers. People with disabilities are also at particular risk of coercive control and financial abuse and abuse from multiple perpetrators.

"Being disabled strongly affects the nature, extent and impact of abuse."

Rural communities:

2.39 Domestic and/or sexual abuse is no less prevalent in rural communities but can be less visible. People living in rural communities may also face additional challenges in accessing services or may have concerns about their information being shared with others if they live in a close-knit community. Isolation can also be used to further abuse someone, making it harder to escape.

"Abuse can manifest differently in a rural setting (isolation, infrastructure, rural economies, means of escape), and solutions that work in an urban context may not translate for rural victims."

Targeted actions for different groups

2.40 Everyone can experience domestic and /or sexual abuse – some people may be more at risk or may face additional barriers in accessing services and will therefore require specialist support and intervention. This could be where they have a number of different and specific attributes relating to, for example, their age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability etc. For example, a young, LGBTQIA+, minority ethnic community person or an elderly male, who is disabled and lives in an isolated rural area. As we work through this Strategy and associated action plans, it will be important to identify and respond to the intersectional needs of victims and bring forward appropriate actions to address these. This will be considered, in conjunction with our key stakeholders.

3

Framework for action

3. Framework for action

3.1 The Strategy has five Pillars (Partnership; Prevention; Children and Young People; Support and Provision and Justice and ten strategic outcomes that are aligned with these Pillars. We intend to deliver these outcomes through actions set out in associated action plans. In addition, in order to ensure that the Strategy is having the impact and delivering the outcomes that we want it to have, we have developed an integrated performance framework, with indicators of success identified (against outcomes) and associated measures.

As part of taking the Strategy forward a performance framework has been developed (**Annex A**), with key performance indicators, so that we can assess how far our work contributes to achieving the **outcomes and pillars** within this Strategy:



PILLAR 1: PARTNERSHIP

Driving change together through joint commitment, leadership and partnership working.

What we know

3.2 Ending domestic and sexual abuse requires a whole of society approach.

3.3 No single agency, organisation or Department can tackle domestic and/or sexual abuse alone. It is everyone's business and it is only by working together and learning from experience and expertise across sectors and from those with lived experience that we can develop our understanding, approach and services to make a real difference to people's lives.

"Ensure a joined-up approach."

3.4 The Strategy has been developed and published by the Departments of Health and Justice which have key roles and functions in relation to tackling domestic and sexual abuse and delivering services and supports for victims. However, we also recognise the role of other Departments in delivering the outcomes set out in this Strategy, and the need for focus and commitment across the whole of government. In particular the Strategy also incorporates the work of Department for Communities, particularly in relation to housing and homelessness and its funding of key frontline services such as refuge, outreach and community-based support; and the Department of Education in supporting the education sector to teach about sensitive subjects such as domestic and/or sexual abuse. The roles and functions of other Departments are also engaged through the Strategy and there are interdependencies with the Department for the Economy particularly in relation to employment, including new safe leave provisions, and addressing issues of rurality; as well as with the Executive Office, particularly in relation to the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, which is led by the Executive Office.

3.5 In addition to cross-Departmental working, we recognise that more can be done to promote integrated working across sectors. The need to tackle domestic and sexual abuse cuts across the whole of society and all sectors – the criminal justice, housing, health and social care, education, employment, community and voluntary sectors all have a role to play. The Strategy recognises the important role of our expert voluntary and community sector partners in working alongside us to deliver real change and this will also be reflected in the Strategy's associated action plans.

3.6 Action plans will clearly set out who is responsible for delivering actions and will make use of score cards to report against critical areas in terms of the difference made and will also set out costs associated with key areas of work. We will ensure that effective oversight structures are in place for delivery of the Strategy and associated action plans, with measurable outcomes to provide greater clarity and accountability for the delivery of key actions, as well as making clear connections with other related strategies.

3.7 A key aspect of delivering a partnership response to domestic and sexual abuse is ensuring that we learn from and involve those with lived experience. In delivering work in this area, we will listen to the experiences and views of victims to understand whether the Strategy is making a real difference to those most affected and whether we need to adapt our responses or develop new ones.

3.8 We also acknowledge that we need to bring together more comprehensive data to understand the prevalence and nature of domestic and/or sexual abuse and how this should shape and inform service provision. The Call for Views highlighted concerns that data and research specific to Northern Ireland is not comprehensive and does not present a full picture of the characteristics of those affected by domestic and sexual abuse. Improving our understanding of the nature and scale of domestic and/or sexual abuse in Northern Ireland will help to improve how we develop, tailor and target services and policies to meet need. As we progress work to deliver the Strategy a key strand will consider how we can improve data capture and analysis and what local research could be commissioned, so that we can both gauge the effectiveness of our interventions and inform future policy and provision. As part of this we will work with all partners and agencies to explore how we can share local data to better understand how domestic and sexual abuse presents and impacts people within Northern Ireland.

"Effective solutions must be informed by data."

3.9 Some of the most successful interventions that we have seen have been based on cross-sectoral and multi-agency partnerships. We recognise how important it is to build on our collaborative approaches, sharing information, knowledge and experience. We are stronger working together in partnership. In taking forward and overseeing delivery of the Strategy we will ensure that there continues to be a joined-up approach.

What more will we do?

3.10 Our focus in this pillar is to have robust and effective governance processes and to improve how we work together as a region to tackle domestic and/or sexual abuse. This includes working together across all relevant Government Departments, working in partnership with expert statutory and voluntary sector partners and reflecting the voices of victims as experts with lived experience. Partnership working is a critical enabler for the overall Strategy, including identifying clear owners for work going forward, reporting on progress made and identifying robust data on which to measure this. The outcomes and key priorities under this pillar are:

PILLAR 1: PARTNERSHIP

Driving change together through joint commitment, leadership and partnership working.

OUTCOME 1:

A coordinated response to domestic and/or sexual abuse informed by victims' voices and community engagement.

KEY PRIORITY AREAS:

- Working collaboratively across all government Departments and with statutory, voluntary and community and faith organisations to tackle domestic and/or sexual abuse.
- Having effective governance structures underpinning the Strategy's delivery with a performance framework to monitor outcomes and impact.
- Informing policy, legislation and service development with better quality data, research and shared learning.
- Having increased opportunities for victims' voices to be heard and ensuring the Strategy's delivery is underpinned by intersectionality recognising that many people have multiple needs and face multiple barriers.

WHAT WILL SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

Better, effective and targeted policies and interventions to tackle domestic and/or sexual abuse and support victims.

A whole society approach to ending domestic and/or sexual abuse is adopted, aligned with the approach to EVAWG.

Integrated working across sectors to tackle domestic and/or sexual abuse becomes the norm.

Expert voluntary and community sector partners are recognised as equal partners in implementing the Strategy and action plans.

High quality, relevant data and research is gathered, analysed and combined with that gathered in connection with other connected strategies such as EVAWG.

Governance structures in place are effective and fit for purpose.

Meaningful and effective involvement of people with lived experience in the design and delivery of services and support, including children and young people ensuring response to trends and emerging issues.

PILLAR 2: PREVENTION

Preventing domestic and/or sexual abuse from happening by challenging the attitudes and behaviours that foster it and intervening early where possible to prevent it.

What we know

3.11 Sadly, many people feel unwilling or unable to report domestic and/or sexual abuse. They may live with it for a long period of time and suffer a sustained series of incidents before reporting or asking for help. We want to encourage a culture of openness where victims are confident that they will be listened to, believed and not blamed. In order to achieve this, we must increase public awareness so that people, including those who are affected, understand what domestic and/or sexual abuse is, the different forms they can take, what support is available and, importantly, how to get help.

3.12 Our communication needs to be tailored to specific audiences and take account of communication needs, making use of a wider range of media formats as well as social media as appropriate. We will ensure that strategic communications linked to domestic and/or sexual abuse are informed by engagement with specialist organisations and those with lived experience, to reflect the diverse experiences of domestic and/or sexual abuse.

"The challenge is making people aware that it is okay to talk about domestic abuse, and that it is never acceptable."

3.13 Responses to the Call for Views highlighted the need to change attitudes that reinforce harmful stereotypes. This Strategy acknowledges that people of all ages, ethnicities, religions, genders, gender identities, sexual orientation or disabilities can be victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse. It can, and does, happen to anyone. A lack of understanding of the issues, or negative attitudes that may be held across society, can be a real barrier to people speaking out and seeking support.

"Victims are not to blame and should not be made to feel ashamed."

3.14 We know that many victims are likely to be in contact with frontline services and may ask for help from someone they trust; this could include GPs, nurses, midwives, teachers, housing officers or staff in local community centres. Some people may call the police or some may approach their employer and the duty of care on employers, and the implementation of the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 provide important protections in these cases.

3.15 This first response to people who are experiencing domestic and/or sexual abuse is crucial and likely to be a key factor in whether or not the individual ultimately goes on to access and receive support services. We know that it is critical to have the right response, by the right people, at the right time and in the right way. A lack of knowledge and awareness can lead to missed chances to help people.

3.16 Through the Strategy we want to unlock more opportunities to intervene early to prevent domestic and/or sexual abuse. This will mean identifying training needs to equip people working in public facing roles so that they are able to respond appropriately. As part of this we want professionals working with children and young people to have a greater understanding of how domestic and/or sexual abuse can affect them, not only now but also in their future life. We also want to consider how best to build on the Ask for Ani and Ask for Angela schemes and explore ways in which the delivery of services can be more trauma informed, recognising the barriers and intersectional needs faced by different groups and individuals. The Strategy and associated action plans will also respond to the need to educate those in front-lines roles to recognise abuse in victims with speech, language and communication needs, where there is an elevated risk posed.

3.17 We recognise that tragically, in some cases domestic abuse can result in the death of the victim. Where this happens, we recognise that we need to ensure that there is effective learning from such tragic circumstances through Domestic Homicide Reviews so that we can improve practice, better support and safeguard those who are may be at risk and prevent future domestic homicides from happening. We will keep the operation of DHRs under review, monitoring and effectively implementing systemic learning in order to identify and put in place best practice and reduce any missed opportunities to deal with abusive and potentially fatal behaviour. Oversight of, and monitoring, implementation of recommendations through the multi-agency Strategic Oversight Forum will be an important area of work during the lifetime of this Strategy.

Some of the outcomes and interventions that will be delivered under the Justice pillar are also relevant to preventing domestic and/or sexual abuse.

What more will we do?

3.18 Our focus in this pillar will be to increase public understanding of domestic and/or sexual abuse through improved communications and empowering people to challenge attitudes that foster it. Through training and the promotion of good practice we will also seek to equip those in frontline and public facing roles with the knowledge and skills to identify domestic and/or sexual abuse earlier, and to respond more effectively to abusive behaviour. This will include supporting and encouraging employers to make workplaces safer. The outcomes and key priorities under this pillar are:

PILLAR 2: PREVENTION

Preventing domestic and/or sexual abuse from happening, by challenging the attitudes and behaviours that foster it and intervening early, where possible, to prevent it.

OUTCOME 2:

The public is informed about the different types of domestic and/or sexual abuse and its impact on victims, including children and young people.

KEY PRIORITY AREAS:

- Raising awareness, among as wide a range of groups as possible, so that those at risk of, or experiencing domestic and/or sexual abuse, recognise it, its various forms and know that help is available.
- Preventing domestic and/or sexual abuse from happening by empowering people to safely challenge attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that foster domestic and/or sexual abuse.

OUTCOME 3:

Domestic and/or sexual abuse is identified and responded to earlier.

KEY PRIORITY AREAS:

- Building capacity among people working in frontline and public-facing roles to identify and respond effectively to domestic and/or sexual abuse, including in relation to children and young people, at the earliest opportunity. This includes learning from Domestic Homicide Reviews, improving practice to identify, support and safeguard.
- Supporting and encouraging employers in the public, private and other sectors to make workplaces safer by raising awareness of domestic and/or sexual abuse and promoting workplace policies with effective measures to support staff.

WHAT WILL SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

Fewer people affected of domestic and/or sexual abuse.

Fewer domestic homicides.

Victims are able to report and to access support.

The general public has an awareness of domestic and/or sexual abuse and what support services are available.

Individuals feel confident in challenging attitudes around domestic and/or sexual abuse.

Attitudes that reinforce harmful stereotypes are changed.

People are aware of where they can get more information if they are concerned about domestic and/or sexual abuse.

Frontline and public-facing staff are equipped to identify domestic and/or sexual abuse and signpost to relevant services.

Appropriate referrals to established multi-agency risk assessment forums.

Recommendations in Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) reports are implemented and embedded in timely manner.

Organisations have domestic and/or sexual abuse workplace policies in place.

PILLAR 3: CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Preventing domestic and/or sexual abuse from happening and ensuring children and young people, who are victims, are seen and heard; and can access services and receive support, helping them to recover and taking account of their particular needs.

What we know

3.19 We know that the impact of domestic and/or sexual abuse on children and young people can be incredibly damaging. We also recognise that children and young people affected by domestic and/or sexual abuse can be victims in their own right and are not simply witnesses to domestic and/or sexual abuse carried out by others. We will ensure that this is reflected in the services and support brought forward under this Strategy.

3.20 This Strategy reflects the importance of having services and support that are tailored to the individual needs of children and young people. These services need to be trauma-informed, child-centred and effective in supporting recovery. To do this, we will consider any barriers and difficulties that children and young people face (including communication) and how best these can be addressed in a trauma-informed way[7]. We recognise that the needs of children and young people also need to be reflected in how services such as education, housing and children's services are delivered. This Strategy is intended to keep children and their families safe, both through preventing and through tackling domestic and/or sexual abuse in Northern Ireland; we acknowledge that this abuse can also be online.

"A child's experience ... is different to that of an adult, and specialist, child-centred support is key to ensuring that the damage caused ... is minimised."

3.21 In developing and in implementing the Strategy, it is important for us to listen to the voices of children and young people who are victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse in order that we can learn from them how abuse can best be prevented and addressed where it occurs. This will include taking account of the views of children and young people, as experts through lived experience, who know what is needed to make things better in their life. As part of this we have engaged with expert voluntary sector partners, through our Stakeholder Assurance Group, with a view to identifying how best we can support victims to share their experiences in a safe place, so we can hear the views of children and young people affected by domestic and/or sexual abuse.

7 Working definition of trauma-informed practice

3.22 Responses to the Call for Views and consultation on the draft Strategy called for more to be done in schools, youth services and youth groups to help children and young people to understand issues such as consent and respect from an early age, in the context of healthy relationships. Consideration is needed of formal learning through educational and training facilities; the use of peer to peer support; as well as other settings in which children and young people can be guided by a trusted person, making best use of a wide range of positive influences.

"Education is the cornerstone of prevention."

3.23 Preventing and reducing incidents of domestic and/or sexual abuse is everyone's responsibility. We must continue to teach children and young people about healthy relationships, so that they can better understand consent and know that domestic or sexual abuse is never acceptable. We also need to tackle the root causes of domestic and/or sexual abuse and prevent recurring cycles of abuse. In doing so we recognise the need to support the education sector to build capacity, knowledge and skills to better promote understanding about consent and healthy relationships.

3.24 However, equipping children and young people to have healthy relationships is not just a matter for schools, further education colleges, training facilities and universities. It is also about how these important issues are dealt with in the wider community, for example through youth settings, youth clubs, sports clubs and places of worship, particularly given that not all young people engage in the traditional school system. It is equally important to build capacity amongst staff and volunteers in those settings so that they not only recognise the signs of abuse but also have the practical skills to respond effectively when signs emerge, or disclosures are made. It is also important that parents, guardians and carers are supported to feel confident to discuss the issue of healthy relationships with their children. The Executive's Online Safety Strategy will also play an important role in the prevention of, and education about, sexual abuse and exploitation that we know increasingly takes place online.

3.25 In developing and delivering this Strategy and its associated action plans we recognise that children are not a homogenous group, and that there is a range of intersectional factors that will shape their experience. In a domestic abuse context, their experience will also be different where their parents are separated, given that the impact of the abuse may intensify after separation. Providing help to both the child and the non-abusive parent is important.

3.26 As we progress services and support under this pillar, we will consider how best to meet the specific needs of children (including communication needs) in order to support children and young people to access and participate in the services that will support their recovery.

3.27 This work will include consideration of a Barnahus-type model for Northern Ireland, as well as delivery of effective advocacy and support services for children and young people. We will ensure that the best interests of the child are a primary consideration, that their voices are heard and that their experiences are considered as part of criminal justice proceedings. Critically, in bringing forward new policies, services and interventions, we want to reflect their lived experience, with their safety paramount and so that they are supported and best able to recover.

3.28 Responses to the Call for Views and consultation called for further support services for children and young people, noting that a range of services for children and young people have either been discontinued or are no longer funded by the state. Responses set out that investment in services would facilitate savings at a later date in terms of the health and justice systems.

3.29 We know that alongside their parents or guardians, children and young people often need to leave their homes because of the dangers of further or repeated abuse. This requires access to accommodation and housing support services that are suitable for children, not only in terms of their safety, but also in terms of responding to their needs. In some cases, it will be in the best interests of the child or young person to remain in their home, maintaining the support of family and friends, along with regular routines in school attendance, youth clubs etc. which potentially provides a wider package of support. For others, alternative emergency or longer-term accommodation or care may be required.

3.30 Improvements in how child sexual abuse is dealt with in Northern Ireland are vital in order to prevent and minimise the harm caused by child sexual abuse and secure better lifetime opportunities for children, young people and their families. Child sexual abuse not only has a significant immediate impact on the child victim but can also have long-term devasting impacts on the victim, including a higher risk of them experiencing mental and physical health problems. As a society, we need to focus efforts on ensuring child sexual abuse is prevented before it occurs, before people at risk of abusing become offenders and before potential victims become actual victims.

What more will we do?

3.31 Our focus in this pillar is to enable access to effective services for children and young people; to provide support that will prevent abuse occurring where possible; and to help children and young people to recover when it does occur, ensuring that they are seen and heard and taking account of their individual needs. There will be an important emphasis on helping children and young people to understand consent and what constitutes healthy relationships. The outcomes and key priorities under this pillar are:

PILLAR 3: CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Preventing domestic and/or sexual abuse from happening and ensuring that children and young people, who are victims, are seen and heard; and can access services and receive support to help them to recover and taking account of their particular needs.

OUTCOME 4:

An increase in the knowledge and skills of children and young people, and of supporting adults in their life, about forming healthy relationships, helping to prevent domestic and/or sexual abuse.

KEY PRIORITY AREAS:

- Supporting the education sector to build capacity, knowledge and skills to promote understanding about consent and healthy relationships and to teach about sensitive subjects such as domestic and/or sexual abuse, in an age-appropriate and inclusive way, across schools and other youth settings, training facilities, Further Education Colleges and Universities.
- Improve understanding of domestic and/or sexual abuse and building capacity among parents, guardians and carers, supporting them to be able to confidently discuss the issue of healthy relationships with their children and young people.

OUTCOME 5:

Children and young people are supported, feel safe regardless of diversity of need, are guided into services quickly and can access safe accommodation-based services.

KEY PRIORITY AREAS:

- Providing tailored, responsive and specialised support for children and young people in an age-appropriate manner, as well as wider family, to reduce the risk and impact of abuse; recover from trauma; understand their needs; and improve their health and well-being, including further implementation of the Gillen Review and consideration of a Barnahus-type model for Northern Ireland.
- Ensuring all children and young people can access sufficient accommodation, or housing support, that is safe and appropriate to their needs and circumstances or supporting them to remain in their home if they want to and it is safe to do so.

OUTCOME 6:

Children and young people feel confident to report domestic and/or sexual abuse, barriers to participating in the justice system are reduced and justice responses are effective.

KEY PRIORITY AREAS:

- Providing children and young people with accessible information and services to support engagement in the criminal justice process, in a way that ensures they feel protected and safe, including further implementation of the Gillen Review and consideration of a Barnahus-type model for Northern Ireland.

WHAT WILL SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

Teachers are better equipped to inform children and young people about consent, Relationship and Sexuality Education and domestic and/or sexual abuse.

Children and young people have access to, and participate in, well supported RSE programmes which are flexible, reflect their needs and enable them to learn about developing healthy relationships.

Children and young people receive support at educational and training facilities.

Improved engagement with parents, guardians and carers in the review and development of a school's RSE policy and taught programme.

Identification of pupils displaying harmful sexual behaviour in line with the Department of Education circular 2022/02.

Children and young people receive the support services they need.

Increased satisfaction among children and young people with the services provided.

Children and young people affected by domestic and/or sexual abuse are empowered and feel confident to report it.

PILLAR 4: SUPPORT AND PROVISION

Ensuring that all victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse can access tailored, responsive and specialised support and provision to recover and rebuild their lives.

What we know

3.32 Support for adults affected by domestic and/or sexual abuse comes from many sources and is provided in many different settings. Individuals who are experiencing domestic and/or sexual abuse may need additional support to enable them to continue to access mainstream services, such as education, welfare, housing and mental health provision.

3.33 The statutory, voluntary and community sectors play an important role in the provision of specialist domestic and/or sexual abuse services, including crisis response, outreach, housing support services, advocacy and counselling services to help victims overcome trauma, recover and rebuild their lives. This also includes providing support to family and friends of someone who is experiencing domestic or sexual abuse.

3.34 A concern for many is that they will have access to appropriate services in a timely manner, tailored to their needs and taking account of lived experience at the point where they are finally able to reach out and ask for help.

"There must be clear pathways to help and support victims. It is vitally important that this is provided in the right way and at the right time so that victims are not put off taking action about their situation."

3.35 It is important that services should take account of the particular needs of victims, including where there are multiple intersectional needs of different at-risk groups. This could, for example, include children, older people, women, men, disabled people, minority ethnic groups, LGBTQIA+ individuals, those with communication difficulties, immigrants or refugees.

3.36 Victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse often face numerous barriers to leaving an abusive relationship and seeking support (these have been considered in more detail in **Section 2**, particularly in terms of the barriers associated most commonly with different groups). To ensure effective, accessible support, it is important that support providers fully understand these barriers and that the support provided is victim-centred and trauma-informed.

3.37 We know that victims, including children, may often have to leave their homes because of the dangers of further or repeated abuse and that economic barriers to leaving can make it more difficult. Refuges and other forms of temporary accommodation can provide a safe and supportive environment. Some victims may want to remain in their homes, as they miss the support of family and friends, and may also wish to maintain regular routines such as school attendance for their children, and in such cases a wider, tailored package of support may be needed. In addition to the role of the Northern Ireland Executive, the particular role of the Department for Communities, as well as the Northern Ireland Housing Executive is critical at a strategic level in ensuring ongoing progress to address these issues, given the importance of appropriate and accessible housing (plus housing support services) and the link between homelessness and domestic abuse.

"[We] need to tackle homelessness as a result of domestic abuse."

3.38 Responses to the Strategy's Call for Views also pressed for improved and expanded services during the criminal justice process, particularly to take account of the specific needs of children and the impact of abuse on them (which is dealt with under Pillar 3). We will listen to those with lived experience to further consider the support needed for those affected by abuse to ensure they are able to fully engage in the criminal justice system and feel supported to do so for their entire journey.

What more will we do?

3.39 Our focus in this pillar is to support those affected by domestic and/or sexual abuse, including addressing the wider impact on family and friends. This includes understanding and taking account of the intersectional needs of victims, providing services that are victim-centred as well as addressing and responding to housing needs. The outcomes and key priorities under this pillar are:

PILLAR 4: SUPPORT AND PROVISION

Ensuring that all victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse can access tailored, responsive and specialised support and provision to recover and rebuild their lives

OUTCOME 7:

Victims are supported, feel safe regardless of diversity of need and are guided into services quickly.

KEY PRIORITY AREAS:

- Providing tailored, responsive and specialised support for victims, as well as wider family, to reduce the risk and impact of abuse; recover from trauma and improve their health and well-being; and engage in the justice system in a way that ensures they feel protected and safe.
- Enabling services to better understand intersectional needs of individuals to ensure victims get the responses and support they need.

OUTCOME 8:

All victims of domestic abuse can access safe accommodation-based services.

KEY PRIORITY AREAS:

- Ensuring all victims can access sufficient accommodation, or housing support, that is safe and appropriate to their needs and circumstances.
- Supporting victims of domestic abuse to remain in their home if they want to and it is safe to do so.

WHAT WILL SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

Victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse are aware of support services and how to access them.

Barriers to accessing support for specific groups are identified and removed.

Victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse receive timely provision of support services.

Waiting times to access support services are reduced.

Support provided is tailored to meet the intersectional needs of the victim.

Victims feel satisfied with support services provided.

Victims have safe and appropriate accommodation.

Victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse are able to access refuge/emergency accommodation when they need to.

PILLAR 5: JUSTICE

Ensuring justice responses are effective, supporting victims and holding individuals who are abusive to account, at the earliest opportunity.

What we know

3.40 While anyone can be a victim of domestic or sexual abuse, we know that many perpetrators of domestic and/or sexual abuse are repeat offenders and that many victims unfortunately may experience domestic and/or sexual abuse again in the future.

3.41 For many victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse, going through the criminal justice system will be a daunting experience and due to a range of factors (including, for example, trauma or concerns about the impact on their family) this can result in disengagement from the criminal justice process. Recorded crime levels only show part of the true picture, due to underreporting and to victims withdrawing from criminal justice processes. Not all domestic and/or sexual abuse incidents are reported and where they are, not all will result in a crime being recorded due to the level of the severity of the incident.

3.42 This Strategy seeks to address the high levels of under-reporting and attrition (victims who withdraw from criminal justice processes) that are associated with domestic and/or sexual abuse through increasing awareness of available support; and through improving understanding of and confidence in the criminal justice system. We also recognise that speedier case progression, better legal protections and specific supports for victims will be important factors.

3.43 Through this Strategy we will seek to understand better the reasons behind under-reporting and attrition rates so that we can address barriers to participation and more effectively reflect intersectional needs.

"Survivors do not believe that the outcome of their report will be worth the trauma of reporting and reliving their experience."

3.44 Responses to consultation called for more support for victims on their criminal justice journey. This included calls for improved and extended services to meet the needs of specific groups of victims. They also highlighted the need for the provision of clear and accessible information for victims on what to expect through the criminal justice processes; and ensuring access to timely and accurate case updates (in terms of case progression and outcomes). In taking forward measures to address these we will take account of communication difficulties that individuals may face.

3.45 Consultation responses also called for consideration of how cases could be fast-tracked. Many had concerns about the time taken to deal with cases and the level of delay encountered. Reducing delay in the criminal justice system continues to be a key priority, with a significant programme of work already underway, which is being progressed out with this Strategy.

"More must be done to ensure that the process of reporting is streamlined."

3.46 Consultation respondents also called for improved linkages across the justice system, particularly in relation to the use of information across different court types. They also highlighted the need for improved awareness of the range of criminal justice supports and preventative measures available to victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse and of the existing legal aid waiver for Non-Molestation Orders).

3.47 It is also important to consider how we can best address offending and abusive behaviour and carry out early risk assessment in order to reduce offending, prevent re-offending and reduce the number of people who become victims or have to suffer further abuse. The earlier we can identify, address and stop abusive and offending behaviour and its impact, the better.

3.48 Through the Strategy and its associated action plans we want to build on existing early and upstream intervention measures to break the cycle of abusive behaviour. To do this effectively we recognise the need for more information and evidence on the causes and drivers of abusive behaviour. as well as what works well to address it, including effective management of those with a history of abusive behaviour.

"An opportunity to seek early intervention before offending behaviour takes place ... when behaviours of concern would first be identified before this would ever reach the criminal justice arena."

3.49 We will also consider how best to utilise multi-agency arrangements to manage the risk posed to individuals; to address abusive behaviour; provide support; and ensure that victims are both protected and that they feel safe.

3.50 As part of this we will consider how to improve risk management and safeguarding for victims of domestic abuse, focusing on both the safety of victims as well as the management of those that cause harm.

3.51 We will work to further ensure that where protective measures are in place, we can enable people to remain in their own home, if that is what they want. This may include using available powers, where needed to place restrictions on individuals who are abusive in terms of contact with and proximity to their victims.

"The protections available need to be strengthened."

3.52 We recognise that there are interdependencies between this pillar and the prevention pillar, around raising awareness of healthy and unhealthy behaviours in order to help address concerning and abusive behaviours. The Strategic Investment Board's mid–term review of the 2016 – 2023 Strategy identified the need for an ongoing assessment of the capacity of the justice system to respond to current, new and emerging offences. It also stressed the need to continue to develop and deliver initiatives and interventions, based on best practice, to effectively address harmful and abusive behaviours.

What more will we do?

3.53 Our focus in this pillar is to encourage victims to report domestic and/or sexual abuse, for them to remain engaged in the justice process and for them to receive an effective justice system response. In addition, we want to address abusive behaviours, reduce the associated risk of harm and improve protections for those affected. The outcomes and key priorities under this pillar are:

PILLAR 5: JUSTICE

Ensuring justice responses are effective; supporting victims; and holding individuals who are abusive to account at the earliest opportunity

OUTCOME 9:

Victims feel confident to report domestic and/or sexual abuse, barriers to participating in the justice system are reduced and justice responses are effective.

KEY PRIORITY AREAS:

- Understanding better the factors contributing to high attrition levels (drop out of cases) and under-reporting in domestic and/or sexual abuse cases in order to improve these.
- Providing victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse with accessible information and services to support engagement in the criminal justice process, including continued implementation of the Gillen Review.
- Improving the efficiency of the justice system and how domestic and/or sexual abuse cases are dealt with in criminal, civil and family courts.
- Strengthening the police and criminal justice response to domestic and/or sexual abuse.

OUTCOME 10:

Individuals are held to account for their abusive behaviour and supported to change, with the risk of harm reduced and victim safety enhanced.

KEY PRIORITY AREAS:

- Supporting individuals to address and manage their abusive behaviours, sustain positive change and facilitate participation by a wider range of individuals.
- Working collaboratively to target the most prolific offenders, improving risk assessment and management.
- Providing integrated safety and support structures for victims where programmes to address abusive behaviours are undertaken.
- Improving protections for those at risk of abuse.

WHAT WILL SUCCESS LOOK LIKE:

Victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse are confident to report abuse and have an improved experience of the criminal justice system.

Overall increased confidence in criminal justice system.

Reduced attrition rates in cases involving domestic and/or sexual abuse offences.

Complainants of domestic and/or sexual abuse feel that they are effectively supported through criminal justice processes.

Reduced time for domestic and/or sexual abuse cases to complete at court.

Those engaging in interventions and behavioural change programmes do not reoffend.

Victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse are protected from repeat offending.

4

Delivering the Strategy

4. Delivering the Strategy

Governance structures for co-ordination and delivery

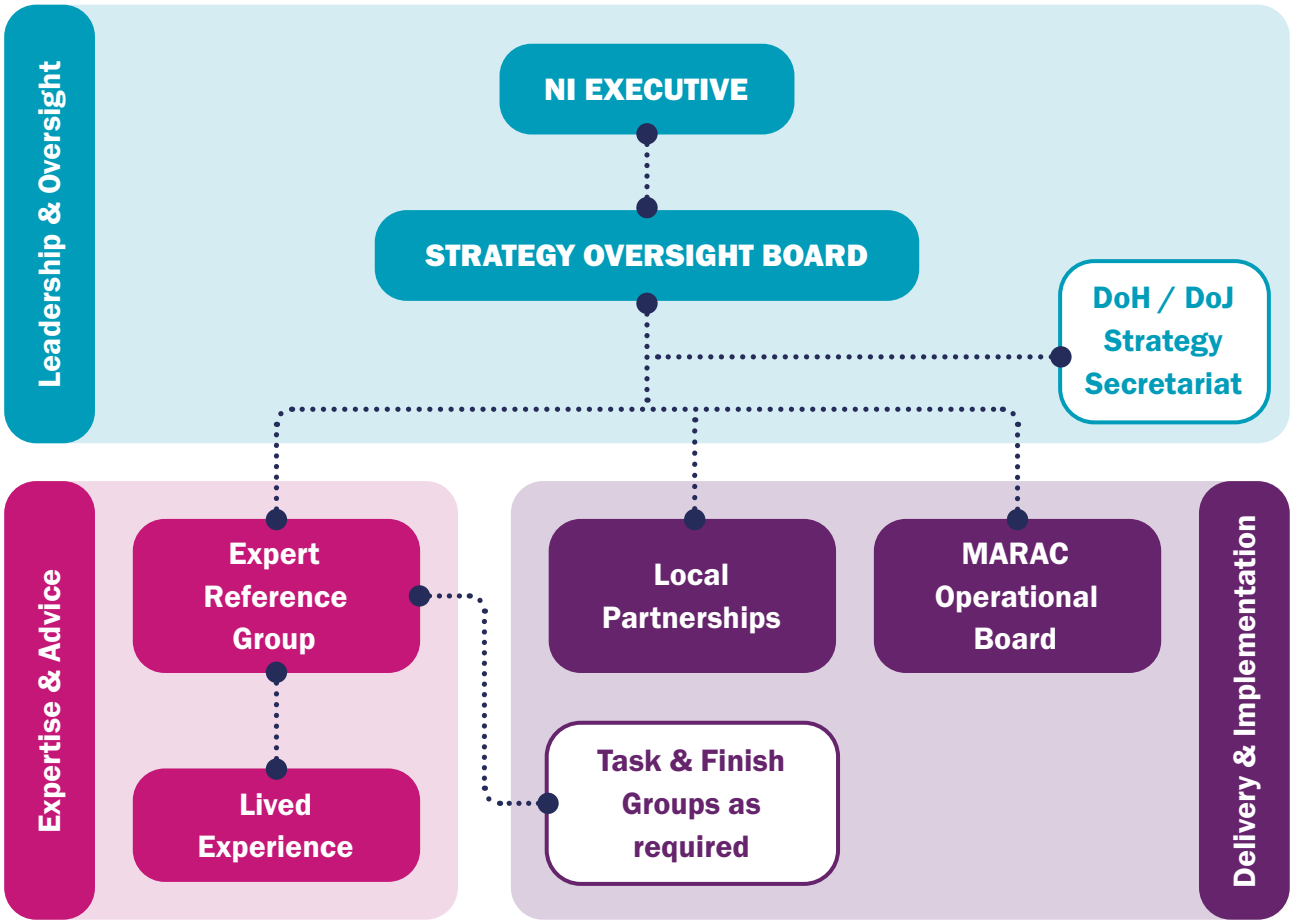
4.1 The Strategy has been endorsed by the Northern Ireland Executive.

4.2 The Strategy is led jointly by the Department of Health and the Department of Justice, working in partnership with the Department for Communities and Department of Education with which there are key links and interdependencies, for example, in relation to relationship and sexuality education, homelessness and housing support through Supporting People. The Strategy also has connections and interdependencies with the work of other Departments, including:

- the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs;
- the Executive Office (Ending Violence Against Women and Girls);
- the Department for the Economy (employment and further education); and
- the Department of Finance (civil law matters).

4.3 Implementation of this Strategy will be overseen by a cross-Departmental Strategy Oversight Board, informed by both an expert reference group and by engagement with those with lived experience. This approach builds on the governance structures that were in place in relation to the previous Strategy, although with an increased emphasis on listening to and taking account of lived experience, as well as reflecting the needs of different groups in the work that is being progressed.

4.4 In recognition of the strong interdependencies with the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, we will ensure that arrangements are put in place to support reporting mechanisms across the two strategies, where that is necessary or appropriate. The Executive Office is represented on the Strategy Oversight Board in order to ensure a cohesive, coordinated and collaborative approach across both strategies.



Leadership and oversight

4.5 The **Northern Ireland Executive** agreed the strategic direction providing leadership and oversight at an Executive level and will receive progress reports from the Strategy Oversight Board every six months. This approach reflects the cross-cutting nature of stopping domestic and sexual abuse and reinforces the principle that tackling domestic and/or sexual abuse is everyone's responsibility.

4.6 The Strategy Oversight Board will report and be accountable to the Executive. It will meet quarterly, and the membership will include senior officials across the Health, Justice, Communities, Education and Finance Departments; the Executive Office; the Northern Ireland Housing Executive; and Police Service of Northern Ireland. Additional representatives from the local Domestic and Sexual Violence Partnerships and voluntary sector will also be invited to attend on a rotational basis. The Board's role will be to oversee delivery against targets and against the performance framework, with appropriate challenge and scrutiny. It will also be responsible for negotiating and addressing barriers where these are encountered.

4.7 Should it be considered that delivery on the Strategy is not being achieved to its full extent, the Board will consider what mitigating steps and actions need to be taken.

4.8 There will be appropriate alignment and engagement with other relevant strategic oversight groups where there are strong interdependencies, particularly in relation to child protection and to Ending Violence against Women and Girls. This will help to ensure that there are joined up, informed, effective and collaborative responses at a strategic level.

Expertise and lived experience advice

4.9 A multi-agency **Expert Reference Group** comprised of partners from the statutory, voluntary and community sectors will provide advice to the Strategy Oversight Board from a cross-sectoral, frontline perspective. This will replace the previous Stakeholder Assurance Group. It will meet quarterly to share local data and best practice, to inform and drive continued improvement in tackling domestic and/or sexual abuse. It will also provide an important critical friend/challenge function through considering the delivery and deliverability of the Strategy, including advising on any mitigating action and adjustment necessary to ensure that progress continues to be made.

4.10 Victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse will also be key to the Strategy's delivery to ensure their lived experience and insight continues to inform our response. We are, however, mindful of the impact that this can have on individuals and the need to ensure there are structures available for support.

4.11 Stakeholder engagement has shown that there is already a range of relevant groups with lived experience groups across Northern Ireland, supported by key organisations across the voluntary and community sector. In progressing work under this Strategy and associated action plans, we will engage with those with lived experience, including with networks that have been established to support work to end violence against women and girls. In this way we will be informed by the views of those who have been affected by domestic and/or sexual abuse. We will also make available an ongoing survey mechanism through which victims can anonymously provide feedback on the support and services that they have received. In addition, we will want to take account of the feedback and monitoring mechanisms that service providers already have in place. We want to involve those with lived experience in implementation of the Strategy in order to better understand if what we are doing is making a difference for those affected. The intention is to both listen and respond as necessary. This will include considering what further actions need to be progressed as a result.

Action plans

"We recommend that the strategies clearly set out the roles and responsibilities of each Department so that there are clear lines of accountability."

4.12 The outcomes set out in this Strategy will be delivered through a series of associated action plans which will be developed over the lifetime of the Strategy, informed by analysis of need, emerging issues, international standards and ongoing engagement with our Expert Reference Group and other relevant networks.

4.13 The action plans will be aligned to the direction and priorities set by the Strategy. The actions contained within them will be SMART and co-ordinated where necessary and linked to the outcomes being sought. Action owners and timescales will be clearly identified. We will also ensure that there is sufficient flexibility to be able respond dynamically to new issues and needs that emerge across the lifespan of the Strategy. Where necessary, multi-agency Task and Finish groups will be established (with a clear lead agency) to take forward specific actions under the Strategy.

4.14 We will take steps to ensure that local Domestic and Sexual Violence Partnerships are equipped and structured to effectively support the implementation of the Strategy.

4.15 We will also publish regular progress reports to highlight the work that has been delivered as well as performance metrics on the impact of the Strategy's outcomes. The Strategic Oversight Board will monitor and review the actions plans on a quarterly basis and ensure any corrective action or barriers to implementation are addressed.

Monitoring progress and measuring success

4.16 We want to be sure that the Strategy is effective and is delivering the intended outcomes. We have developed a Strategic Performance Framework which is both integrated into the body of the Strategy and presented separately at Annex A.

4.17 Against each key priority area, the Performance Framework sets out a series of indicators and of measures that are intended to help us understand and evaluate the impact of the Strategy. In some cases we know that data is currently not available and we will need to take forward preparatory work to enable data capture and to establish baselines that can be monitored.

4.18 We will also work closely with the Executive Office to ensure appropriate alignment with reporting on data and measures under the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy.

4.19 We want to ensure that there is a continuous review process with accountable and transparent monitoring and reporting against the work that is being undertaken and how this is delivering against the Strategy's vision. We will keep the performance framework and associated dashboard under review as the Strategy is implemented, including taking account of the views of the Expert Reference Group as to how effectively it is reflecting delivery of the Strategy. We will also seek and encourage feedback from partners if actions are not being delivered as envisaged and where remedial action is needed to bring projects/actions back on track. Through this we can secure increased accountability for delivery against targets.

4.20 We will develop scorecards for significant new pieces of work that are being progressed, in order to demonstrate delivery under the Strategy. These will provide an overview of the service being delivered, partners involved in the project and provide a number of performance measures that will consider how much we have done, how well it was done and whether anyone is better off as a result. This will also feed into the Strategy's annual reports.

Funding

"Money and resources must be ring fenced."

4.21 Many responses to the Call for Views stressed the importance of developing a costed delivery plan and for longer-term sustainable funding being made available to support delivery of the Strategy and its action plans.

4.22 In developing associated action plans we will seek, so far as possible, to set out the costs associated with delivery. In some cases preparatory scoping work may need to be carried out before there is a reliable estimate of costs. Where this is the case, we will reflect this in the action plan.

4.23 At the point of publication, future budgets remain uncertain and, within this context, where there are funding pressures, we will seek to progress work against priority objectives, subject to available funding. The allocation of funding and work to be progressed will be considered by the Strategy Oversight Board as part of the development of annual action plans, informed by engagement with key stakeholders and delivery partners, and will be agreed by Ministers.

Mid-term review and evaluation

4.24 A mid-term review and evaluation of projects will be undertaken to assess how well our work is contributing to achieving the Strategy's ten outcomes.

4.25 We will also use this as an opportunity to gather feedback from key delivery partners and stakeholders on what aspects of the Strategy they think are working well and what could be improved. The findings of this evaluation will be made available and will be used to inform the remainder of the Strategy's seven-year implementation.

4.26 In line with established policy development processes, any new policy developed and implemented under the Strategy will be subject to monitoring and evaluation at appropriate stages of implementation. The purpose of this is to assess their effectiveness, determine what changes may be needed and identify areas for improvement.

Annex A

DSA Strategy Performance Framework

Annex A – DSA Strategy Performance Framework

Performance Framework

Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024-2031

Introduction

A Strategic Performance Framework, which is both integrated into the body of the Strategy and presented separately below, sets out the position and progress of each outcome to be measured using a range of indicators and data sources. It is acknowledged that data is not currently readily available in connection with a number of measures included in the framework, we are committed to data development as we take the Strategy forward.

Crossover with EVAWG

In a number of areas, the indicators and measures are aligned with those included in the EVAWG Strategy. This is to be expected given the close connection between both strategies. We will ensure that data collected across both Strategies is consistent, complementary and constructs an improved picture, whilst also recognising that the data collected for the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy needs to cover all victims of these crimes.

Important caveat regarding data/statistics relating to domestic and sexual violence

As for the previous Strategy, we will continue to use police recorded statistics on domestic and sexual abuse incidents and crimes. However, we must be cognisant that headline figures will require further assessment and analysis in order to draw out trends over time. An initial increase in incidents and crimes would not necessarily mean that domestic and/or sexual abuse is increasing; it could instead be the result of increased awareness and more victims coming forward. Ultimately, at the end of the seven year period, we would want to see an overall decrease in the recorded instances of domestic and sexual violence.

PILLAR 1: PARTNERSHIP

Driving change together through joint commitment, leadership and partnership working.

OUTCOME 1:

A coordinated response to domestic and/or sexual abuse informed by victims' voices and community engagement.

KEY PRIORITY AREAS:

- Working collaboratively across all government Departments and with statutory, voluntary and community and faith organisations to tackle domestic and/or sexual abuse.
- Having effective governance structures underpinning the Strategy's delivery with a performance framework to monitor outcomes and impact.
- Informing policy, legislation and service development with better quality data, research and shared learning.
- Having increased opportunities for victims' voices to be heard and ensuring the Strategy's delivery is underpinned by intersectionality recognising that many people have multiple needs and face multiple barriers.

INDICATORS

- Better, effective and targeted policies and interventions to tackle domestic and/or sexual abuse and support victims.
- A whole society approach to ending domestic and/or sexual abuse is adopted, aligned with the approach to EVAWG.
- Integrated working across sectors to tackle domestic and/or sexual abuse becomes the norm.
- Expert voluntary and community sector partners are recognised as equal partners in implementing the Strategy and action plans.
- High quality, relevant data and research is gathered, analysed and combined with that gathered in connection with other connected strategies such as EVAWG.
- Governance structures in place are effective and fit for purpose.
- Meaningful and effective involvement of people with lived experience in the design and delivery of services and support, including children and young people ensuring response to trends and emerging issues.

MEASURES

- Qualitative feedback on the effectiveness of partnership structures and mechanisms.
- Mapping and ongoing review of gaps in services or data (used to inform the development of action plans).
- Mid-term and end review of quality of research commissioned to assess its impact on the identification and development of actions, which deliver the aims sought by the Strategy.
- Qualitative feedback from victims on how their voices' have been listened to and actioned, where appropriate.
- Frequency of engagement with Expert Reference Group and other partnership structures.

PILLAR 2: PREVENTION

reventing domestic and/or sexual abuse from happening by challenging the attitudes and behaviours that foster it and intervening early where possible to prevent it.

OUTCOME 2:

The public is informed about the different types of domestic and/or sexual abuse and its impact on victims, including children and young people.

KEY PRIORITY AREAS:

- Raising cross-sectoral and public awareness so that those at risk of, or experiencing domestic and/or sexual abuse, recognise it, its various forms and know that help is available.
- Preventing domestic and/or sexual abuse from happening by empowering people to safely challenge attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that foster domestic and/or sexual abuse.

OUTCOME 3:

Domestic and/or sexual abuse is identified and responded to earlier.

KEY PRIORITY AREAS:

- Building capacity among people working in frontline and public-facing roles to identify and respond effectively to domestic and/or sexual abuse, including in relation to children and young people, at the earliest opportunity. This includes learning from Domestic Homicide Reviews, improving practice to identify, support and safeguard against domestic and sexual abuse.
- Supporting and encouraging employers in the public, private and other sectors to make workplaces safer by raising awareness of domestic and/or sexual abuse and promoting workplace policies with effective measures to support staff.

INDICATORS

- Fewer people affected of domestic and/or sexual abuse
- Fewer domestic homicides.
- Victims are able to report and to access support.
- The general public has an awareness of domestic and/or sexual abuse and what support services are available.
- Individuals feel confident in challenging attitudes around domestic and/or sexual abuse.
- Attitudes that reinforce harmful stereotypes are changed.
- People are aware of where they can get more information if they are concerned about domestic and/or sexual abuse.
- Frontline and public-facing staff are equipped to identify domestic and/or sexual abuse and signpost to relevant services.
- Appropriate referrals to established multi-agency risk assessment forums.
- Recommendations in Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) reports are implemented and embedded in timely manner.
- Organisations have domestic and/or sexual abuse workplace policies in place.

MEASURES

- Figures for domestic and sexual abuse incidents and crimes, recorded by PSNI.
- Number of domestic homicides, recorded by PSNI.
- Number of applications made under DVADS; and number of disclosures made by PSNI.
- Feedback from Northern Ireland Safe Community Survey.
- Number and range of frontline staff completing training and evaluation of same.
- Numbers of civil protection orders applied for and awarded.
- Number of referrals by agencies to multi-agency risk assessments.

Measures to address abusive behaviours, under the Justice pillar are also relevant to Prevention.

PILLAR 3: CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Preventing domestic and/or sexual abuse from happening and ensuring that children and young people, who are victims, are seen and heard; and can access services and receive support, helping them to recover and taking account of their particular needs.

OUTCOME 4:

An increase in the knowledge and skills of children and young people, and of supporting adults in their lives, about forming healthy relationships, helping to prevent domestic and/or sexual abuse.

KEY PRIORITY AREAS:

- Supporting the education sector to build capacity, knowledge and skills to promote understanding about consent and healthy relationships and to teach about sensitive subjects such as domestic and/or sexual abuse, in an age-appropriate and inclusive way, across schools and other youth settings, training facilities, Further Education Colleges and Universities.
- Improve understanding of domestic and/or sexual abuse and building capacity among parents, guardians and carers, supporting them to be able to confidently discuss the issue of healthy relationships with their children.

INDICATORS

- Teachers are better equipped to inform children and young people about consent, Relationship and Sexuality Education and domestic and/or sexual abuse.
- Children and young people have access to, and participate in, well supported RSE programmes which are flexible, reflect their needs and enable them to learn about developing healthy relationships.
- Children and young people receive support at educational and training facilities.
- Improved engagement with parents, guardians and carers in the review and development of a school's RSE policy and taught programme.
- Identification of pupils displaying harmful sexual behaviour in line with the Department of Education circular 2022/02.

MEASURES

- Qualitative feedback from teachers/providers on RSE programmes delivered from Inspection evidence and disaggregated information from the questionnaire relating to changes to the curriculum made by the Secretary of State.
- Feedback from teachers regarding the effectiveness and their satisfaction with the materials provided through monitoring of the CCEA RSE Hub and through Inspection feedback.
- The number of staff undertaking various levels of safeguarding training and number of schools receiving whole school training each year. (Baseline in place)
- School Omnibus Survey question about schools engaging with parents/carers on RSE, including domestic and/or sexual abuse.
- The number of Risk Assessment Management Plans (RAMPs) put in place in schools each year, for children displaying harmful sexual behaviour. (Baseline in place)

PILLAR 3: CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Preventing domestic and/or sexual abuse from happening and ensuring that children and young people, who are victims, are seen and heard; and can access services and receive support, helping them to recover and taking account of their particular needs.

OUTCOME 5:

Children and young people are supported, feel safe regardless of diversity of need, are guided into services quickly and can access safe accommodation based services.

KEY PRIORITY AREAS:

- Providing tailored, responsive and specialised support for children and young people in an age-appropriate manner, as well as wider family, to reduce the risk and impact of abuse; recover from trauma; understand their needs; and improve their health and well-being, including further implementation of the Gillen Review and consideration of a Barnahus-type model for Northern Ireland.
- Ensuring all children and young people can access sufficient accommodation, or housing support, that is safe and appropriate to their needs and circumstances or supporting them to remain in their home if they want to and it is safe to do so.

INDICATORS

- Children and young people receive the support services they need.
- Increased satisfaction among children and young people with the services provided.

MEASURES

- The number of children and young people accessing support services linked to domestic and/or sexual abuse.
- Qualitative feedback from children and young people on effectiveness of support services and interventions.
- Pupil satisfaction through Time and Life Surveys.
- The number of Operation Encompass Referrals to schools. (Baseline is in place).
- The number of schools completing trauma informed training to enable appropriate support to be provided in school, following Operation Encompass notification. (Baseline in place)

PILLAR 3: CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Preventing domestic and/or sexual abuse from happening and ensuring that children and young people, who are victims, are seen and heard; and can access services and receive support, helping them to recover and taking account of their particular needs.

OUTCOME 6: **Children and young people feel confident to report domestic and/or sexual abuse, barriers to participating in the justice system are reduced and justice responses are effective.** **KEY PRIORITY AREAS:** • Providing children and young people with accessible information and services to support engagement in the criminal justice process, in a way that ensures they feel protected and safe, including further implementation of the Gillen Review and consideration of a Barnahus-type model for Northern Ireland.	• Children and young people affected by domestic and/or sexual abuse are empowered and feel confident to report it.	• The number of domestic and sexual abuse incidents and crimes, recorded by PSNI. • Prosecution and conviction rates for domestic and/or sexual abuse offences relating to children and young people. • The number of cases in which child aggravators are used. • The number of times Remote Evidence Centres are used by witnesses who are children and young people. • The number of times Pre-Recorded Cross Examination is used. (once introduced) • The median time taken from report to conclusion at the Crown Court for cases involving sexual offences against a child.

NB (Data in relation to cases involving sexual offences against children relates to the number of calendar days between the dates listed. Court recess dates are not taken into account - data relates to case where the principal offence was a sexual offence that specified that the victim was a child in the offence description)

PILLAR 4: SUPPORT AND PROVISION

Ensuring that all victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse can access tailored, responsive and specialised support and provision to recover and rebuild their lives.

OUTCOME 7: **Victims are supported, feel safe regardless of diversity of need and are guided into services quickly.** **KEY PRIORITY AREAS:** • Providing tailored, responsive and specialised support for victims, as well as wider families, to reduce the risk and impact of abuse; recover from trauma and improve health and well-being; and engage in the justice system in a way that ensures they feel protected and safe. • Enabling services to better understand intersectional needs of individuals to ensure victims get the responses and support they need.	**INDICATORS** • Victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse are aware of support services and how to access them. • Barriers to accessing support for specific groups are identified and removed. • Victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse receive timely provision of support services. • Waiting times to access support services are reduced. • Support provided is tailored to meet the intersectional needs of the victim. • Victims feel satisfied with support services provided.	**MEASURES** • The number of victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse (disaggregated) accessing specific support services. • Qualitative feedback from victims on information and resources provided and from service users on the effectiveness of support services. • Waiting times for access to services. (once available)
OUTCOME 8: **All victims of domestic abuse can access safe accommodation-based services.** **KEY PRIORITY AREAS:** • Ensuring all victims can access sufficient accommodation, or housing support, that is safe and appropriate to their needs and circumstances. • Supporting victims of domestic abuse to remain in their home if they want to and it is safe to do so.	• Victims have safe and appropriate accommodation. • Victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse are able to access refuge / emergency accommodation when they need to.	

PILLAR 5: JUSTICE

Ensuring justice responses are effective; supporting victims and holding individuals who are abusive to account at the earliest opportunity.

OUTCOME 9:

Victims feel confident to report domestic and/or sexual abuse, barriers to participating in the justice system are reduced and justice responses are effective.

KEY PRIORITY AREAS:

- Understanding better the factors contributing to high attrition levels (where a victim withdraws from criminal justice processes) and under-reporting in domestic and/or sexual abuse cases in order to improve these.
- Providing victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse with accessible information and services to support engagement in the criminal justice process, including continued implementation of the Gillen Review.
- Improving the efficiency of the justice system and how domestic and/or sexual abuse cases are dealt with in criminal, civil and family courts.
- Strengthening the police and criminal justice response to domestic and/or sexual abuse.

INDICATORS

- Victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse are confident to report abuse and have an improved experience of the criminal justice system.
- Overall increased confidence in criminal justice system.
- Reduced attrition rates in cases involving domestic and/or sexual abuse offences.
- Complainants of domestic and/or sexual abuse feel that they are effectively supported through criminal justice processes.
- Reduced time for domestic and/or sexual abuse cases to complete at court.

MEASURES

- The number of victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse accessing specific support services (disaggregated).
- The number of cases where special measures are granted, including the use of Remote Evidence Centres
- Attrition rates in domestic and/or sexual abuse cases (once available)
- Qualitative feedback from service users in relation to services and resources (such as My Justice Journey, once introduced)
- Completion times for criminal justice processes.
- The number of police recorded incidents and crimes.
- Prosecution and conviction rates in domestic and/or sexual abuse cases.
- Quantitative and qualitative data relating to training for CJO staff on the domestic abuse offence and in relation to supporting a trauma informed justice system.

PILLAR 5: JUSTICE

Ensuring justice responses are effective; supporting victims and holding individuals who are abusive to account at the earliest opportunity.

OUTCOME 10:

Individuals are held to account for their abusive behaviour and supported to change, with the risk of harm reduced and victim safety enhanced.

KEY PRIORITY AREAS:

- Supporting individuals to address and manage their abusive behaviours, sustain positive change and facilitate participation by a wider range of individuals.
- Working collaboratively to target the most prolific offenders, improving risk assessment and management.
- Providing integrated safety and support structures for victims where programmes to address abusive behaviours are undertaken.
- Improving protections for those at risk of abuse.

INDICATORS

- Those engaging in interventions and behavioural change programmes do not reoffend.
- Victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse are protected from repeat offending.

MEASURES

- Repeat offending rates. (once available)
- Rates of repeat victimisation. (where available)
- Quantitative and qualitative data relating to behavioural change programmes and associated numbers of repeat referrals and/or offending rates.
- The number of civil protection orders applied for, awarded and, where relevant, breached.



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