

# LA DOLCE VITA PROJECT

Submission on the

## **PROTECTION FROM STALKING BILL**

**La Dolce Vita Project** is a non-gender specific domestic abuse, parental alienation therapeutic support charity founded January 2016.

**La Dolce Vita Project** was delighted to see the Protection from Stalking Bill introduced to the assembly earlier this year. We now welcome this opportunity to put forward our written comments and to share the real-life experiences of those within our community and across Northern Ireland whom we have had the honour of supporting.

Those whom we refer to in this document have been unfortunate to experience stalking alongside many other abusive behaviours associated with domestic abuse and parental alienation.

**La Dolce Vita Project** partnered with Stalking N.I founder Vicki Clarke June 2016 to received training and to be educated on Stalking. Vicki Clarkes 7 years lived experience of Stalking prompted her to bring a “Civil Bill” to the assembly back in September 2016. Vicki Clarke worked alongside the Stalking Steering Group, set up by the Criminal Law Branch, Department of Justice for the drafting of the Stalking Bill. La Dolce Vita Project continue to work with Stalking N.I to promote and increase the provision of services in relation to Stalking and Domestic Abuse.

**La Dolce Vita Project** and Stalking NI held a conference on Stalking and Domestic Abuse June 2018 specific to the impact on those affected and how the lack of legislation was failing men, women, children. Lived experiences were shared on the day.

**La Dolce Vita Project** welcomed the opportunity to acquire a better understanding from the training received in relation to stalking behaviours to support amendment of La Dolce Vita Project risk assessment model.

Feedback from La Dolce Vita Project team members on the inclusion of stalking behaviours within our assessment model found that many of those they assessed did not understand that the behaviours they were experiencing were in fact stalking.

Feedback received found that Stalking behaviours were more commonly found with those who had left abusive relationships. The threats and stalking behaviours accelerated post separation keeping victims in a perpetual state of fear.

Stalking laws are vital to ensure victims, survivors and their children are protected.

### **What is stalking:**

Police Service Northern Ireland (PSNI) describe stalking as ***“an obsessive fixation which is powered and renewed with continuous unwanted contact attempts to their target. Using texts, emails letters, social media, door calling, drive-by’, following, suddenly appearing in shops or visiting places of work”***.

It is estimated that one in five woman and one in ten men will be affected by stalking in their lifetime.

### **Stalking behaviours reported to La Dolce Vita Project:**

- Ex partners appearing outside their home, back of shed, garage, or waiting for them after they finished worked, outside or close to their place of work.
- Followed home, to their place of work or to a friend's home.
- Overwhelming volume of calls, texts.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> party contact through family members, friends questioning the movement of the victim.
- Misuse of social media platforms to befriend the victim and portray to be someone else, to gain information or set up to meet.
- Misuse of social media platforms, particularly Facebook, changing their passwords to gain access to message their friends, or pretend to be them.
- Video recordings of the victim, taking of pictures and sending to them, to let the victim know they are being watched.
- Threats of harm to self and or the person's children "you will not see your children again if you do not do as I say".
- Make use of a person's disability to cause emotional, physical, psychological, financial harm.

### **Lived Experience:**

One lady we interviewed talked of how she would receive random messages over a few days from different mobile number, telling her where she was; who she was with; what she was wearing, and that the person texting was going to take their life if she did not do what he said. Unfortunately, even though the lady knew who this was it could not be proven.

This lady remained home and refused to go out for several weeks, isolated, living in fear, feelings of suicide were high, following a text message she had received telling her she left her bedroom light on, while she was in her kitchen.

The lady went upstairs and received another text telling her, she should have locked her back gate. By the time the lady called the police, and the police arrived, no one was found. The number could not be traced back to whom she believed it to be - her ex-partner.

La Dolce Vita Project believe that to ensure the safeguarding and protection of women, men, and children exposed to stalking, it is important that we capture within the Protection from Stalking Bill all abusive and threatening behaviours.

**Barriers reported by those who experience stalking to La Dolce Vita Project:**

- Barriers to acquiring orders because of financial restrictions or limitations.
- Lack of resources within the court environment to protect victims from unnecessary exposure to further intimidation.
- Cases involving stalking appear to rank lower in terms of importance. Reportedly it takes a considerable number of months to even secure a court hearing.
- Police officers appear to have limited knowledge or training. Therefore, do not have a full understanding of stalking behaviours.
- Disabilities appear not to be taken into consideration when reporting stalking.

- Those who experience stalking felt neither heard, believed, or understood.

### **Lived experience:**

One mother detailed how she had come home one evening to the door to her home opened. The mother felt a presence in her home, which alarmed her, she contacted a friend by phone while she checked around everywhere to find no one in the home.

Two days later the mother again returned home to find pictures of her children across the kitchen table that had been sent months before her ex-partner as part of an indirect contact order.

This left the mother highly distressed and alarmed of how her ex-partner had gained access to her home. The PSNI questioned the mother to which she noted she felt she was being accused of doing wrong. A suggestion was made by a police officer that perhaps she had left her door opened or had forgot to get her key off her ex-partner.

The mother knew this was an indirect message to her from her ex-partner threatening her with their children, as he had previously said if she ever left him, she would never see their children.

One month later she returned home from a night out with friends, and walked into her front room, turned on the light and her ex-partner was sitting in her living room waiting for her. The mother was assaulted, and her ex-partner left the property. He has never been charged for the assault or entry to the mother's property.

**La Dolce Vita Project feedback received from those with lived experiences of stalking:**

- Those who choose to abuse appear to have no respect for the laws and do not adhere to protection orders.
- Children can be stalked, threatened, and misused to carry information to another person, who will use the information to cause further distress fear and alarm.
- There are no real consequences, and the abusers know there is a high probability that they will get away with it, as victims of stalking are expected to have recordings or excessive evidence for a prosecution.
- Breaches of orders are common.
- Police not equipped with all the required information to advise of the next steps once a statement is made by a victim.

**La Dolce Vita Project feedback received on the impact of stalking:**

- Isolation
- Loss of family life
- Loss of friendships
- Loss of social life

- Loss of employment
- Mental health deterioration
- Anxiety related disorders
- Eating disorders
- Depression
- Fear of being followed and or watched
- Hypervigilance
- Unsafe
- Post trauma stress disorder
- Sleep related issues
- Inability to work
- Agoraphobia

**Additional comments made and recommendations:**

- Lack of understanding among professionals in the difference between harassment and stalking could result in non-prosecutions therefore adequate training on completion of the bill must be mandatory.
- Extensive research and recorded statistics will shed light on the prevalence of the issue of stalking across Northern Ireland.



- Direct links with legal and mental health professionals is required between criminal and civil family law proceedings to ensure transparency on all matters arising and protection for victims and their children.
- Mandatory training should be made essential to all services working with the vulnerable, e.g., of training: in dealing with a disclosure of stalking, protection, safety and safeguarding from stalking to ensure early intervention plans is in place to protect from any potential harm from stalking.
- Practical guidance, information leaflets available to support not only the local and statutory bodies but accident and emergency rooms, GP practices, domestic abuse, mental health services e.g.: when advising victims of what will happen next, e.g., after they report an incident, what resources are available to them.
- Easy online access to stalking information for all to include children.
- Mandatory Stalkers register
- Implementing of a stalker tagging location system
- Devising an early intervention assessment model across all legal and mental health services that is adapted to include stalking behaviours.

- Services financially supported to meet the needs of victims, survivors, and their children.

**La Dolce Vita Project** would like consideration to include an amendment to Clause 1 Subsection 4 which defines the meaning of conduct to include:

***1. “To make use of a person’s disability to cause fear, alarm or substantial distress on a person and or their children”.***

***2. “Blackmail or suicidal threats of harm to self or another that will cause fear, alarm or substantial distress on a person and or their children”.***

***3. “Employment status or professional capacity cannot be used, misused, or abused to cause fear, alarm or substantial distress on a person and or their children”.***

**La Dolce Vita Project** close our submission with the hopes and comments made by those we represent who do not wish for their names to be published for their own protection and safety at this time.

(A):

***“My hopes are that changes are implemented to support care and facilitate my human rights. That changes are made, and that people listen before more lives are lost”.***

(B):

***“Family court professionals need to be regularly evaluated so they know how to show compassion, care and consideration for the children that witnessed their parent going through this”.***

(C):

***“My stalking experience has left me completely exhausted, walking a tight rope, waiting for it to break. Wondering when I am going to snap, living a life of potence”.***

(D):

***“I feel I have to convince people of everything that has happened to me all of the time”.***

(E):

***“I have anxiety. I do not trust people. I do not leave my house. I have high blood pressure due to the stress”.***

(F):

***“My hope for this bill is that it takes in the thoughts and feelings of the blind and those with other disabilities. My abuser would often come up behind me, shout in my ear, throw objects to harm me, I knew it was him, as I sensed him, knew his scent, his low tones. My abuser used my blindness to his advantage. Though explaining this to the police was difficult. The experience of reporting the stalking left me feeling discriminated against. The most traumatic experience of my whole entire life. It has left me judgemental. It has destroyed my self-esteem”.***

## **La Dolce Vita Project**