



NORTHERN
IRELAND
HUMAN
RIGHTS
COMMISSION

Christine Darrah
Committee Clerk

Committee for Justice
Room 242, Parliament Buildings
Stormont
BT4 3XX

Sent via email to: committee.justice@niassembly.gov.uk

4 August 2020

Dear Christine,

Re: Example of best practice for considering best interests of the child

Thank you again to the Committee for providing the opportunity for the Commission to provide oral evidence on 2 July 2020, as an expansion of our written evidence on the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill.

During the 2 July session a question was posed by Sinéad Bradley MLA as to whether I was aware of any examples of best practice in terms of child safeguarding, particularly regarding their presence in court and live linkage. In answer to this question, the Barnahus or 'child house' model is an example of best practice. We initially proposed this model in the context of the Gillen Review and how to best support child victims of sexual abuse and exploitation,¹ however, the principles and approaches adopted by this model are useful in a variety of contexts.

The Barnahus model was developed in Iceland 20 years ago and is designed to prevent re-traumatisation, while also producing valid evidence for judicial

¹ NI Human Rights Commission, 'Submission to the Department of Justice's Review of the Law on Child Sexual Exploitation' (NIHRC, 2019), at 32-34.

proceedings by eliciting the child's disclosure. The model aims to establish a child-friendly environment bringing under one roof all relevant services (the judge, the prosecutor, the police, psychologists, medical doctors, social workers) to obtain from the child the necessary information for investigation and court proceedings.

The Barnahus model is well regarded by the Council of Europe² and has been proposed by the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People for inclusion in this Bill.³ There is also precedent for its use in the UK, with Scotland including this approach within its Vulnerable Witnesses (Criminal Evidence) (Scotland) Act 2019, which came into force on 20 January 2020.

If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Les Allamby', written over a faint grid pattern.

Les Allamby
Chief Commissioner

² Council of Europe, 'Children's House: 20 Years of Protecting Children against Sexual Violence' (CoE, 2018).

³ NI Commissioner for Children and Young People, 'Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill: Written Submission to the Justice Committee' (NICCY, 2020), at 6-7.