

# Written Ministerial Statement

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## Department of Justice

### NEW DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL ABUSE STRATEGY

*Published at 10am on Wednesday 25 September 2024*

**Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice):** I am pleased to inform Members that the Minister of Health, and I have today jointly published a new cross-Departmental Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy for Northern Ireland, along with an initial three-year Action Plan to support its delivery.

Our vision is for Northern Ireland to become a place where:

- domestic and / or sexual abuse is not tolerated, and everyone can be safe and free from fear;
- domestic abuse 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 as central to decision making.

We wish to pay tribute to everyone - including the victims and survivors with lived experience of domestic and sexual abuse; victim representatives; community and voluntary sector organisations providing care and support; front-line professionals across statutory agencies; and other Executive Departments – who has helped to shape the vision for what we want Northern Ireland to become. This strategy sets out a seven-year road map for how we will get there.

We want Northern Ireland to be a place where everyone can be safe and free from fear.

Safety and freedom from fear is what those people with lived experience of domestic and sexual abuse told us that they most wanted. These are basic needs that are fundamental to us as human beings and that most of us take for granted; when we don't have these needs met it can constrain all the other areas of our lives. Yet for those living with domestic abuse and / or sexual abuse, these fundamental human needs are denied them, often in the places where they should feel most safe and free from fear.

Our strategy builds on much good work that has already been progressed under our previous seven year strategy. However the nature and scale of domestic and sexual abuse across our society and the impact on individuals, families and communities continue to shock. Within the 2023/24 financial year police responded to 32,763 domestic abuse incidents and almost 20,000 domestic abuse crimes were recorded by police. That meant that on average, domestic abuse was reported to PSNI every 16 minutes. Within the same period there were over 4000 sexual offences recorded by police; an average of one sexual offence recorded every two hours.

In too many cases these crimes have resulted in loss of life. Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHRs) were introduced in December 2020 to allow us, as a system, to learn from the tragic circumstances where someone has been killed as a result of domestic abuse. Since they were introduced 20 DHRs have been commissioned; 14 of the victims were women; six were men. The youngest victim was 21; the oldest was 84.

These figures are shocking. Behind each one is an individual, their families, their friends, their communities who have been deprived of safety, deprived of freedom from fear, deprived of their lives. As Ministers we wish to extend our sympathy and our support to those who have suffered as a result of domestic and sexual abuse. But we also want to reaffirm our commitment to doing all in our power to tackle these abuses and to ending the harm caused by them. This strategy is intended to help us do that.

It recognises that domestic abuse and sexual abuse can affect anyone and it provides the framework for us to identify and remove the specific challenges and barriers that may prevent individuals - regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability or other factor or combination of factors - from accessing protection, support and justice.

We welcome the publication last week of the Executive's Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls and its associated first delivery plan. Whilst this Domestic and Sexual Abuse strategy is intended to be gender inclusive and to benefit anyone who is a victim of domestic abuse or sexual abuse, we acknowledge that women and girls are disproportionately affected by these crimes. In the 2023/24 financial year, 69% of victims of domestic abuse crimes and 75% of sexual abuse crimes in Northern Ireland were female.

Therefore we recognise that anything that we do to tackle domestic abuse and sexual abuse will also directly contribute to our shared strategic outcomes around ending violence against women and girls. Both strategic responses are needed and are intended to be mutually reinforcing and complementary. Our governance structures reflect these strong interdependencies and will help to ensure that we remain aligned and are able to continue to work collaboratively for the protection of all.

The Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy is based around five pillars – Partnership, Prevention, Children and Young People, Support and Provision; and Justice. These are the areas where we believe we need to focus our efforts in order to lever the biggest change.

It is supported by an initial three year Action Plan which we have also published today; and it incorporates an integrated performance framework that will help us to monitor the impact of the interventions we will deliver. This will help us to ensure that the strategy is effective in securing outcomes that will protect and support those at risk; bring perpetrators to justice and make Northern Ireland a place where domestic abuse and sexual abuse are not tolerated and where everyone can be safe and free from fear.

In response to our consultation on the draft strategy, respondents stressed the importance of including a strategic pillar that is specifically dedicated to children and young people. We have acknowledged this and recognise the importance of measures around education, prevention, early intervention, protection and support in order to provide the most effective responses for children and young people. As part of this, under the strategy we will also continue to take forward work to explore how we can best develop wrap-around services for children and young people in Northern Ireland, informed by the Barnahus model.

Cases involving sexual crime are some of the most intrusive and difficult for victims to endure. Impacts on children are understandably extreme. I have met with families and with young victims who have told me directly how challenging it can be to engage with the criminal justice process. Lack of access to advice on what the legal system might involve, or on what their rights are, all adds to victims' anxiety and trauma, which can also contribute to their reluctance to engage. In April 2021 I established a Sexual Offences Legal Advisor – or SOLA - service, which is delivered by Victim Support NI, and which helps adult complainants in serious sexual offence cases by providing access to publicly funded legal advice. Many have said that without help and advice from the SOLA, they would not have felt able to continue with the criminal justice process.

I am delighted to announce today that plans are now in place for the launch an equivalent, but specific SOLA service for children and young people. This will help to empower children who are victims of sexual crime – some of the most vulnerable in society – and marks another important step towards improving victims' experiences in sexual offence cases. My expectation is that this new service will be operational early in the new year.

Each of the five strategic pillars – partnership, prevention, children and young people, support and protection, and justice - are important. If we remove any one of them we will weaken the strategy's effectiveness.

However I want to take the opportunity to focus on Partnership. Domestic abuse and sexual abuse are not issues that can be resolved by any single agency, organisation or Department. They cut across health and social care; justice; education; housing; employment; and community; across

government; communities; faith groups; businesses; and families. That is why our vision makes clear that tackling domestic and sexual abuse is everyone's business.

The approach and governance structures that we have put in place to drive delivery of the strategy reflect this truth:

- the strategy is jointly led by my Department and the Department of Health – but it reflects work across other Executive Departments and wider sectors;
- our response will be informed by a cross-sectoral Expert Reference Group, that harnesses a wide range of front-line expertise and lived experience; and
- we also plan to strengthen the role of local Domestic and Sexual Violence Partnerships.

Partnership is absolutely at the heart of this strategic response and in the face of such significant challenges and pressures it is needed more than ever before. But partnership is also our greatest strength: when we can bring together our collective perspectives, resources, experiences, insights, skills and expertise to work collaboratively to deliver a common goal. We recognise and pay tribute to the invaluable role that the community and voluntary sector plays, not only in terms of the crucial support it provides to victims and survivors, but also through bringing its collective knowledge, skills and expertise to help inform our strategic, policy and operational responses.

That is why, in conjunction with this strategy, we are introducing a small grant scheme that will offer members of the voluntary and community sector the opportunity to apply for funding to support new products and initiatives that align with our strategic objectives. The grants will be drawn from our cross-cutting domestic and sexual abuse funding, with the goal of supporting the vital work carried out by frontline organisations. We hope this initiative will enable our partners to continue their essential work and make a meaningful difference. Further details on the application process will be provided in due course.

For too long domestic abuse and sexual abuse have harmed the people around us; the people around us everyday; the people we care about. This strategy is intended to help us move towards ending domestic and sexual abuse and making Northern Ireland a place where everyone can be safe and free from fear. We do not underestimate the challenge ahead, but we are committed to working in partnership, through this strategy, to create lasting change and provide hope.

Naomi Long MLA  
Minister of Justice