

February 2023

**Tackling Domestic  
and Sexual Abuse is  
everyone's business**

Draft

# Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy

2023 – 2030



Department of  
**Health**

An Roinn Sláinte

Mánnystrie O Poustie

[www.health-ni.gov.uk](http://www.health-ni.gov.uk)



Department of  
**Justice**

An Roinn Dí agus Cirt

Mánnystrie O tha Laa

[www.justice-ni.gov.uk](http://www.justice-ni.gov.uk)

## Accessing support

If you have been affected by domestic or sexual abuse, you are not alone. Help and support is available.

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](mailto: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](http://www.dsahelpline.org).

**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.

## Alternative formats

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Please email [DSAStrategyConsultation@justice-ni.gov.uk](mailto:DSAStrategyConsultation@justice-ni.gov.uk) or phone 028 9052 3713.

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## Foreword by DoH and DoJ Permanent Secretaries

We are pleased to share with you a new draft Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy for 2023 – 2030.

Domestic and sexual abuse continues to have a damaging and lasting impact on the lives of adults and children right across Northern Ireland. It is prevalent in every community and affects all people regardless of age, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, race or religion and yet sadly it continues to be a crime that many feel they cannot report. Tackling it remains a priority for Executive Departments.

This new draft strategy is an ambitious seven-year programme which sets out a renewed focus on tackling domestic and sexual abuse. It follows the direction of travel set by the former Health and Justice Ministers and has been informed by detailed consultation and analysis which began with a Call for Views in January 2022. We would like to take this opportunity to extend our gratitude to all the individuals and organisations who have been part of that process and in particular to those victims and survivors who have shared their experiences with such courage in order to inform our strategic response.

We have designed the strategy around four key pillars of Partnership, Prevention, Support and Justice. Each pillar has its own expected outcomes and key priority areas which will be expanded on in further detail in a series of action plans with timelines for implementation.

We are committed to fully implementing this strategy over the next seven years and believe that the outcomes delivered can make meaningful and sustainable progress in tackling domestic and sexual abuse; addressing its root causes; ensuring that those affected are able to access effective support; and in holding those who abuse to account. However it is important that we also acknowledge the difficult financial context in which this strategy is being issued. At the time of publication, full implementation of the strategy is subject to confirmation of additional funding. Subject to receiving this funding, it will be important to recognise that the scale and pace of our delivery will be informed by available resources, and that it will be important that we focus resources on those priorities which will have the most significant impact in tackling domestic and sexual abuse and supporting those affected by it. In parallel, we will continue to seek opportunities to secure additional resources to support ongoing implementation of the strategy.

The strategy will be implemented by way of annual delivery plans. The Year One Action Plan will focus on laying the foundations and progressing the enabling actions to support future delivery. Importantly, this preparatory work will include the development of a Performance Framework to ensure we can monitor and report on the delivery of key strategy objectives and the outcomes being achieved.

We want to be clear, domestic and sexual abuse has absolutely no place in our society and we remain committed to working together to realise our ambitions under the strategy over the coming years.

Handwritten signature of Peter May in blue ink.

**PETER MAY**  
**Permanent Secretary**  
**Department of Health**

Handwritten signature of Richard Pengelly in blue ink, enclosed in a rectangular box.

**RICHARD PENGELLY**  
**Permanent Secretary**  
**Department of Justice**

## Strategy at a glance

**Our vision is that domestic and sexual abuse is unacceptable within our homes and across all of society so that everyone can live without fear.**

Our overall strategic aim is to work together as partners, agencies and communities to make real, sustainable progress in tackling domestic and sexual abuse by addressing the root causes; ensuring those affected get the right support; and holding individuals who are abusive to account. The strategy is designed around four pillars:

<b>Pillar 1: Partnership</b>	
<i>Driving change together through joint commitment, leadership and partnership working.</i>	
<b>OUTCOME</b>	<b>KEY PRIORITY AREAS</b>
<b>A coordinated response to domestic and sexual abuse informed by victims' voices and community engagement.</b>	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.

<b>Pillar 2: Prevention</b>	
<i>Preventing domestic and sexual abuse from happening by challenging the attitudes and behaviours that foster it and intervening early where possible to prevent it.</i>	
<b>OUTCOMES</b>	<b>KEY PRIORITY AREAS</b>
<b>The public is informed about the different types of domestic and sexual abuse and its impact on victims including children.</b>	Raising awareness, so that those experiencing, or at risk of experiencing domestic and sexual abuse, recognise it and know that help is available.
	Empowering people to safely challenge attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that foster domestic and sexual abuse.
<b>An increase in the knowledge and skills of children, young people and adults about forming healthy relationships.</b>	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 sexual abuse, in an age appropriate and inclusive way, across schools and other youth settings, training facilities, Further Education Colleges and Universities.
<b>Domestic and sexual abuse is identified and responded to earlier.</b>	Enabling people working in frontline and public-facing roles to identify and respond effectively to domestic and sexual abuse at the earliest opportunity.
	Supporting employers in the public, private and other sectors to make workplaces safer by raising awareness of domestic and sexual abuse and promoting workplace policies with effective measures to support staff.

**Pillar 3: Support**

*Ensuring that all victims of domestic and sexual abuse, including children, can access services supporting them to recover and rebuild their lives.*

OUTCOMES	KEY PRIORITY AREAS
<b>Victims including children are supported and feel safe regardless of diversity of need.</b>	Providing support for victims including children, 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.
	Ensuring there is a focus on tackling sexual abuse, including the sexual abuse of children and young people, and providing specialist support for victims.
	Enabling services to better understand intersectional needs of individuals to ensure victims get the responses and support they need.
<b>All victims of domestic abuse including children can access safe accommodation-based services.</b>	Ensuring all victims and their children can access accommodation that is safe and appropriate to their needs and circumstances.
	Supporting victims of domestic abuse to remain safely in their home if they want to and it is safe to do so.

**Pillar 4: Justice**

*Holding individuals who are abusive to account and ensuring justice responses are effective.*

OUTCOMES	KEY PRIORITY AREAS
<i>Addressing abusive behaviours</i>	
<b>Individuals are responsible for their abusive behaviour, are held to account and supported to change, with the risk of harm reduced and victim safety enhanced.</b>	Supporting individuals to address and manage their abusive behaviours and sustain positive change.
	Encouraging individuals to change their abusive behaviour by removing barriers to participation.
	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.
<i>Justice system</i>	
<b>Victims feel confident to report domestic and sexual abuse, barriers to participating in the justice system are reduced and justice responses are effective.</b>	Understanding better the factors contributing to high attrition levels (drop out of cases) and under-reporting in domestic and sexual abuse cases in order to improve these.
	Providing victims of domestic and sexual abuse with information and services to support them through the criminal justice process.
	Improving the efficiency of the justice system and how domestic and sexual abuse cases are dealt with in criminal, civil and family courts.
	Strengthening the police and criminal justice response to domestic and sexual abuse.

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 2023 – 2030.

# 1. Introduction

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## Purpose and vision

This is a seven-year, cross-departmental strategy for tackling domestic and sexual abuse from 2023 – 2030. The strategy has been developed by, and its delivery will be overseen by, the Department of Health and the Department of Justice. It has been informed by extensive stakeholder engagement with advice from across the statutory, voluntary and community sectors as well as by public feedback but, most importantly, it has been informed by the voices and experiences of victims including children.

### Our Vision:

Domestic and sexual abuse is unacceptable within our homes and across **all** of society so that everyone can live without fear.

This vision is ambitious and cannot be achieved by one agency alone. To be successful, tackling domestic and sexual abuse must become everyone's business.

### Our Aim:

To work together as partners, agencies and communities to make real, sustainable progress in tackling domestic and sexual abuse by addressing the root causes; ensuring those affected get the right support; and holding individuals who are abusive to account.

To achieve this aim, the strategy is designed around **four pillars**:

#### 1. PARTNERSHIP

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



#### 2. PREVENTION

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



#### 3. SUPPORT

Ensuring that all victims of domestic and sexual abuse, including children, can access services supporting them to recover and rebuild their lives.





## 4. JUSTICE

Holding individuals who are abusive to account and ensuring justice responses are effective.



Within each pillar, outcomes and key priority areas are identified (see **Section 3**). These will be expanded on in further detail in a series of action plans that will outline clear responsibilities and timelines for implementation over the next seven years. This will allow our framework to evolve and to respond to new opportunities and challenges in order to deliver meaningful change over the long term.

Through this strategy we want to send a clear message that domestic and sexual abuse in all its forms, both physical and non-physical, is wrong. We want to challenge misconceptions and change the conversation around domestic and sexual abuse, so that people become more familiar with what it looks like and those that are affected feel empowered to reach out for help and support without fear of judgement.

### What this strategy covers

#### Scope

It is important to be clear about what this strategy covers and what it does not cover. Our focus will be on tackling **domestic abuse and sexual abuse**, as defined in **Section 2**. Whilst we recognise the overlap with other crimes (for example, such as child sexual exploitation, ‘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. However, we recognise the importance of sharing information around actions arising from the strategy with other cross-departmental groups to promote collaboration and to avoid duplication. This includes the cross-departmental Child Protection Senior Officials Group (CPSOG) which provides strategic oversight of work related to child protection. Links with wider areas of work, including CPSOG, are considered in **Section 5**.

#### An inclusive approach

This strategy recognises that **anyone can be a victim** of domestic and sexual abuse regardless of age, ethnicity, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation or any form of disability. It is for this reason that 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 sexual abuse. The strategy also recognises that abuse can take place in family relationships and between generations.

#### Terminology

Within this strategy we refer to those affected by domestic 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

There is a great deal of activity already underway across the statutory, voluntary and community sectors to drive real improvements in tackling domestic and sexual abuse. There have also been a number of notable achievements across government over the lifetime of our previous strategy<sup>1</sup> which are outlined below. However, much work remains to be done. We must continue to build on our approach, connect with and learn from each other and find new ways to energise collective action.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Legislation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>A new domestic abuse offence</b> was introduced in 2022, criminalising a pattern of non-physically abusive behaviour.</li> <li>• <b>Protection from stalking legislation</b> was brought forward (which may also be outside a domestic or family context) as well as the Justice Act (NI) 2022 which provides for <b>new offences of up-skirting, down-blousing, non-fatal strangulation</b> and preventing the so called ‘<b>rough sex</b>’ defence.</li> <li>• Preparatory work progressed to introduce <b>Domestic Abuse Protection Notices and Orders</b>.</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Schools</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>I-matter resources</b> for schools have been updated and new subjects added including healthy relationships, consent and sexual harassment.</li> <li>• <b>Operation Encompass</b> was rolled out so that police can share information with schools where there has been domestic abuse involving a child.</li> <li>• <b>Development of the CCEA Wellbeing Hub</b> 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.</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Training and awareness raising</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>A new e-learning package</b> bolstered the introduction of the new domestic abuse offence. This continues to be available across the public sector, developed in partnership with our voluntary sector experts.</li> <li>• <b>Raising awareness</b> 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.</li> <li>• <b>A Domestic and Sexual Abuse Workplace Policy</b> and Gold Workplace Charter Award for the NI Civil Service, with additional training for staff. Guidance for employers was also developed.</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Services</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Piloting Identification and Referral to Improve Safety (‘IRIS’)</b> to train and support GPs to recognise and respond to domestic and sexual abuse and refer patients to specialist advocacy support.</li> <li>• <b>Free public transport</b> for those going to refuge or temporary accommodation as a result of domestic abuse.</li> <li>• <b>Ask for Ani Code Word scheme</b> 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.</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> [Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategy](#), published by DoH and DoJ in 2016.

Funding	Services
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Funding key services</b> including the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline; emergency refuge provision; other accommodation-based services; floating support; advocacy; and Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences.</li> </ul>	
Learning and Review	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Domestic Homicide Reviews</b> were introduced in 2020 to learn lessons from those tragic deaths arising from domestic violence.</li> <li>• <b>The Gillen Review</b> into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in NI was undertaken and made recommendations for systemic reform which are now being progressed.</li> <li>• <b>Establishment of a Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime</b> who, as well as representing the interests of all victims of crime, has specific functions in respect of victims of domestic and sexual abuse.</li> <li>• <b>Learning from the challenges presented during the COVID-19 pandemic</b> and adapting to new ways of working.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>A new advocacy support service</b> for victims of domestic and 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.</li> <li>• <b>Provision of behavioural change programmes</b> 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.</li> <li>• <b>A domestic violence perpetrator programme</b> was tested at Derry / Londonderry magistrate's court, a Problem-Solving Justice initiative, aimed at breaking patterns of concerning behaviour in its early stages.</li> <li>• <b>Piloting Sexual Offences Legal Advisers</b> – offering free objective legal advice to complainants in serious sexual offence cases.</li> <li>• <b>The Domestic Violence and Abuse Disclosure Scheme</b> 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.</li> <li>• <b>The Sanctuary Scheme</b> 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.</li> </ul>
Governance	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Improvements in how we work.</b> Including enhanced governance structures with six monthly 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.</li> <li>• <b>A MARAC Operational Board</b> was established and a <b>MARAC review</b> undertaken.</li> <li>• <b>A mid-term review</b> of the previous strategy and a ten week <b>Call for Views</b> was undertaken to help inform the strategic direction of this strategy.</li> </ul>	

## Why change is needed

We want to provide a future where everyone can live safe lives, without the threat or experience of domestic and sexual abuse. While levels of domestic and 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 that are affected, taking account of their particular needs. We know that many live their lives in fear and are significantly impacted by the abuse they have suffered, be that domestic or sexual abuse. 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, needing a multi-faceted response.

For many there is also 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.

Victims may often internalise what has happened; they may fear the blame and judgement of others and as a result, they may be reluctant to tell anyone, report the abuse to the police or seek support. This is despite the fact that the only person who has done anything wrong is the person who has abused them.

We also know that children's experience of domestic and 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 sexual abuse grow up not recognising abusive or unhealthy relationships, meaning that the cycle of abuse may be repeated.

In taking this new strategy forward we recognise that there are a number of areas that it will be important to focus on. These are:

- increased co-operation and more effective collaboration across government, working in partnership with others;
- addressing social attitudes, while promoting awareness and knowledge of healthy relationships;
- providing support for those affected by domestic and sexual abuse, informed by their experience and the needs of particular groups;
- working to prevent domestic and sexual abuse taking place, identifying and disrupting abusive behaviour while holding offenders to account; and
- providing a more robust and effective justice response, increasing protection and safety for those affected.

Going forward we want a stronger system: improving how we respond to domestic and sexual abuse and working together to support those affected with a trauma informed approach. We also want to harness every opportunity for positive intervention, so that

abusive behaviour can be called out and addressed, with improved outcomes for all.

## A Call for Views

This strategy has been informed by a Call for Views, which ran from 10 January to 21 March 2022. The Call for Views asked a number of questions to gather ideas and experiences, a summary of which was published in July 2022.<sup>1</sup>

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,<sup>2</sup> have helped us to identify the outcomes we want to achieve. We now need to translate what you have told us into positive action.

### What you have told us



Other quotes from the Call for Views have been included throughout the strategy.

Another piece of work that has informed the strategy's development was 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 also 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.

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

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<sup>1</sup> [Call for Views – Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy and Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy | Department of Justice \(justice-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> 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 \(justice-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

## Other linked areas of work, strategies and action plans

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 and reported on separately and which may have some connected actions to help deliver the vision of this strategy.

Some of these areas at the time of drafting are highlighted below (this is not an exhaustive list).

The Executive Office is taking forward work on a new **Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy** that will identify actions to tackle violent and abusive behaviour directed at women and girls, precisely because they are women and girls. This includes crimes and unwanted behaviour in the physical and online world. PSNI has also published its first Violence Against Women and Girls Action Plan.

While violence against women and girls can include domestic and sexual abuse, we believe that tackling this issue warrants a dedicated approach, an identifiable strategy with specific commitments. Nonetheless, it will be important that actions taken forward under the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy align with the key messages and wider actions of the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls agenda. The Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy will, however, continue to adopt an inclusive approach applying to all regardless of gender or gender identity.

The Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy also has close linkages with the 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 (including consideration of a Child House 'Barnahus' type model) 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.

The Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy will also have links with the suite of **Social Inclusion Strategies** in development by the Department for Communities: **Anti-Poverty, Disability, Gender Equality and Sexual Orientation**.

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:

- [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 2021–2022](#);
- the Department of Justice’s programme of legislation to deal with [stalking](#) and [sexual offences](#) as well as action plans to implement Criminal Justice Inspections;
- [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; and
- Ending Homelessness Together – [Homelessness Strategy 2022–2027](#) and Interdepartmental Homelessness Action Plans.
- The Child Protection Senior Officials 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.
- Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland work on harmful sexual behaviour and domestic and sexual abuse, including developing a Domestic Violence and Abuse Learning and Development Framework.

In progressing the work of this strategy, it will also be important that we take account of a number of international conventions and obligations. This includes the transposition of the [EU Victims Directive](#) (and associated [Victim](#) and [Witness Charters](#) that placed this on a statutory footing); UK 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](#).

Going forward, given that this strategy is to apply over a seven-year period, we will also want to consider any future developments or changes which may be of relevance to its implementation and associated action plans.

## 2. Understanding Domestic and Sexual Abuse

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### 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

Domestic abuse can take many forms, which may involve physical violence. However, often it 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.

Domestic abuse can occur in an intimate or family relationship. It most commonly takes place in intimate partner relationships including same sex relationships. The victim and the abuser do not have to be living together. Teenagers can experience domestic abuse in their relationships and familial abuse may be perpetrated by children (child to parent abuse), grandchildren, parents, siblings or extended families. An area of increasing concern is familial abuse of parents by a young or adult child.

### What does domestic abuse look like?

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

- **controlling or coercive behaviour**, which may make a person dependant 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 – through, for example, grooming and sharing of sexual images – can also occur online;
- **economic and financial abuse**, where one person deprives their partner or



family member of financial resources or ability to make money. This creates financial dependency and control, preventing them from leaving the relationship;

- **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.

Other forms of abuse such as **stalking and non-fatal strangulation** may also occur alongside domestic or sexual abuse. Much of the work to tackle these issues is being undertaken separately to this strategy however there will, at times, be some cross over with actions under this strategy dealing with these specific areas.

## Domestic abuse is a crime

Until 2022, domestic abuse as a crime was largely limited to physically abusive or violent behaviour in Northern Ireland. 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 child protection provisions. However, the domestic abuse offence may be committed where a person makes use of a third party (including their child) to abuse another person.

The legislation also includes sentencing aggravators which can enable harsher penalties. Sentencing for the domestic abuse offence may be increased where a young person was involved (the child saw, heard or was present; they were used to abuse the other person; or the behaviour would likely adversely impact on a child). 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.

## Some facts and figures

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 September 2022 domestic abuse crime accounted for 20% of all police recorded crime.**

**33,108**

domestic abuse

**INCIDENTS**

responded to by  
police

**22,288**

domestic abuse

**CRIMES**

recorded by  
police



On average every

**16 MINUTES**

domestic abuse  
was reported to  
police



Took place

**EVERY DAY**

of the year

Tragically there were **9 murders** with a domestic abuse motivation between 1 November 2021 and 31 October 2022. Four of the victims were female



**68%** of victims of domestic abuse crimes were **female**, **32%** were **male**

**83%** of offenders were **male**, **15%** were **female**

**34%** of relationships involved a former partner  
**24%** a current partner  
**1 in 4** cases involved a **parent child relationship**

**1 in 4 lesbian and bisexual women** and  
**4 in 10 gay and bisexual men**  
experienced domestic abuse

**94%** of offenders were **aged 18 or over**

## 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).

Sexual abuse can occur in intimate partner relationships, within families, between colleagues and 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.

### What does sexual abuse look like?

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

- penetrative sexual activities such as rape (vaginal, anal or oral);
- sexual assault such as intentional touching, rubbing or groping;
- being made to perform masturbation on someone;
- sexual threats or harassment including unwanted sexual advances;
- indecent exposure;
- 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.

Sexual abuse is trauma and as such it initiates a traumatic response like a fight, freeze or flop response. Everyone's response will be different, and there is no predictable textbook response, nor is any response more right or wrong or acceptable than any other. For many people it can be a number of years before they report sexual abuse; for some people, they may never tell anyone.

## Some facts and figures

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. In relation to sexual abuse children and young people are also more likely to be affected.

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 October 2022 sexual abuse crime accounted for 4% of all police recorded crime.**



**78%** of victims of sexual abuse were female,  
**21%** were male

**57%** of sexual abuse victims were **under the age of 18**  
**14%** were aged between **18 and 24**

## Additional barriers for different groups

Domestic and sexual abuse can, and does, happen to anyone. The impact is personal to each individual affected and many people have multiple needs and face multiple barriers: to reporting (such as fear of not being believed, concerns about access to private information and delays in the system); to accessing support; and to engaging with the criminal justice system. We are committed to working together to help break down these barriers.

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

### What you've told us

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:**

Women are disproportionately affected and more likely to experience multiple incidents and different types of domestic and sexual abuse. Women also face barriers to disclosing abuse and finding help. They can feel that they are reliant on the person abusing them in many ways, such as finance and housing, or they may fear that their children will be taken away should they leave. Many also fear not being taken seriously when they disclose abuse and are worried that they'll 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:**

Men also suffer from domestic and sexual abuse. One of the main reasons men don't seek help is embarrassment and feeling "less of a man". There is also a fear of not being believed, fear of being accused as the perpetrator and losing contact with any children they may have with their abuser. Not knowing that support is available and believing services are for women only is another significant barrier for male victims.

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

### **LGBTQIA+ community:**

Domestic and sexual abuse can happen to anyone but LGBTQIA+ people 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:**

While children's experience of domestic abuse is usually connected to their parents, they can also be victims in their own right. The impact of seeing, hearing or experiencing the effects of abuse is significant and the long-term consequences of this trauma can stretch into adulthood. Adverse childhood experiences can have lasting, negative effects on a child's development, health and well-being which can lead to behavioural problems, difficulties at school and increased risk of difficulties in future relationships.

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

### **Ethnic minority communities:**

Domestic and 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 understanding of 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:**

Domestic and 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. 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.”

### **People with a disability:**

Disabled people are often in particularly vulnerable circumstances and may not recognise abuse or know how to report domestic and sexual abuse. They can be socially isolated; reliant on assistance with healthcare, housing or financial security; and may also face physical inaccessibility.

“Many people with a disability are unaware that domestic abuse services exist.”

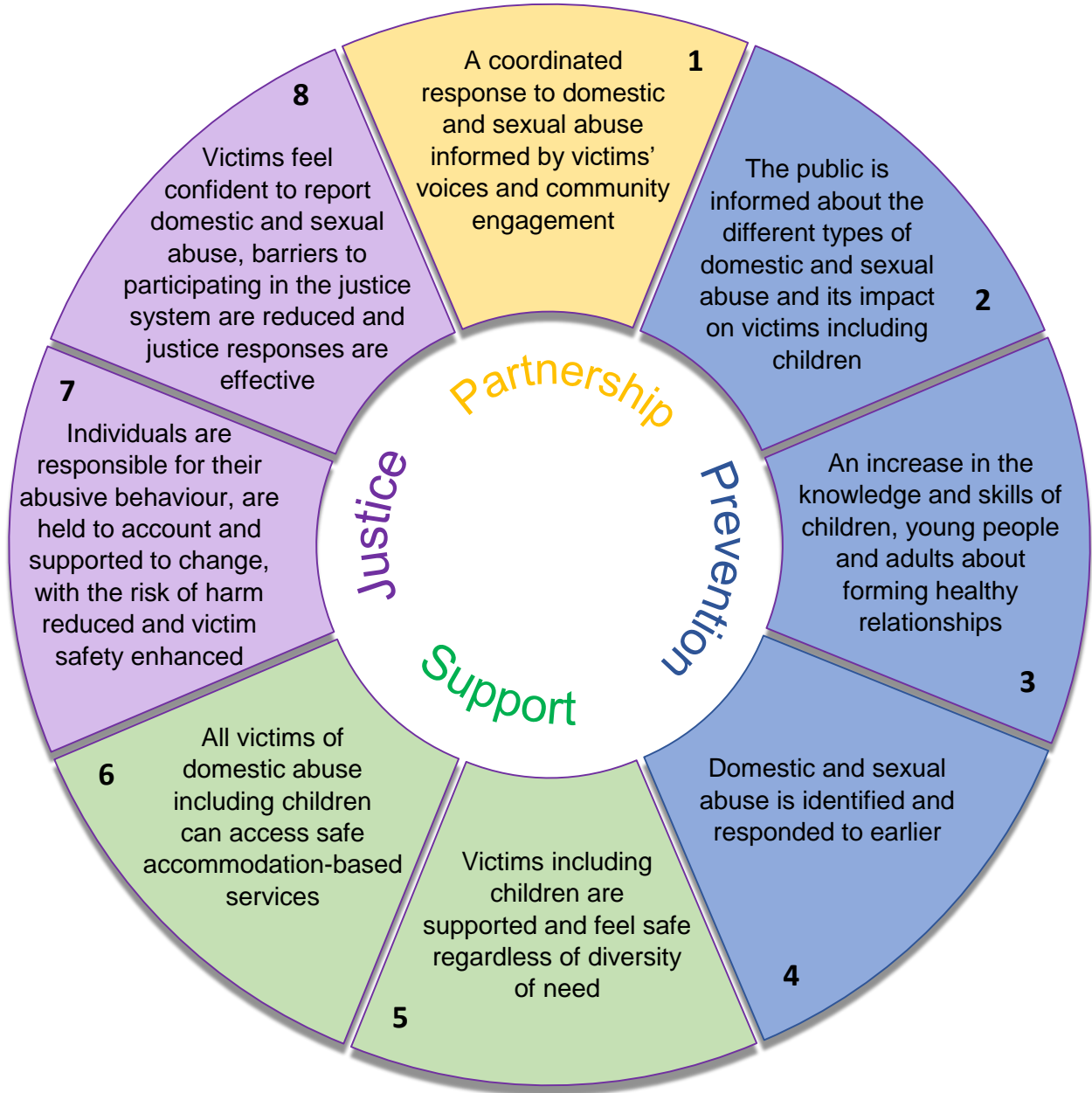
### **Rural communities:**

Domestic and 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.”

### 3. Framework for action

The first step in moving forward with this strategy will be to develop a performance framework, in year one, with key performance indicators so that we can assess how far our work contributes to achieving the **eight outcomes which are built around four pillars** within this strategy:



Preliminary measures of success have been identified within each of the four pillars. These will inform plans to collect data once appropriate indicators have been finalised in partnership with delivery partners and key stakeholders.



## Pillar 1: Partnership

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

### What we know

No single agency can tackle domestic and sexual abuse alone. It is everyone's business and it is only by working together that we can develop our understanding, approach and services to make a real difference to people's lives. We are committed to doing everything we can to prevent, protect and support victims of domestic and sexual abuse and to ensure there is a focus across the whole of government to deliver this strategy.

"Ensure a joined-up approach"

We know that more can be done to promote integrated working across all sectors. We need robust and effective oversight structures with measurable outcomes that will create a central focal point for domestic and sexual abuse and ensure greater clarity and accountability for the delivery of key actions, as well as making clear connections with other related strategies.

This is an area in which every person should have an interest and all organisations have a role to play whether it be criminal justice agencies, housing, health and social care, education, our employment sector or local support services, to name but a few.

We also know that we need to bring together more comprehensive statistics on the prevalence of domestic and sexual abuse, on our service provision and on gap analysis. It is clear from the Call for Views that data and research specific to Northern Ireland is insufficient, with limited potential to consider the characteristics of those affected and yet we know that an effective response can only be achieved if we truly understand the nature and scale of domestic and sexual abuse in Northern Ireland. This is an issue that we will want to consider further going forward.

"Effective solutions must be informed by data."

Tackling domestic and sexual abuse is not something that government can achieve alone. It requires all partners and agencies to work together and to actively share local data and statistics to better understand domestic and sexual abuse. Some of the most successful interventions that we've seen so far have been multi-agency based and it is important that we continue to build on our collaborative approach sharing information, knowledge and experience. We are stronger working together in partnership.

## What more we will do

Our focus in this pillar will be to have robust and effective governance processes and to improve the way that we work together as a region to tackle domestic and sexual abuse. Partnership working will be a critical enabler for the overall strategy.

### **Pillar 1: Partnership**

#### **Outcome 1:**

**A coordinated response to domestic and 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 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.

#### **How will we know we are making a difference?**

***Listening to views of victims, including children.***

***Ensuring joined up working on cross cutting projects.***

***Engaging regularly with key stakeholders at both a regional and local level.***

***Data from key stakeholders is shared, ensuring that as a system we understand and can respond to trends and emerging issues.***

***Review of action plans and performance indicators on a regular basis by all partners to ensure progress is made.***

## Pillar 2: Prevention

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

### What we know

Sadly, many people feel that they cannot report domestic or sexual abuse. They may live with it for a long period of time and suffer a sustained series of incidents before 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. We must increase public awareness so that people, including those who are affected, understand what domestic and sexual abuse is, the different forms it can take and importantly how to get help.

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

It is clear from the results of the Call for Views that we need to change attitudes that reinforce harmful stereotypes. People of all ages, ethnicities, religions, genders, gender identities, sexual orientation or disabilities can be a victim of domestic and sexual abuse. It can and does happen to anyone and having little knowledge, or negative attitudes, 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.”

We know that many victims are likely to be in contact with frontline services and may ask for help from someone they trust. That could include GPs, nurses, midwives, teachers, housing officers or community centres. Some may also call the police or may even approach their employer. That first response is crucial and likely to be a key factor in whether or not the individual ultimately goes on to access support services. A lack of knowledge and awareness can, however, lead to missed chances to help people. Together, we need to identify more opportunities to intervene early and equip people working in public facing roles so that they are able to respond appropriately.

Responses to the Call for Views also made it clear that there is much more to be done in schools and youth groups to help children and young people understand issues such as consent and respect from an early age.

“Education is the cornerstone of prevention.”

We must continue to teach children and young people about healthy relationships and to understand what consent looks like to tackle the root causes of domestic and sexual abuse and nurture future generations. However, we know that this is not just about schools. It is also about how Further Education Colleges; training facilities and Universities deal with these important issues. Equally important is the need to build awareness amongst staff in those places so that they can learn practical skills to

respond to any disclosures. The Executive’s Online Safety Strategy will also play an important role in the prevention of, and education about, sexual abuse in the online sphere. Preventing and reducing incidents of domestic and sexual abuse is everyone’s business.

**What more we will do**

Our focus in this pillar will be to increase understanding of domestic and sexual abuse, what consent looks like and what constitutes healthy relationships, as well as effectively responding to abusive behaviour.

<b>Pillar 2: Prevention</b>	
<p><b><u>Outcome 2:</u></b>  <b>The public is informed about the different types of domestic and sexual abuse and its impact on victims including children.</b>            KEY PRIORITY AREAS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raising awareness, so that those experiencing, or at risk of experiencing domestic and sexual abuse, recognise it and know that help is available.</li> <li>• Empowering people to safely challenge attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that foster domestic and sexual abuse.</li> </ul>	<p><b><u>How will we know we are making a difference?</u></b></p> <p><i>Public awareness of domestic and sexual abuse.</i></p> <p><i>Increased reporting of domestic and sexual abuse.</i></p> <p><i>Prevention initiatives supporting individuals to develop healthy relationships.</i></p> <p><i>Referrals from a wider range of agencies to MARAC and domestic and sexual abuse services.</i></p> <p><i>Domestic abuse is recognised as a workplace issue.</i></p>
<p><b><u>Outcome 3:</u></b>  <b>An increase in the knowledge and skills of children, young people and adults about forming healthy relationships.</b>            KEY PRIORITY AREA:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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 sexual abuse, in an age appropriate and inclusive way, across schools and other youth settings, training facilities, Further Education Colleges and Universities.</li> </ul>	
<p><b><u>Outcome 4:</u></b>  <b>Domestic and sexual abuse is identified and responded to earlier.</b>            KEY PRIORITY AREAS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enabling people working in frontline and public-facing roles to identify and respond effectively to domestic and sexual abuse at the earliest opportunity.</li> <li>• Supporting employers in the public, private and other sectors to make workplaces safer by raising awareness of domestic and sexual abuse and promoting workplace policies with effective measures to support staff.</li> </ul>	

## Pillar 3: Support

**Ensuring that all victims of domestic and sexual abuse, including children, can access services supporting them to recover and rebuild their lives.**

### What we know

Support for individuals affected by domestic and sexual abuse comes from many sources and is provided in different settings. It can often be part of the provision of other services such as education, welfare and housing, children's services and mental health service provision.

The statutory, voluntary and community sector also plays an important role in the provision of specialist domestic and sexual abuse services, including crisis response, outreach, 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 experiencing domestic or sexual abuse.

A concern for many is that, when they are able to reach out and ask for help, they will have access to appropriate services in a timely manner.

“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.”

Victims of domestic and sexual abuse are often faced with numerous barriers to leaving an abusive relationship and seeking support (these have been considered in more detail in **Section 2** in terms of different groups). To ensure effective, accessible support, it is important that support providers fully understand these barriers.

We also know that victims and their children often need 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, which requires a wider package of support.

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

There is also a call 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. Through this we can provide additional support and assistance to those affected by abuse, on their journey through the criminal justice system, during what can be a daunting time for victims.

## What more we will do

Our focus in this pillar will be to support those affected by domestic and sexual abuse while also recognising the wider impact on family and friends. The outcomes and key priorities under this pillar are:

<b>Pillar 3: Support</b>	
<p><b><u>Outcome 5:</u></b>  <b>Victims including children are supported and feel safe regardless of diversity of need.</b></p> <p>KEY PRIORITY AREAS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing support for victims including children, 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.</li> <li>• Ensuring there is a focus on tackling sexual abuse, including the sexual abuse of children and young people, and providing specialist support for victims.</li> <li>• Enabling services to better understand intersectional needs of individuals to ensure victims get the responses and support they need.</li> </ul> <p><b><u>Outcome 6:</u></b>  <b>All victims of domestic abuse including children can access safe accommodation-based services.</b></p> <p>KEY PRIORITY AREAS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensuring all victims and their children can access accommodation that is safe and appropriate to their needs and circumstances.</li> <li>• Supporting victims of domestic abuse to remain safely in their home if they want to and it is safe to do so.</li> </ul>	<p><b><u>How will we know we are making a difference?</u></b></p> <p><i>Victims of domestic and sexual abuse access support.</i></p> <p><i>Learning from the experience of victims to inform best practice.</i></p> <p><i>Provision of services.</i></p> <p><i>Fewer victims of domestic and sexual abuse withdraw from the criminal justice process.</i></p>

## Pillar 4: Justice

**Holding individuals who are abusive to account and ensuring justice responses are effective.**

### What we know

#### Addressing Abusive Behaviours

While anyone can be a victim of domestic or sexual abuse, we know that those carrying out abusive behaviours tend to be predominantly male, while the majority of victims are female. We also know that many domestic and sexual abuse offenders are repeat offenders and that many victims unfortunately will also be repeat victims. We will want to take account of this both under this pillar and in terms of wider service provision under the strategy.

Effective and early risk assessment can help 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. Only by taking action to address domestic and sexual abuse, and associated concerning behaviour, can we reduce the risk of abuse occurring, reoffending and revictimisation. We also need more information and evidence on the causes and drivers of abusive behaviour plus what works well to address it.

“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.”

We know that effective management of those with a history of abusive behaviour is needed, including through ongoing engagement with statutory, voluntary and community sector partners. We also need to consider the use of multi-agency arrangements to best manage risk, address abusive behaviour and provide support. Protection of victims and feeling safe is also important, with further measures needed to secure this, including ensuring that where protective measures are in place, we can enable people to remain in their home rather than necessarily having to leave. Importantly, in this context, we want to bring forward measures that strengthen restrictions on individuals that are abusive in terms of contact with and proximity to their victims.

“The protections available need to be strengthened.”

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. There was considered a need to focus on offending behaviour, with mainstreaming of current programmes. We also recognise that there are intrinsic links between this Justice pillar and that relating to Prevention, in terms of raising awareness around healthy and unhealthy behaviours. Tackling these together will help address levels of concerning and abusive behaviours.

## Justice System

For many victims of domestic and sexual abuse, going through the criminal justice system will be a daunting experience that they may never have encountered before. This, combined with a range of factors (including, for example the trauma response to the domestic and sexual abuse they have been subjected to or concerns about the impact on their family) can result in disengagement from the criminal justice process. While domestic and sexual abuse recorded crime levels are just under 26,000 annually, we know that this is lower than the true picture, due to underreporting and victims disengaging with the criminal justice system. Not all domestic and sexual abuse incidents will be reported to police and even then, not all will result in a crime being recorded due to the level of the severity of the incident.

The Call for Views highlighted that reporting could be improved by increased awareness of abuse, increased understanding of the system, speedier progression of cases and better legal protections. Both underreporting and drop out of cases (attrition) are higher than we would want them to be.

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

The Call for Views highlighted the need to support victims on their criminal justice journey, both by informing victims of what they could expect and providing information about the criminal justice process itself, as well as ensuring access to timely and accurate case updates.

In looking at the experience of criminal justice, the Call for Views' victim survey reflected the need for clearer information, including on outcomes, and pressed for consideration of how domestic abuse cases could be fast-tracked, with many responses commenting on the time taken for cases to proceed through the criminal justice system and the level of delay encountered. However it should be also noted that reducing delay in the criminal justice system is a key priority for the Department of Justice and a significant programme of work is already underway, separate to this strategy, to address this issue.



Responses to the Call for Views also felt that improved and extended services are required as part of the criminal justice journey. In considering how we respond to these issues, we also need to further explore how best to meet the needs of particular groups of victims as part of the criminal justice journey.

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

A number of responses to the Call for Views also set out proposals for improved linkages across the justice system, particularly in relation to the use of information across court types. The Call for Views also highlighted that there is currently limited knowledge and awareness amongst victims and wider society, of the range of criminal justice supports that are available to victims of domestic and sexual abuse, for example, the Domestic Violence and Abuse Disclosure Scheme, the existence of a legal aid waiver for non-molestation orders, etc.

Tragically we know that in some cases domestic violence can result in death. Provision is already in place for a Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) to be held where a person is killed as a result of domestic violence, so that as a system, we are able to learn lessons and put in place improved practices to prevent future deaths. We recognise the need to ensure continued learning from DHRs and to keep the operation of DHRs under consideration to ensure that they are robust and effective. We are committed to improving our understanding of what may lead to fatalities as well as monitoring and effectively implementing systemic learning from these reviews in order to identify and put in place best practice and to reduce any missed opportunities to deal with abusive and potentially fatal behaviour.

## **What more we will do**

Our focus in this pillar will be two-fold: to address abusive behaviours, reduce the associated risk of harm and improve protections for those affected; and to encourage victims to report domestic and sexual abuse, remain engaged in the justice process and provide an effective justice system response. The outcomes and key priorities under this pillar are:

## **Pillar 4: Justice**

### *Addressing Abusive Behaviours*

#### **Outcome 7:**

**Individuals are responsible for their abusive behaviour, are held to account 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 and sustain positive change.
- Encouraging individuals to change their abusive behaviour by removing barriers to participation.
- 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.

#### **How will we know we are making a difference:**

***A reduction in repeat incidents of domestic and sexual abuse.***

***Increase in levels of convictions for domestic and sexual abuse offences.***

***Engagement in behavioural change programmes and associated reoffending levels.***

***Increase in protection orders granted and reduction in associated breaches.***

### *Justice System*

#### **Outcome 8:**

**Victims feel confident to report domestic and 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 sexual abuse cases in order to improve these.
- Providing victims of domestic and sexual abuse with information and services to support them through the criminal justice process.
- Improving the efficiency of the justice system and how domestic and sexual abuse cases are dealt with in criminal, civil and family courts.
- Strengthening the police and criminal justice response to domestic and sexual abuse.

#### **How will we know we are making a difference?**

***Increased reporting of domestic and sexual abuse.***

***Fewer victims of domestic and sexual abuse withdraw from the criminal justice process.***

***Time taken for domestic and sexual abuse cases to be completed.***

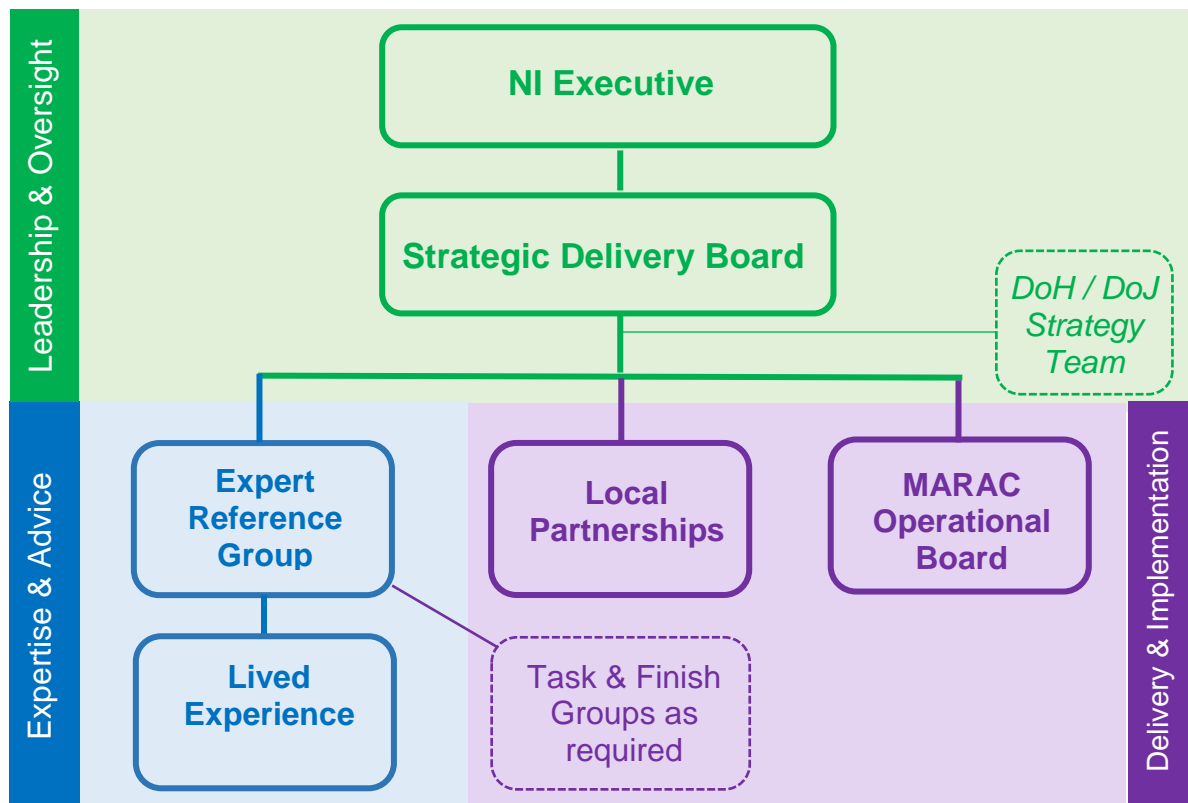
***Satisfaction with criminal justice system support.***

## 4. Delivering the Strategy

### Governance structures for co-ordination and delivery

The strategy is led jointly by the Department of Health and the Department of Justice but cuts across the work of other Departments, primarily the Department for Communities, the Department of Education and the Executive Office.

It is envisaged that the strategy could be monitored through the following governance structure, which is largely similar to the previous strategy. Given the ongoing development of an Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy it will be important to keep this under review, in order that structures between the two strategies can best align.



#### Leadership and oversight

The **Northern Ireland Executive** will set the strategic direction, providing political leadership and visibility. It will receive progress reports from the Strategic Delivery Board every six months.

The **Strategic Delivery Board** will report and be accountable to the Executive. It will meet quarterly and will be comprised of senior officials across the Health, Justice,

Communities, Education and Finance Departments; the Executive Office; 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 ensure delivery against targets and oversee accountability mechanisms with appropriate challenge and scrutiny. Links will also be established with other relevant strategic oversight groups including CPSOG to share information, promote collaboration and avoid duplication in relation to action plans.

### Expertise and advice

A multi-agency **Expert Reference Group** comprised of partners from the statutory, voluntary and community sectors will provide advice to the Strategic Delivery Board from a cross-sectoral, frontline perspective. It will meet quarterly to share local data and best practice to inform and drive continued improvement in tackling domestic and sexual abuse.

Victims of domestic and 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.

Initial stakeholder engagement has indicated that a number of lived experience groups are already in place across Northern Ireland, supported by key organisations across the voluntary and community sector. The Departments will continue to engage with those organisations with a view to identifying how best we can support victims to share their experiences in a safe space.

### Delivery and implementation

Multi-agency Task and Finish groups will be established, as required, to inform policy development and take forward specific actions under the strategy (including how best we meet the needs of those with protected characteristics).

There will also be collaboration opportunities with the local Domestic and Sexual Violence Partnerships to ensure regional priorities are interpreted and delivered at a local level. To inform this, the Departments have asked the Innovation Lab within the Department of Finance to bring together key stakeholders to take a fresh look at how we can best work together at a local and regional level.

The existing Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) Operational Board will also continue to feed into the implementation of the strategy. The Board provides strategic operational governance across all MARACS in Northern Ireland to ensure they operate effectively and have a measurable impact.

## **Annual 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.”

The strategy will be delivered through annual action plans the detail of which will be delivered over the lifetime of the strategy. They will be developed in conjunction with our Expert Reference Group and will outline how each of the key priority areas within the four pillars will be driven forward, who will be responsible, and the timescales by which they will be completed.

Annual reports will also be published, at the start of each financial year, highlighting the work that has been delivered in the previous 12 months as well as performance against the strategy’s outcomes. The Strategic Delivery 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**

From the Call for Views, we know that it is important that there are effective arrangements in place to monitor and measure the delivery of the strategy. Therefore, a key action for year one will be to develop a Strategic Performance Framework with the position and progress of each outcome measured using a range of indicators. 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.

It is also intended that for significant new pieces of work that are being progressed we will develop scorecards 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 did we do, how well did we do it and is anyone better off as a result. This will also feed into the annual delivery reports.

## **Funding**

“Money and resources must be ring fenced.”

Many responses to the Call for Views stressed the importance of longer-term sustainable funding and a costed delivery plan in order to fully implement the strategy

and its action plans. In recognition of this, a cross-departmental bid was submitted as part of the Executive's draft 2022-25 budget which was issued for consultation in December 2021. In the absence of an Executive, that draft budget was not agreed and the future funding picture is uncertain. The Secretary of State announced a one-year budget for 2022-23 at the end of November 2022. However, there is currently no certainty around funding in future years.

Within this context, it is anticipated that Departments will seek to continue the implementation of priority objectives, including delivery of programmes of work, and the development of services commissioned by Departments that will allow us to deliver under the key pillars of the strategy, subject to available funding. The allocation of funding and work to be progressed will be considered as part of the development of annual delivery plans, which will be developed in partnership with key stakeholders and agreed by the Strategic Delivery Board.

## **Mid-term review and evaluation**

A mid-term review and evaluation of projects will form a key element of the Strategic Performance Framework for the new strategy and how we can effectively deliver under this.

In addition to annual reporting, we will conduct an interim review of the strategy at the mid-way point of delivery (likely to be during 2026/27) to assess how far our work has contributed to achieving the strategy's eight outcomes. 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.

As part of the policy development and implementation process, evaluations will also typically be undertaken on significant new projects. The purpose of this is to assess their effectiveness, determine what changes may be needed and identify areas for improvement. As part of an ongoing review process this will allow us to demonstrate the success of progress that has been made through the measures that have been introduced.