

## YEAR 5 PROGRESS REPORT

### **Progress under the Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategy's Year Five Action Plan (2020-21)**

A Year Five Action Plan was published jointly by the Department of Health ('DoH') and the Department of Justice ('DoJ'), under the 'Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategy', in July 2020. The action plan was based on partnership working with the Department of Education ('DE'), the Department for Communities ('DfC'), the Department of Finance ('DoF') as well as statutory, voluntary and community sector organisations.

2020/21 has been a year like no other. The covid-19 pandemic has presented many challenges for us all but it has also shed a light on domestic and sexual abuse. The necessary restrictions put in place to combat covid-19 have resulted in fewer opportunities for people experiencing, or at risk of, domestic abuse to contact supportive friends, families, community members and service providers.

Our priority has therefore been to ensure that essential services continue to operate effectively and remain fully available during the pandemic. We have also had to think innovatively and find new ways for people, who may be isolated at home, to access those services. Along with the pressures this has created, the public health restrictions have also made progress against some initiatives more difficult, and progress has slowed on some pieces of work. This is related to work on updating iMatter materials on healthy relationships; piloting a scheme to notify schools of domestic abuse; a safe code word scheme for use in bars and venues; the relaunch of the No Grey Zone (phase 2) sexual consent awareness campaign; and research into the Sanctuary Scheme, which provides victims in NIHE properties with the choice to remain safely in their home.

A number of new areas of work have been taken forward in response to covid-19, and ensuring necessary protections are in place, including:

The publication of **additional guidance** so that victims (or those concerned about others) can easily access, in one place, the contact details for different support organisations.

DoH and DoJ, have also worked closely with the Home Office to develop the '**Ask for ANI**' **pharmacy code word scheme** to allow those at risk or suffering from abuse to discreetly signal to pharmacy staff that they need help to access support. Participating pharmacies will have promotional material on display in store to signal that they are taking part. This includes Boots pharmacies in NI, as well as a number of other independent pharmacies.

**Free public transport** for those going to refuge or emergency accommodation as a result of domestic abuse is now also available through a new scheme launched by the Department for Infrastructure. This provides an additional option for victims fleeing domestic abuse who may not have access to alternative travel.

DoH provided **additional funding** to Women's Aid, to provide an initial care package for families who have experienced or been a victim of domestic abuse. Both Nexus NI and Men's Advisory Project also received an uplift in funding under their existing contracts with the HSC Board to help reduce counselling waiting lists.

**Media campaigns** were re-launched by DoJ and PSNI to promote the 24 hour Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline and to encourage reporting to the police. The advertising campaign *Make the Call, Make the Difference*, launched by Crimestoppers, also encouraged people to report incidents of domestic abuse against others, in confidence.

Messaging on domestic and sexual abuse has been communicated widely across the third sector including the Local Domestic and Sexual Violence Partnerships and Police and Community Safety Partnerships. Together with government departments, organisations increased social media activity during the 16 Days of Action (joining together through **#16daysofactionNI**). All NI Executive Ministers also took part in a short video to call out domestic and sexual abuse and signpost victims and survivors to available help and support.

The **Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline** (jointly funded by DoH, DoJ and DfC) has remained operational 24/7 with increased staffing levels and additional government funding to support remote working and increased use of webchat facilities.

Outside of the Covid specific response, there have also been significant legislative developments over the past 12 months. New landmark domestic abuse legislation has been passed by the NI Assembly. The Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 will introduce a **new domestic abuse offence** and statutory aggravators in late 2021. Legislation has also been introduced to the Assembly to provide for a **stalking offence** and Stalking Protection Orders.

Other key highlights in 2020/21 included:

- Completion of an independent **mid-term review** of the 'Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategy' and steps to deliver against its recommendations.
- A report to the **NI Executive** on cross cutting issues on domestic and sexual abuse.
- The introduction of a **Domestic Homicide Review** process, to learn lessons from tragic cases where a person has died from domestic abuse and prevent further abuse. On average this should mean that 6 cases are considered each year by expert Chairs and a multi-agency panel.
- Piloting the **Identification and Referral to Improve Safety ('IRIS')** programme in East Belfast and Newry and District GP Federations. IRIS is being delivered in partnership with Women's Aid, Victim Support NI, Men's Advisory Project and Nexus NI, to train and support GPs to recognise and respond to domestic and sexual abuse and refer patients to advocacy support.

- A **Domestic Abuse Worker** is also being piloted in Craigavon Area Hospital by the Southern HSC Trust in partnership with Women's Aid Armagh Down, to enable victims of domestic abuse to receive immediate advice and support.
- Procurement of a streamlined singular **advocacy** service for victims of domestic and sexual abuse. The new service will commence in September 2021 and will provide support to victims, largely during their criminal justice journey.
- Publication of **guidelines for media** reporting on domestic abuse in Northern Ireland, making use of a Responsible Reporting Matters framework.
- Work to update the **NI Civil Service Workplace Policy** on domestic and sexual abuse.
- Work to establish a pilot programme to notify schools of domestic abuse incidents and passage of legislation enabling information sharing for this purpose (commonly referred to as Operation Encompass). This will commence in the South Down area in the next financial year, assisting schools to provide support, and a tailored response, to those affected by domestic abuse.
- Report prepared on the outcomes, performance measures and impact of **Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferences**.
- Progression of actions from the SBNI Leonard Review and Criminal Justice NI Inspection.
- Continued funding and provision of **Behavioural Change Programmes** across Northern Ireland. Five programmes ran and were made available to 60 individuals over 24 weeks. Service delivery was maintained by telephone, given that it was not possible due to public health guidelines, to run group programmes of up to 12 people.
- The Supporting People programme, which is administered by the Housing Executive on behalf of the Department for Communities, grant funded a total of 34 Units of Supported Accommodation during 20/21 with a total expenditure of £639,594.00. These units were located at Causeway Women's Aid Refuge (Coleraine), Ashleywood House (Derry/Londonderry) and Rose House (Derry/Londonderry).
- **Crown Court Observer's Study** published by Victim Support NI. This sets out victims' and witnesses' experience of the court system in sexual offence cases and makes a number of recommendations to improve the experience of sexual abuse victims.

The year five action plan can be found at:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/year-five-action-plan.pdf>

[https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/year-five-action-plan-stopping-domestic-and-sexual-violence-abuse-strategy\\_0.pdf](https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/year-five-action-plan-stopping-domestic-and-sexual-violence-abuse-strategy_0.pdf)