



# PUTTING THE CHILD AT THE CENTRE

**Barnahus (Children's House) - a one door approach to supporting children who have been sexually abused in Northern Ireland**

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## Acknowledgements

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**Cover Image:** we would like to thank the PROMISE Barnahus Network ([www.barnahus.eu](http://www.barnahus.eu)) for permission to use their image in this report.

The views expressed herein are those of the authors.

## Commissioner's Foreword



*'..... feeling I had been put in the system and I wasn't going to be remembered and I was just a number, a case number. I know technically I was a case number, but like...that feeling that I had been forgotten in the system, I was just that I wasn't actually a person'.*

The criminal justice and child protection systems are, by necessity, governed by detailed processes but what the above quote demonstrates is that those processes run the risk of losing the child victim that the system was established to protect and get "justice" for.

Along with others, NICCY has been working on establishing a more effective system for children who have been sexually abused and the Barnahus model seems to provide the way forward. As this report outlines, by collaborating and making sure that the child has one door to go through for all the services that they need, outcomes for children and young people will be improved. As the primary stakeholder of the system it is critical that children experience their rights, particularly to ensure their right not to be discriminated against (UNCRC Article 2), have their best interests taken into account (Article 3), their right to participate and be heard (Article 12) and that the right to recovery (Article 39) will become a reality. To quote the authors *"everything in Barnahus is designed around the needs of children and young people"*. That is how it should be.

This research provides in one document the evidence of the effectiveness of the Barnahus model and the importance of a collaborative and partnership approach. Barnahus has been subject to local adaptation across Europe, whilst adhering to the core principles of placing the child at the centre, collaboration and one-door. It also outlines the appetite that there is in Northern Ireland to make it happen. The fact that there is a real determination to make it a reality from professionals who have genuine questions with regards to practicalities is not surprising. These professionals have dedicated their working lives to making a difference to victims of sexual abuse and can see the potential that such a development has.

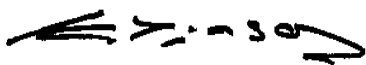
This report outlines the significant developments that are already in place in Northern Ireland as well as the views of professionals and, of course, young people. Young people are not always able to share their experiences of the system, particularly as understandably they want to move on. We are, therefore extremely grateful to those young people who did participate and to the organisations who supported them to do so.

They have clearly outlined their need to be believed and validated, the life-changing nature of their experience, a loss of identity and their fear of sharing their experiences to the criminal justice system. All clear evidence that children have not been at the centre of these processes. They make the strongest case of why the system must be changed.

The research identifies the way forward and the steps that must be taken to make a Northern Ireland Barnahus a reality. The authors discuss the importance of leadership from the justice and child protection systems. The recent experience of developing a joint campus proposal for secure care and custody make me optimistic that joint leadership is possible. Strategic leadership is key to ensuring strong and effective collaboration which will be necessary so that key agencies and professionals are flexible and accommodating whilst still fulfilling their statutory responsibilities. This research provides clear and irrefutable evidence that collaborative endeavours provide better outcomes, not only for children and families, but also for the justice system.

I have always been a strong supporter of Barnahus and reiterate **NICCY's position that a service closely modelled on Barnahus, adhering to the PROMISE standards and adapted to Northern Ireland must be progressed.** Children should not have to wait for months and years for a case to be concluded and they must never again feel lost in the system whose aim is to support them. This report discusses different aspects of justice and lays out the hope that all can be addressed.

NICCY is indebted to the formidable team from the University of Edinburgh, along with Queen's University Belfast and Children 1<sup>st</sup> and NICCY staff who have been professional and diligent throughout this process. I endorse their recommendations as the roadmap by which a Barnahus service can be realised in Northern Ireland. Time to get on with implementation.



**Koulla Yiasouma**  
Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People



## **Executive Summary**

### **Background**

Violence against children is estimated to affect half of the world's population globally (Hillis et al., 2016), with 7.5% of adults aged 18 to 74 years reporting having experienced sexual abuse before the age of 16 years (Office National Statistics, 2020).

Previous studies have found that as many as 90% of sexual assault incidents are not reported to authorities (Priebe & Svedin, 2008) and that as many as one-third of children do not disclose experiences of violence during a forensic interview (Azzopardi et al., 2019). For children who do disclose, the journey from initial disclosure through to judicial completion can be a long and daunting process to navigate (Alaggia, 2004).

### **Barnahus and Children's Rights**

The Barnahus model facilitates a streamlined "one-door" (colocated) approach to interagency collaboration and services for children and families who have been affected by forms of violence. The model fully conforms to international children's rights standards, including the UNCRC and the Lanzarote Convention, and is championed by the Council of Europe. Central features of the model are a child-friendly environment, access to information and services that are offered as part of the criminal justice and child welfare investigation, as well as therapeutic services to support children's recovery. All of these services are colocated within one building, which offers ease of access for children and families, interagency cooperation and shared culture, and a streamlined process for children and families.

### **Views of those with Lived Experience**

There is already a robust body of evidence in Northern Ireland about the weaknesses in the current system of investigating and prosecuting sexual crimes against children. These challenges are not unique to Northern Ireland, and therefore it is timely that Sir John Gillen looked at the need for an alternative approach to providing access to justice and care for sexually abused children in line with the UNCRC. We met with young people with lived experience of being sexually abused and exploited as children to discuss their views on Sir John's proposal that a Barnahus be given serious consideration. Four overarching themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews with young people who had previous

experience of abuse and of speaking with police and others in the criminal justice system: (1) the need to be believed and validated; (2) the impact of experiencing abuse on all aspects of their life; (3) feeling a loss of identity; and (4) feeling scared telling their stories in the criminal justice system. These themes highlight the need for a child-centred approach to be used in the criminal justice and recovery systems. We discuss how the core tenets of Barnahus as a child-friendly, child-rights-centred approach can come alongside to support children and families during the disclosure journey.

### Stakeholder Discussions

The research team invited key stakeholder organisations to contribute their views about the Barnahus model and the perceived facilitators and challenges to implementation in Northern Ireland. Organisations across criminal justice, health and social care, and the third sector were contacted and invited to participate in focus groups or individual interviews to discuss considerations for Northern Ireland. After conducting the focus groups and follow-up interviews, aggregate responses were reviewed by the research team to establish recurring topics into themes using a thematic analysis approach.

Four overarching themes emerged from discussions with professionals across all stakeholder organisations and sectors. Broadly, these were **leadership** and the question of who will have responsibility for realising the plans for the Barnahus in Northern Ireland; what the **Northern Ireland Barnahus model** would look like, operationally, and of the potential for the Barnahus to become a centre for excellence for training and for data-sharing between core agencies, and lead in the education of the wider public; the **lens for justice** in terms of ensuring the focus is on children and families' needs; and **co-production with children and families** to ensure **responsive services and procedures** that are designed flexibly to suit the unique needs of children and families using the centre.

### Recommendations

Based on discussions with those with lived experience, and organisational stakeholders in criminal justice, health and social care, and the third sector in Northern Ireland, we have compiled a list of recommendations regarding the introduction of a Barnahus model in Northern Ireland. These recommendations are rooted in the belief that the Barnahus could further embed the principles of the UNCRC into services and procedures for the benefit of children in Northern Ireland. Our recommendations are by no means exhaustive but were reiterated through discussions with stakeholders and also emerged through the academic

and practice literature. These recommendations also stem from the Council of Europe recommendations for Barnahus (2018). The recommendations fall into two broad categories - the establishment of the Barnahus, and the operation of the Barnahus:

### ***Establishment of the Barnahus***

1. While there is a broad consensus on the benefits that a dedicated Barnahus would provide, there is a clear need for the Department of Justice and the Department of Health to agree ministerial responsibility for the Barnahus, as elements of the core services and procedures currently fall within the remit of different Departments and agencies.
2. A designated project lead and strategic Project Board should be appointed, comprising a Barnahus Champion within each relevant service/agency, including third sector representation.
3. This Project Board should also have representation from those with lived experience of the justice system regarding sexual abuse and exploitation in childhood.
4. The Project Lead and Project Board should clarify the remit and commissioning arrangements in terms of the Barnahus. This will include the arrangements for commissioning and funding the service, alongside operationalising what services and procedures are provided by the Barnahus directly, and which are delivered in collaboration with existing services and procedures, including addressing any legislative or other barriers.
5. There is a need for a designated space for children that does not also serve adults (adult victims or adult perpetrators), and that is flexible enough to meet the diverse needs of children, due to developmental stage, disability and/or ethnicity.
6. Co-production with children and families in the design of the NI Barnahus model is key to help better understand the lived experiences and the needs of both the child and their wider family.
7. Ensure that the Children and Young People's Commissioner and the proposed Victim of Crime Commissioner are both able to contribute to the discussions about the remit and governance mechanisms within any proposals for the Barnahus.

### ***Operation of the Barnahus***

The Barnahus has the potential to capitalise and bring together a range of important recent developments and to augment these in a holistic and coordinated service for children:

1. The Barnahus should ensure that each child has a designated individual who acts as an advocate and source of information and discussion for the child and family. This advocate should be present throughout the criminal justice and therapeutic processes; and could be part of the “spoke” services (i.e., available remotely) for children and families living in more remote locations of NI.
2. Providing testimony, including cross-examination, should be as contained within Barnahus services and procedures, as outlined by the Council of Europe, for example through pre-recording of evidence held under the oversight of a court judge, and observed by the council for defence, prosecution, law enforcement, child protection, and the child’s advocate (Council of Europe, 2018). The forensic interview should be recorded (audio and visual) for use in any indictments. There may be an exploratory interview for the initial disclosure as well as court testimony. Both should be recorded to a very high quality to ensure that the child’s voice and testimony are heard and seen clearly, and so that informal credibility assessments of the child are not negatively impacted by poor-quality recording.
3. Clarify the legal process for how any additional disclosure of evidence, such as post-testimony recording, becomes part of the criminal justice proceeding (e.g., the child is recalled to the Barnahus for an additional interview, under similar conditions as the first court testimony recording).
4. Ensure that all Barnahus services and procedures are offered under one roof in an environment that is child-friendly (e.g., home-like environment that is suitable for different age ranges of children and young people) and local to the child.
5. Provide appropriate public funds for NI Barnahus to ensure that the model is sustainable over time. External funding may be beneficial for the initial start-up phase (Council of Europe, 2018) but key services and procedures delivered by the third sector should have certainty about their role on a longer commissioning timeframe.
6. Formalise agreement protocols for information sharing between agencies involved in NI Barnahus, specifically core information as relates to the child’s case to reduce the need for children and families to repeat information with different services and professionals.

## Conclusion

In sum, discussions with Northern Ireland stakeholders highlighted the need for leadership in moving the Barnahus forward; for a bespoke Northern Ireland Barnahus that would meet the Northern Ireland context and needs; the consideration of the different lenses for justice that are being used to drive the model; and the coproduction of services and procedures with children and families to ensure the rights of each child and each family are met.

In the words of Sir John Gillen during an interview with the research team, he highlighted what the attitude in Northern Ireland must be moving forward:

“The attitude [toward Barnahus] must be a “can do” not “I can't do”. We should be saying what can we do here to do this? Because the concept is absolutely first class. It's worked in Norway, Greenland, Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania, it's working in England. I'm just a bit concerned that you can sit down if you're a civil servant and think of 100 reasons why all the money shouldn't be spent here. You know children are being absolutely devastated by this whole process - that's without price.”



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# 1. Background and Evidence Review

## Introduction to Violence Against Children in the Northern Ireland Context

Violence against children is estimated to affect half of the world's population globally (Hillis et al., 2016). Within Northern Ireland, violent acts against children were reported to the police 5,481 times in 2018/19; of these, 2,036 offences were sexual in nature (PSNI, 2019). Although already too high, these figures likely only represent the tip of the iceberg of the number of children who have experienced sexual violence. Previous studies have found that as many as 90% of sexual assault incidents are not reported to authorities (Priebe & Svedin, 2008) and that as many as one-third of children do not disclose experiences of violence during a forensic interview (Azzopardi et al., 2019).

For children who do disclose, the journey from initial disclosure through to judicial completion can be a long and daunting process to navigate (Alaggia, 2004). As highlighted by Sir John Gillen in his Report into the Law and Procedures in Serious Sexual Offences in Northern Ireland (2019), cases of serious sexual offences committed against children incur the longest delays in the judicial system with an average duration of 986 days (i.e., more than two and a half years). This delay serves as a barrier to children's right to justice (Article 3) and recovery from trauma (Article 39) as highlighted in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

As outlined in the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children Against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote Convention, 2014), there is a need to "ensure that investigations and criminal proceedings are treated as priority and carried out without any unjustified delay" (Article 30.3) and that "investigations and criminal proceedings do not aggravate the trauma experienced by the child" (Article 30.2). As the *New Decade New Approach* agreement (2020) in Northern Ireland has reinforced a commitment to "ensuring faster, fairer justice" for victims and witnesses, there is a need to consider how the justice and judicial process can better support the needs of children, including those who have experienced forms of sexual violence and assault.

One of the key directives in the Council of Europe Lanzarote Convention is that States "ensure *the coordination on a national or local level between the different agencies* in charge of the protection from, the prevention of and the fight against sexual exploitation

and sexual abuse of children, notably the education sector, the health sector, the social services and the law-enforcement and judicial authorities.” (Article 10.1).

The “Barnahus” or “child house” model originated in Iceland in 1998, partly developed from the Children’s Advocacy Centre model in the United States (Herbert et al., 2018). The model, at its core, is designed to uphold children’s rights to participation by ensuring that they are heard and provided with information and services to be able to participate in any investigation and recovery after witnessing or experiencing forms of violence. The model takes a multidisciplinary and interagency approach to coordinate services and procedures for the child and non-offending family under one roof in a safe and child-friendly environment. Due to how Barnahus upholds the rights of the child, Barnahus has been championed as a child-friendly justice model and as a best-practice model that operationalizes international children’s rights standards to a high benchmark (Haldorsson, 2019; Johansson & Stefansen, 2020).

According to the PROMISE network of Barnahus in Europe, at the time of writing 22 countries have or are in the process of introducing a Barnahus model. Countries have adapted the specifics of how Barnahus functions (e.g., whether law enforcement or social services act as lead), while still upholding the main premise of interagency cooperation and ensuring a child-friendly justice model upon which Barnahus is founded, and importantly, while maintaining the quality standards, as outlined by the PROMISE Barnahus Movement and discussed below (Haldorsson, 2019).

### **Structure of Report**

In our report, we first present an evidence review of (1) the background to sexual violence against children and children’s disclosures of sexual violence, (2) children’s rights standards and (3) the Barnahus model, including core features, history of the model, and country-level adaptations. Next, we turn to a discussion of the Northern Ireland systems and legislative landscape regarding children and families disclosing experiences of abuse, including current policy initiatives. We then present themes from focus group and individual discussions with Northern Ireland stakeholders in criminal justice, health and social care, and third sectors, as well as individual interviews with young people with lived experiences of justice and recovery processes. Finally, we embed stakeholder responses and key elements of the evidence background in our discussion section.

## 2. Scope of Child Maltreatment and Sexual Violence

Children have a right to be protected from all forms of violence, abuse, neglect and bad treatment by their parents or anyone else (Article 19, UNCRC) including sexual exploitation (Article 34, UNCRC). However, violence against children is estimated to affect half of the world's population globally, with variations across countries and continents (Hillis et al., 2016). Although already too high, these figures likely only represent the tip of the iceberg of the number of children who have experienced sexual violence in particular given the nature of how sexual offences against children are discovered. Our knowledge and understanding of children's experiences of sexual abuse has evolved significantly over the past forty years and includes a wide range of both direct and indirect behaviours (Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, 2017). Sexual violence, in the form of abuse, assault, or exploitation is most commonly discovered through children's own disclosures (Rush et al., 2014). Given the general lack of corroborating evidence of sexual violence (e.g., Ornlfsdottir et al., 2017), relative to other forms of maltreatment such as physical abuse that may be more overt, for example, leaving marks on the child, children's disclosures of sexual violence often require the child to be interviewed about what has occurred and are central to an investigation and any future prosecution (Rush et al., 2014). For this reason, knowledge of how children tend to disclose sexual offences helps to give context for how children become involved in an investigation of a sexual offence committed against them and how they engage in the safeguarding, criminal justice and recovery processes. In the next section, we focus on reasons why children can be reluctant to speak with authorities, how a child's disclosure and follow-up statements can change when engaging with the safeguarding or criminal justice systems, and how age differences between very young children, primary-school-aged children, and adolescents can affect their disclosures.

### Reluctance to Disclose to Authorities

The results of a previous study indicate that approximately 90% of sexual assault incidents experienced by adolescents were not reported to authorities (Priebe & Svedin, 2008), and the results of a recent meta-analysis demonstrated that as many as one-third of children do not disclose experiences of violence during a forensic interview (Azzopardi et al., 2019). These figures suggest a high level of reluctance on the behalf of children and adolescents to speak with authority figures (i.e., police officers, child forensic interviewers) about experiences of sexual violence.



There are many reasons why young people can be reluctant to disclose experiences of sexual abuse, assault, or exploitation to authorities in particular. For example, they may be reluctant to go to the authorities because they may not know whom they can trust with their disclosure, and they may also be concerned that their disclosure will have negative consequences for the person who abused them. Adolescents, in particular, have an increasing awareness of how their disclosures may have negative consequences for themselves and for others (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003), and young people who feel they are in a romantic relationship with the person who abused them may deny that any abuse happened even when there is evidence that would suggest otherwise (Katz, 2013; Kennedy et al., 2007). Other reasons young people can be reluctant to disclose sexual offences to the authorities include a (false) feeling of guilt or shame that they might have been involved in their own abuse or exploitation, for example by having sent explicit photos or having agreed to meet with the person who abused or exploited them, and past experiences of trauma with parts of the justice system (Lavoie et al., 2019). Together, this highlights how adolescents may feel reluctant to reach out for any type of help because of the shame, stigma, and trauma they have experienced as well as the potential concern that the outcome of their disclosure may not be the outcome that they desire. As such, seeing disclosure as a process, rather than as an event, that empowers the child to feel in control of how they engage with helping professionals is central to effectively ensuring children's sense of achieving safety and justice (Article 12, UNCRC).

### **Developmental Differences in Disclosures**

The developmental abilities and maturity of the child or young person play a role in how they disclose sexual offences. For example, age alone is a key factor associated with whether a disclosure is made, as well as how substantively detailed the narrative is when (if) the young person discloses. Very young children (i.e., early childhood, once language skills have emerged and are establishing) are less likely to disclose adverse events (Leach et al., 2017), and when they do, their narratives typically provide fewer substantive details than those of older children (Hershkowitz et al., 2012; Lamb et al., 2003). A meta-analysis of studies examining children's disclosures during a forensic interview indicates that disclosure rates increase with the child's age (specifically mean age, that is, pooled across participants in the study; Azzopardi et al., 2019). Of note, the highest mean age of the studies included in the meta-analysis was 11.77 years (Azzopardi et al., 2019). Studies have typically examined age effects in a linear way (that is, one steady relation by which disclosure either increases or decreases with age, but not both), but this may miss the subtleties of disclosure within different developmental stages, such as adolescence.

Leach and colleagues (2017) used linear and quadratic approaches to examine children's rates of disclosures during a forensic interview and found that an inverted "U" curve is common across childhood and adolescence, with both young children and adolescents being less likely to disclose and those in middle childhood being most likely to disclose, and with a peak of disclosure rates around age 11. Overall, these findings suggest that the age of the child is an important factor to consider when looking at children's tendency to disclose, and this may inform how professionals should seek to support children to engage in any criminal justice and recovery process.

### **Children with Additional Support Needs**

All children should have equal access to protection and services under the UNCRC obligations (Article 2). Children with additional needs, specifically cognitive needs (e.g., intellectual disabilities, neurodiversity, language delays or limited language comprehension) are disproportionately represented among children who have experienced forms of violence and abuse (Hendricks et al., 2014). At the same time, speaking with children with specific cognitive needs about their experiences in an interview setting requires additional considerations to how questions are posed and to how to best meet the needs of the child so that they can share their experiences and be understood. Given the additional considerations needed, both safeguarding and legal professionals report feeling inadequately resourced to interview children with specific cognitive needs (Taylor et al., 2016), and perhaps in consequence, the interviewing methods used with this child population tends to be more suggestive, for example through a high reliance on close-ended or option-posing questions (Brown et al., 2017; Cederborg & Lamb, 2008), which then decreases the perceived credibility of the child and their experiences (Henry et al., 2011). Perhaps because of these challenges, the voices of children with additional cognitive needs can sometimes be overlooked (Stalker et al., 2015). Additional needs that children may present with also include speaking a first language that is different from the majority language or interviewing language, and cultural considerations that include how law enforcement is viewed as trustworthy or authoritarian and dynamics of body language and eye contact that can affect informal credibility assessments when misunderstood or not taken into account (Article 30, UNCRC).

In sum, children enter the investigative and recovery process with different needs, relating to age, developmental maturity, cognitive ability, and the circumstances of the abuse itself. Understanding these differences helps to situate what their needs are post-disclosure, and how they are likely to interact with the criminal justice and recovery process going forward.

### 3. Children's Rights

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; 1989) remains a landmark in terms of the standards set for children's rights. The 54 articles contained in this convention outline the minimum standards for all children's rights to protection, participation and the provision of services. Children have a right to develop in a safe environment where their physical, emotional, educational and social needs are respected and met, and that allows children to thrive, and this includes the right to be protected from all forms of violence, abuse and neglect (Article 19, 34, and 35). While all children's rights will have relevance for those children who are the victims of or witness to violence, we have identified some of the key articles which are of particular significance to briefly discuss below, they include: the best interests of the child (Article 3), children's right to participation (Article 12) a child's right to information (Article 13), and children's right to recovery (Article 39).

#### **Best Interests of the Child**

*"In all decisions and actions that concern children, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration"* (UNCRC, Article 3)

Article 3 says that the interests of the child should be considered at all levels of society, and their rights should be respected by people with power. The best interests of the child is a key article when assessing how to address violence against children, including within a Barnahus. Undoubtedly, few would challenge the notion that decisions surrounding the child and pertaining to the child should favour the child and have their best interests in mind. Yet, at the same time, this can still be challenging to implement in practice. For example, for criminal justice and law enforcement, the best interests of the child include factors such as justice and immediate safety, of both the child and wider society, as key priorities. For health and social care agencies, the best interests of the child include both immediate and long-term physical and mental health and overall well-being. For social workers the best interests of the child may be about safeguarding the child, and other children, from ongoing risk. For professionals working in the third sector, the best interests of the child include discussions of resilience and of the child in the context of their environments, for example, their parents or caregivers and families. For the children themselves, their best interests often centre around their own needs and desires, for example, what they want justice and recovery to look like concretely, and how they want to

move forward with their lives. Putting aside the facets of consideration, the drive behind Article 3 is that the interpretation that most effectively upholds the child's interest is the approach that should be implemented (Johansson et al., 2017). It should be noted that the 'best interests of the child' should not be equated to protection alone, rather they are enshrined in all children's rights.

### **Right to Participation**

*"Every child has the right to express their views on matters that affect them, and for these views to be taken into consideration"* (UNCRC, Article 12)

The right of a child to express their views on all matters affecting them and to have them given due weight is understood as the child's right to participate (Article 12) and refers to all children capable of forming a view. This right, alongside the child's right to receive information set out in Article 13, is fundamental to the Barnahus model (see Hill et al., forthcoming) and provide the child with the right to express their views and have them given due weight at an individual or collective level. For example, to have the opportunity to be heard in any judicial process and administrative proceedings affecting the child.

Children's participation in discussions and decision-making processes are central to this right. Participation is interpreted to mean both the approach, that is, how the child is supported to engage with the process of sharing their views, and the resulting decisions arrived at. The right to participation needs an approach that is responsive to the child, including developmental (age, cognitive ability for decision-making, reasoning) and maturational (psychosocial ability for problem-solving and considering multiple perspectives) needs.

### **Right to Recovery**

*"States should do all they can to help any child who has been neglected, exploited, abused, tortured or involved in armed conflict to recover their health, self-respect and dignity, and to reintegrate"* (UNCRC, Article 39)

Children's right to recovery is explicitly relevant when discussing experiences of sexual offences committed against them. Few would dispute the need for children to recover their health, self-respect, and dignity after experiencing maltreatment, but the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children Against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote Convention) has outlined several barriers to children's right to recovery that

member states, including the United Kingdom, need to address. The first is the need to “ensure that investigations and criminal proceedings are treated as priority and carried out without any unjustified delay” (Article 30.3), and that “investigations and criminal proceedings do not aggravate the trauma experienced by the child” (Article 30.2). States should “ensure the coordination on a national or local level between the different agencies in charge of the protection from, the prevention of and the fight against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children, notably the education sector, the health sector, the social services and the law enforcement and judicial authorities.” (Article 10.1). Children and families need the appropriate services provided without delay to support recovery. Without support services provided in a timely manner, this right to recovery is not upheld (Galloway et al., 2017). In sum, children’s right to recovery is underpinned by the need for due process without delay, a trauma-informed approach, and multi-agency coordination across sectors relevant for children’s participation in society.

Of further relevance, in the UNCRC Concluding Observations on the Fifth Periodic Report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UNCRC, 2016), specific points were highlighted where current practice and procedure do not align with the UNCRC standards. Recommendations were highlighted in the report, specifically that “the recommendations of the Marshall Inquiry into child sexual exploitation in Northern Ireland [be implemented]” (p. 10) and that “comprehensive services to support children who are victims or at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse [be further developed]” (p. 10).



## 4. Barnahus Model

The Barnahus model originated in Iceland in 1998 as an adaptation of the United States' Children's Advocacy Centre model and has now expanded across Europe. Core to the Barnahus model is (1) respect for the participatory rights of the child by ensuring the child is heard and receives adequate information and support to exercise their rights; (2) multidisciplinary and interagency collaboration between children's health services (physical and mental health), law enforcement, social services and the judicial agencies to avoid retraumatisation of the child and to secure outcomes that are in the best interests of the child; (3) comprehensive and accessible services that meet the individual needs of the child and family (non-offending family or caregiver); and (4) ensuring high professional standards, including adequate resources and the specialised training of professionals for working with child witnesses and victims (survivors) of violence.

For children, Barnahus is a setting in which children and young people who have been maltreated or witnessed violence can receive all of the necessary support in one location that is designed to be welcoming and a safe environment from the child's perspective (specifics of what "child-friendly environment" can look like or mean are discussed in Stefansen, 2017). Children are interviewed and medically examined for forensic purposes, comprehensively assessed and receive recovery services from the relevant professionals all within one location, "under one roof". The purpose of Barnahus is to offer each child a coordinated and effective response and to prevent retraumatisation during the investigation and court proceedings. Due to this overarching mandate, everything in Barnahus is designed around the needs of children and young people, and not the needs of the organisations providing the services. This cultural shift is at the heart of the Barnahus model. Barnahus has been championed as a child-friendly justice model and as a best-practice model that is aligned with international children's rights standards (Haldorsson, 2019; Johansson & Stefansen, 2020), including the UNCRC by upholding children's rights to participation, protection, and provision of services.

### Core Features

The Barnahus model consists of core features that are integrated into a country-level adapted model. These include being foremost a **child-friendly** environment and process that engages with the child's developmental and experiential needs to be heard, respected, and to participate in decisions, as underpinned by the UNCRC.

An **interagency approach** (Johansson et al., 2017) is also a core feature of the model as it integrates services and procedures that may otherwise be distinct under one roof so that the services and procedures “come to the child” and not the other way around, as a means of upholding the core feature of being holistic, child-centred and child-friendly. The four agencies typically involved in Barnahus include child protection and safeguarding, criminal justice, physical health and well-being, and mental health and well-being (Johansson et al., 2017; PROMISE network, 2021). A **trauma-informed approach** that does not revictimise the child, especially as they engage in the criminal justice process, is a central core feature of the Barnahus model (Johansson et al., 2017).

The European PROMISE network also provides a set of 10 quality standards for Barnahus as a means to create a similar threshold of quality across Barnahus models (Haldorsson, 2019). These are briefly paraphrased below (for additional description see Haldorsson, 2019).

1 - **Foundational principles that undergird all activities:** children and families’ best interests and needs are at the forefront; that children are able to participate, including being heard and having access to information, without risk of retraumatisation; that children and families have protection, assistance, and justice processes are timely (not delayed).

2 - **Interagency collaboration:** a formal agreement of how the agencies will work and relate together is established and the Barnahus service is recognised and regulated nationally by law.

3 - **Inclusive eligibility:** the eligibility criteria for children to access the Barnahus services should be as broad as possible to incorporate all children who have experienced or witnessed forms of abuse or violence.

4 - **Child-friendly environment:** the physical layout and accessibility of the Barnahus consider the developmental and maturational needs of the child, and avoids any possible interaction with alleged perpetrators.

5 - **Interagency information management:** Cases are managed as an interdisciplinary team and simplify the process for children and families.

6 - **Forensic interview:** the interview is conducted by a specialist trained interviewer, conforms to evidence-based best practices in child forensic interviewing, and upholds the specific developmental and maturational needs of the child.

7 - **Medical examination:** the medical exam is available on premises, on the same day as the interview, and is carried out by specialist medical professionals trained in recognising indicators of abuse.

8 - **Therapeutic services:** mental health services are available for children and families through specialist trained staff.

9 - **Capacity building:** there is regular training, opportunities for feedback on performance are available for staff, and there is a clear plan for evaluation of the services.

10 - **Focus on prevention:** the Barnahus acts as a centre of excellence for training professionals, providing information to the public, and for data-sharing.

As a whole, these standards provide set thresholds and guidance for the aspects involved in a Barnahus model.

### **Countries with Barnahus**

There are, at the time of writing, 22 countries involved in the Barnahus European PROMISE Network, which indicates a commitment to, in various stages of implementation, a Barnahus model (PROMISE, 2021). With this number of countries expressing commitment to a Barnahus model, there are evidently differences in how the model is implemented to suit legislative, practical, and cultural needs. In particular, one of the common adaptations relates to which organisation is commissioned to lead the Barnahus model (e.g., law enforcement, social services), where it is located in terms of which agency “houses” the model, the age of children eligible for services, and the nature of the crime to which children were exposed to or was committed against them. Countries have adapted the specifics of how Barnahus functions while still upholding the main premise of interagency cooperation and ensuring a child-friendly justice model, while maintaining quality standards, as outlined by the PROMISE Barnahus Movement (Haldorsson, 2019).

Many countries began the model to address sexual violence against children but have expanded out to other forms of violence against children to be consistent with UNCRC rights of the child that all forms of violence be addressed. Notably, the Icelandic model is such an example that began with children who had experienced sexual abuse only and have now expanded to include physical abuse as well. The Icelandic model is also an example of an approach that embeds the court process for the child into the Barnahus, with the judge and legal advocates participating in the judicial process from within the Barnahus.

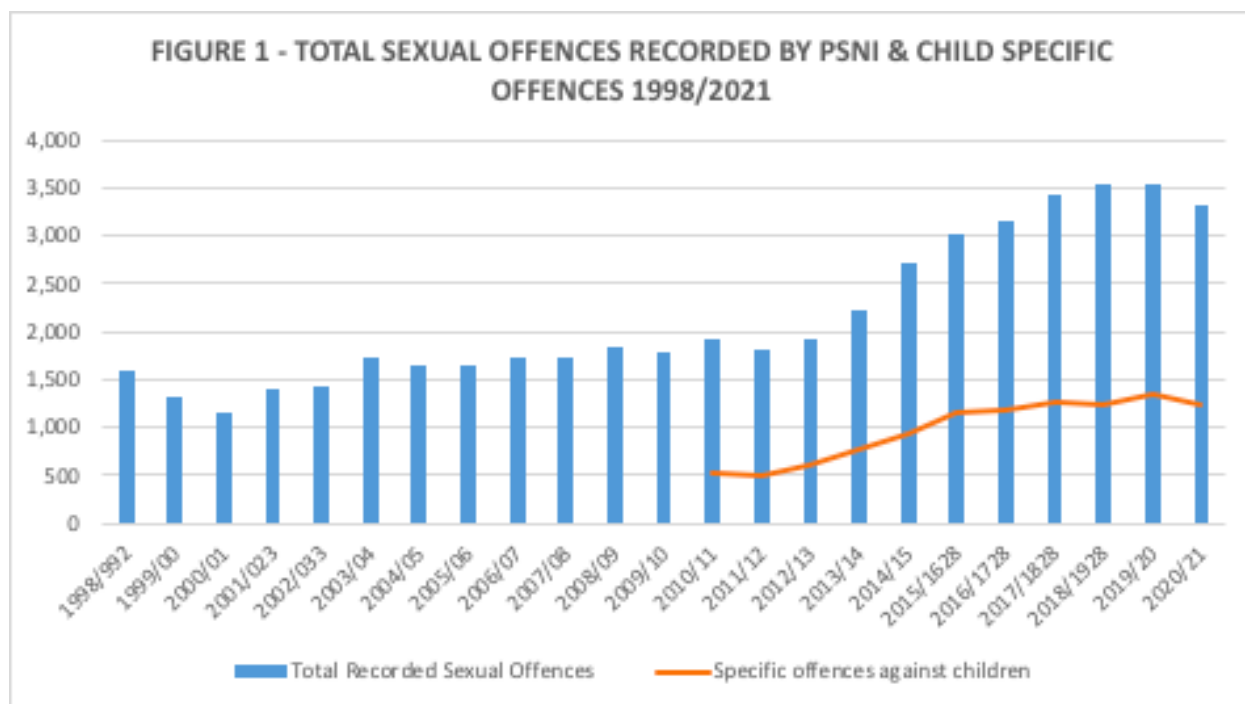
Denmark and Norway also employ a similar approach but use two forensic interviews rather than one to account for the time delay needed by the defence to prepare questions.

Barnahus models are also emerging in different parts of the United Kingdom and Ireland. In particular, England opened the London Child House, “The Lighthouse,” in 2018 as a multiagency service for children and young people who have experienced any form of sexual abuse, including exploitation. It offers a child-centred approach, providing guidance and support to help children and young people recover. Ireland launched the Onehouse Galway Barnahus in 2019, while Scotland is in the process of implementing its first Barnahus model for all child victims and witnesses affected by all forms of violence, estimated for 2022. The models are in the early stages of implementation.

## 5. Northern Ireland Background and Systems

### Scale of Sexual Offences Against Children in NI

In 2020/21 3,335 sexual offences were recorded by PSNI (PSNI Statistics Branch, 2021), 1028 (30.8%) of which were recorded under the offence of rape, with the remaining 2,307 (69.2%) recorded as ‘other’ sexual offences. While figures for 2020/21 represented a 6.1% decrease from the previous year, overall, the number of sexual offences recorded by the police has been steadily increasing over time, with 2019/20 seeing the highest level recorded since 1998/99, three times higher than the lowest level recorded in 2000/01 (Figure 1).



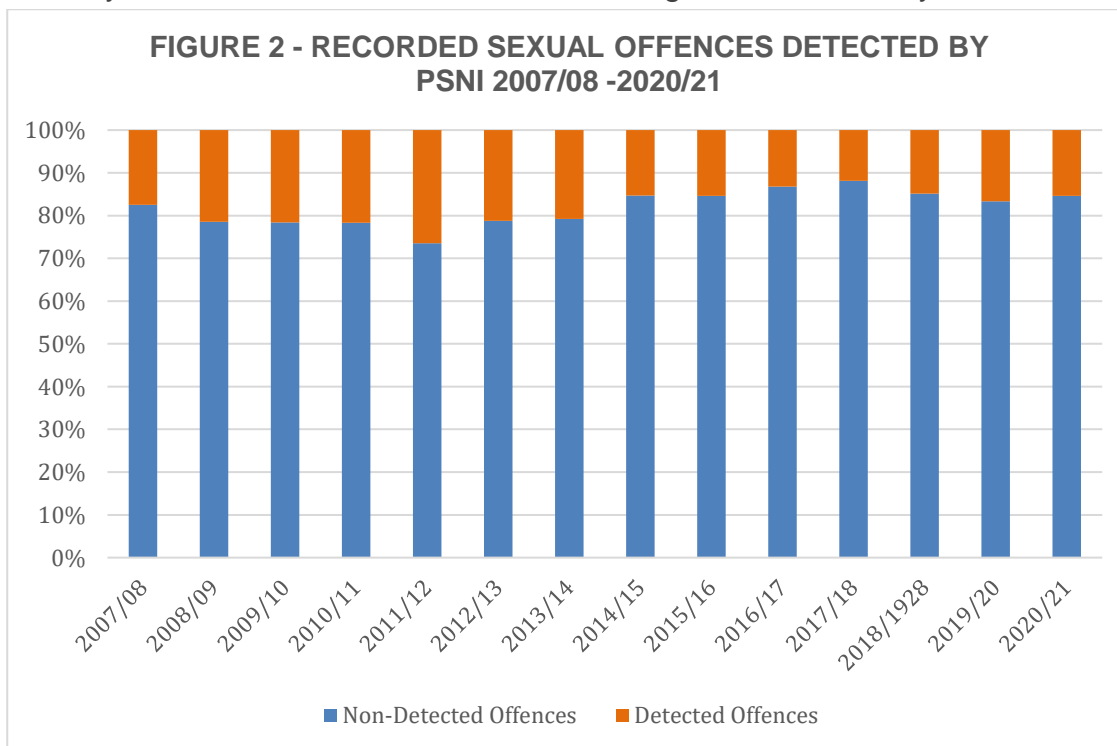
While police recorded crime data are not routinely disaggregated by victim age there are a number of age specific offences, e.g. sexual assault on a female child under 13, which give some sense of the scale of sexual offence against children. Since 2013/14, this category of offences has accounted for more than one-third of all recorded sexual offences, with a high of 38% in 2019/20. Previous analysis of police crime data covering all offence types recording during April 2008 to March 2010 (Bunting, 2011; 2014) has indicated that more than half of sexual offences involve child victims (56%), with the



majority of cases involving sexual activity/assault-related offences (70%) and almost 1 in 5 (19%) involving rape or attempted rape. The majority of victims were girls (85%) and, although teenagers tended to be the predominant victim group, 22% involved children aged 0–9 years. More recent PSNI statistics shared with the NSPCC and subsequently shared with this research team indicate that children are the predominant victim group for sexual offences in NI with 59% of all recorded sexual crimes in 2020/21 being committed against under 18s.

### Case Progression

Figure 2 presents police data on sexual offences ‘detected’ by police – broadly speaking, a crime is deemed to be ‘detected’ if there is sufficient evidence to charge an offender and a reasonable chance of securing a conviction in court, that is the police are reasonably sure they have detected the person responsible. Detection is primarily based on some kind of formal sanction e.g. charges being brought, but may also include a minority of cases in which a prosecution was prevented, for example, because the offender had died or prosecution was not considered to be in the public interest. Between 2007/8 and 2020/21 detection rates varied from a high of 26.5% in 2011/12 and a low of 11.9% in 2017/18, with an average rate of 18%, although it should be noted that rates tend to be lower for more recent years, as not all cases will have an assigned outcome as yet.



Disparities in the length of time taken to assign outcomes to sexual offences compared to other crime types have been also been highlighted by the Criminal Justice Inspectorate NI (CJINI, 2018). Sexual offences, in particular rape, when compared with all crimes were: much more likely to still be under investigation in the year they were recorded (20% of rapes vs 2% of all crimes in 2015/16); to be assigned an outcome code relating to evidential difficulties (63.2% of rape offences vs 27.8% all crimes in 2016/17); or have a prosecution prevented, for example because the offender had died or prosecution was not considered to be in the public interest (4.2% vs 1.1% in 2016/17).

Previous analysis of police data recorded between 2001–2006 has also highlighted significant differences between the characteristics of sexual offences involving children compared to those involving adults (Bunting, 2008). Adults were much more likely to report the offence on the same day it occurred (34% vs 28%) and much less likely to have a significant time delay, 501+ days, than children (8 vs 26%). In terms of case outcomes, similar proportions of child and adult cases resulted in a formal sanction (21%), police/PPS decisions to not prosecute were somewhat higher for child cases (23% vs 19%), and adults were much more likely to decline to prosecute than children (38% vs 28%). Although only available for detected cases, sexual offences against children were much less likely to be carried out by a stranger than adult cases (28.9% vs 45.5%).

Not all cases detected will actually proceed to court, and not all of those which proceed to court will result in a conviction. Historically in NI a lack of integrated data systems has made it difficult to provide precise figures on attrition at the different Criminal Justice System stages. Nevertheless, a 2010 CJINI inspection report (CJINI, 2010b) highlighted that just over half of reported rapes are sent by the police to the PPS for a decision; of this number around 25% proceed to trial and; of those cases that go to court, 57% result in a conviction. While not disaggregated by child and adult victims, the report provides an overall conviction rate of 7% for reported rapes in NI. Similarly, a more recent inspection report (CJINI, 2018) found that, out of 74 finalised sexual offence cases, 42% of cases did not meet the test for prosecution, while 37% of all finalised cases resulted in a conviction (either after trial or by way of a guilty plea). When considering only the cases that met the test for prosecution, this represents a high conviction rate of 63%. However, when considered in the wider context of recorded sexual crime, the overall conviction rate is substantially lower and CJINI (2018) indicate that, for the offence of rape, this was only 1.2% in 2015-16 and 1.8% in 2016/17, and 6.4% and 9.8% for other sexual offences respectively.

### **Northern Ireland Child Protection in Cases of Suspected Abuse**

The overarching government policy framework for safeguarding children and young people in Northern Ireland, Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young People 2016 (revised August 2017), places a clear duty on a range of organisations and professional groups to seek to respond in a coordinated way whenever it is believed that a child has experienced significant harm or may be at risk of being harmed. This is grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and is given expression in legislation, such as The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

Family and professionals may become concerned about the actual or possible sexual abuse or exploitation of a child as a result of the child disclosing what has happened to them, as a consequence of a disclosure by another individual, or concerns by a family member or professional who has regular contact with the child. If a concern is raised about the actual or potential risk of sexual harm to a child in Northern Ireland, the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland's Regional Core Policy and Procedures outline the appropriate multi-agency response. Article 66 of The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 provides the basis for a Health and Social Care Trust to assess whether a child has suffered or is likely to suffer significant harm. In the first instance, this will involve a discussion between the relevant Health and Social Care Trust and the Police Service of Northern Ireland under the Protocol for Joint Investigation by Social Workers and Police Officers of Alleged and Suspected Cases of Child Abuse – Northern Ireland (Joint Protocol). The Joint Protocol also covers concerns and processes related to the investigation of complex, organised or multiple child abuse.

At this point consideration will be given to the steps necessary to provide any immediate protection for the child, and other individuals such as family members or peers. The Health and Social Care Trust and the Police Service of Northern Ireland will also agree a plan for how evidence will be gathered to inform the ongoing needs and safety of the child and to support any future prosecution that may be deemed appropriate. This evidence can include interviewing the child, collecting physical evidence in the form of a medical examination, clothing and electronic communications, and interviewing potential witnesses. At this point, the police should consider referral to Victim Support NI for the appointment of a Child Independent Sexual Violence Advocate who will support the child on their journey through the criminal justice process. The Child Independent Sexual Violence Advocate is a new service being offered in Northern Ireland.

The Joint Protocol has a number of principles informing how investigations will be conducted:

- The child's welfare must always be paramount and this overrides all other considerations;
- Like all criminal investigations, one relating to child abuse is a search for the truth and therefore should not rely entirely on the victim's statement or lack of engagement;
- A proper balance must be struck between protecting children and their rights and respecting the rights and needs of the child, those with parental responsibility, parent/carers and families; but where there is conflict, the child's interests are paramount;
- Children have a right to be heard, listened to and taken seriously. They should be consulted and involved in all matters and decisions which may affect their lives in a way that is commensurate with their age and understanding. An advocate, intermediary or similar may assist in this process;
- Those persons with parental responsibility and those with day-to-day care of children should be consulted and involved in matters which concern the children they have care of;
- Actions taken to protect a child, including investigation, if possible, should not cause the child any further unnecessary distress or add to any damage already suffered;
- Intervention should not deal with the child in isolation, whether within the family or wider community: the child must be considered in a family setting, with the impact of concerns also informing an assessment of the needs of other children within the family;
- Where it is necessary to protect the child from abuse, alternatives should be explored which do not involve removing the child from his/her family and which minimise disruption to the family whilst ensuring the safety of the child;
- Actions taken by agencies must be considered, proportionate and well informed so that they are sensitive to and take account of the child's age, gender, stage of development, physical or mental disability, religion, culture, language, communication needs, race and, in relation to adolescents, sexual orientation; and

- All agencies concerned with the protection of children must work together on an inter-agency basis in the best interests of children and their families and understand each other's roles, powers and responsibilities.

The initial consultation between the Health and Social Care Trust and the Police Service of Northern Ireland will determine which one of a range of options for investigating matters is appropriate. Options include that (a) a joint investigation will be undertaken by the trust and the police; (b) a single agency intervention or investigation by Trust Social Services for child protection or family support; (c) a single agency criminal investigation will be undertaken by the police; and (d) no further action will be undertaken by either agency.

In most instances it is likely that two sets of processes will be occurring in tandem – one related to the assessment of the need for ongoing protection of the child and/or others, led by the Health and Social Care Trust; and a criminal investigation by the police as to whether any offences have been committed and whether they meet the evidential standard for consideration of prosecution. The police will identify any potential need for an intermediary to assist with communication with the child (whether in their role as a victim or as a witness) and, where such a need is identified, ensure the engagement of a registered intermediary as early as possible in the investigation and prior to the witness being interviewed.

For both child protection and public protection requirements a child may be subject to a paediatric forensic medical examination, the purpose of which is to (a) assist with the interagency assessment as to whether abuse has occurred; (b) ensure that any available medical evidence is collected and presented; and (c) ensure that the wider healthcare needs of the child/young person are fully identified and arrangements made to meet these needs. The arrangements for interviewing children about any harm they may have experienced, and for the medical examination of children are arranged locally, and may take place in a number of venues. Sometimes the interview and medical examination may occur in the same venue, or, more likely, in separate facilities.

If a child is considered to have experienced maltreatment or to be at risk of experiencing the same then an initial child protection case conference will be convened by the relevant Health and Social Care Trust. The meeting is designed to provide a forum for the professionals involved with the child and family to meet with the family to share information, make an assessment of the child's needs and any ongoing risk, and

determine whether the child needs a child protection plan. In certain instances, the trust may conclude that an application should be made to the court for a legal order to provide additional safeguards for the child.

In relation to any criminal aspects of the situation, the police will prepare a file for the Public Prosecution Service outlining the details of the case and the evidence gathered. The police will certify in the papers submitted to the Public Prosecution Service that the file has been confirmed as having reached the required standard by a supervisor, and the police should include all relevant evidence and be aware of their responsibility to follow all reasonable lines of enquiry during their investigation. As part of any full file submitted to the Public Prosecution Service the investigating officer will submit, as a minimum, the visually recorded achieving best evidence interview and associated transcript of the interview to the prosecutor for the purposes of the decision along with a summary of the police and criminal evidence interview of the suspect, any medical or forensic evidence gathered and the key statements.

The Public Prosecution Service will then make a decision about whether to bring forward a prosecution, which may involve a consultation with the victim before reaching a decision. If a prosecution is to occur the Director of Public Prosecutions may apply under The Children's Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 for the child's evidence and testimony to be delivered through television link or video recording, and for cross-examination of the child victim or witness to take place by television link.

In Northern Ireland children may also benefit from referral to a counselling or therapeutic support service to aid in their recovery from the abuse or exploitation they have experienced. This could be delivered by one of a number of services based within Health and Social Care Trusts or third sector organisations commissioned to provide such a service. In addition, for children whose case proceeds to trial, there may be additional supports such as the NSPCC's Young Witness Service.

## **6. Child Victims and Witnesses in the Northern Ireland Criminal Justice System**

### **Key Legislation**

Recognition of the potentially negative impact of criminal proceedings and the stresses experienced by child witnesses in the court environment has led to the introduction and implementation of legislation, policies and guidance. This is, both internationally and across the UK, aimed at facilitating children to give their best evidence in court (see Plotnikoff and Woolfson, 2009 for an overview). Key legislative developments in Northern Ireland have included: the introduction of The Children's Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, which allowed for witness evidence by children to be given via video link and barred defendants from cross-examining child witnesses personally; and The Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1999, which made provisions for a number of 'special measures' to reduce the stress of children giving evidence at trial such as screens in the courtroom, evidence by live link, evidence given in private, removal of wigs and gowns, video-recorded evidence-in-chief, video-recorded cross-examination or re-examination (recorded cross-examination is discussed further below); and the use of intermediaries. The Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 was later amended by The Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 to remove the distinction between child witnesses in need of special protection and children giving evidence, allowing all children access to special measures, as well as changing the upper age at which children qualify for such measures from 17 to 18 years.

### **Key Policy and Service Developments 1998-2018**

Over the past two decades, there have been a raft of government strategies and policy initiatives with a focus on improving the experience of victims and witnesses in Northern Ireland. In 2000, the Review of the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland (Criminal Justice Review Group, 2000) recommended that publicly funded witness support schemes should be made available at all courts in NI, a recommendation which formed the basis for the roll-out of the NSPCC's Young Witnesses Service (YWS). First established in 1999 with the aim of providing advice and support to prosecution witnesses under the age of 18 years in criminal cases, the YWS became a regional service covering all crown and magistrates courts, later piloting the use of a 'live link' to enable child witnesses to give evidence remotely. This was followed by a series of criminal justice inspections which identified a range of problems in relation to delays within the criminal justice system,



substantial attrition in the prosecution of sexual offences, lack of contact and support for victims and a general lack of confidence in the system and its processes (CJINI, 2006a, 2006b, 2010). These inspections were influential in further developing policy in relation to victims and witnesses and making recommendations for change. For example, in response to the findings of the 2006 inspection into the experiences of victims and witnesses, the Northern Ireland Office launched a five-year victim and witness strategy, 'Bridging the Gap', with the aim of enhancing the victim and witness experience of the criminal justice system by improving service delivery.

The outworking of this included:

- the development of a dedicated witness walkthrough to complement the victim's walkthrough available on the CJSNI website;
- publication of a guide to Northern Ireland's criminal justice system for victims and witnesses of crime DoJ (2010a);
- publication of a cross-cutting Victims' Code of Practice (DoJ, 2011);
- establishing a 12-month pilot in the Ballymena area of further measures to improve victim liaison at a local level;
- extending the YWS remote link pilot study to the Belfast court area;
- consulting on special measures to assist vulnerable and intimidated witnesses including the introduction of intermediaries (DoJ, 2010b); and
- publication of a revised version of 'Achieving Best Evidence' guidance on the provision of pre-trial therapy (DoJ, 2012).

In conjunction with these responses to the needs of child victims and witnesses, collaborative justice and health strategies to address domestic abuse (NIO and DHSSPS, 2005) and sexual violence (NIO and DHSSPS, 2008) were also developed and a joint action plan published in 2012. These strategies led to various developments in provision including a 24 hour domestic violence helpline (latterly becoming a 24 hour domestic and sexual violence helpline), the introduction of Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC) to identify and protect high-risk victims of domestic abuse, the establishment of Public Protection Units (PPUs) in each police district and a commitment to establish a Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC). The Rowan Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) opened in 2013 on a purpose-built site at the Antrim Area Hospital. The centre provides support and services to victims of sexual violence and abuse, which includes access to a forensic medical examination by a specially trained doctors, assessment, and administration of emergency contraception, assessment and treatment for sexually

transmitted infections, support in making a report to the police, referral to counselling or other suitable support services, and follow-up support.

In 2011-12, various Criminal Justice Inspectorate Reports (CJINI, 2011, 2012a, 2012b) and the 2012 report of the Justice Committee's 'Inquiry into the Criminal Justice Services Available to Victims and Witnesses of Crime in Northern Ireland', while highlighting positive improvements, identified significant gaps in the treatment of victims and witnesses, reiterating the need for improved coordination across justice agencies. Most notably, the inquiry report recommended the establishment of a victim and witness charter providing statutory entitlements, the introduction of a witness care unit as the single point of contact, the introduction of a minimum waiting time for witnesses and a statutory case management system to help ensure cases are dealt with as swiftly as possible. These recommendations were taken forward in the DoJ's (2013) five-year victim and witness strategy 'Making a Difference to Victims and Witnesses of Crime – Improving Access to Justice, Services and Support' and a Victim and Witness Care Unit was subsequently established in 2013 as a joint initiative between PSNI and the PPS. The unit was tasked with supporting victims from the point at which the PPS receives an investigation file and onwards, providing information and updates, carrying out an individual assessment of the needs for services of each victim at important points as the case progresses and referring to services provided by voluntary or non-government organisations where appropriate.

While the strategy also committed to begin video-recorded cross-examination and re-examination of victims and witnesses this provision of The Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 remains, to date, unimplemented (operationalised). The issue of video-recorded cross-examination notwithstanding, several key actions from the strategy were successfully implemented. Importantly, the provision of intermediaries set out The Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1999, which was facilitated through the introduction and roll out of a Registered Intermediary (RI) Scheme in Crown Courts to assist individuals with communication difficulties to give evidence to the police and at court. This was later extended to the magistrates' court (including both adults and young people) and RIs currently operate in respect of criminal cases being heard in all crown, magistrates' and youth courts. In 2015, the EU Directive 2012/29/EU on establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime was placed on a statutory footing with the commencement of The Victim's Charter. This was followed by a Witness Charter in 2017. The PPS established a serious crime unit to enhance the delivery of and effective prosecutions in a range of the most serious offence types and

provision was made to grant victims the legal entitlement to make a written Victim Personal Statement (VPS) in cases where the defendant pleads or is found guilty.

In 2016, the DoJ and DHSSPS published a joint seven-year strategy 'Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland'. In addition to the continued provision of funding for core services such as the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline, MARACs and the Rowan SARC, key highlights with specific relevance to sexual violence include annual implementation plans for years 1-5 of the strategy. These indicate a wealth of activity to deliver improvements in the areas of preventative education, identification of risk, the provision of protection and support and the management of offenders. Although the DoJ/DHSSPS strategy cited the provision of Independent Domestic Violence Advocates (IDVAs) in some parts of the UK and indicated an intention to consider how best to provide advocacy services to victims, the lack of statutory provision of these services was highlighted in a number of inspection reports (CJINI, 2018 & 2019). Nonetheless, there were positive developments with regards to Independent Sexual Violence Advocates (ISVAs), with Victim Support NI (VSNI) beginning a three-year pilot of ISVA services to provide emotional and practical support to victims of sexual violence and liaise between the police, courts and other agencies. Initially, the scheme received charitable funding with a contribution from the DoJ but has been fully funded by DoJ since 2018-19. In 2021 VSNI also received charitable funding to pilot a Children's Independent Sexual Violence Advocate service. Subsequently, Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid, Foyle Women's Aid and the Men's Advisory Project secured joint funding from the Department of Justice and Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) for a new regional advocacy service for all victims and survivors of domestic and/or sexual violence or abuse. While this service is due to commence in September 2021, concerns have been raised by various stakeholders about the amalgamation of the many roles that currently exist into one service to provide support for both adult and child victims across a range of abuse types (CJINI, 2021).

In addition to highlighting the development of the ISVAs through VSNI, the 2018 CJINI thematic inspection of the handling of sexual violence and abuse cases drew attention to the positive impact of the Rowan SARC and improvements this had made in the early response to victims. It also pointed to high levels of attrition within the criminal justice system, significant numbers of victims declining to engage in an investigation process and the persistent issue of delay and the negative impact this has on victims. Similarly, the most recent CJINI reports on 'the care and treatment of victims and witnesses' (CJINI,

2020) highlighted an overall sense of improvement and engagement by criminal justice agencies, as well as the positive contribution made by the victim and witness care unit to improving the victim/witness journey. However, it acknowledged that navigating the system still remained complex and confusing from the perspective of many victims who were often less concerned with the role and function of whom they talked to and more concerned with how they interacted and engaged with them. The report observed that, while individuals from across the criminal justice system and the voluntary sector provided meaningful support to both children and adults, victims and witnesses remained fundamentally unaware of their rights to information, support, protection and access to services as set out in the Victim and Witness Charters. It also observed that services to assist them were still not being consistently delivered to a quality standard across Northern Ireland. Additionally, the CJINI (2020) thematic inspection of the criminal justice response to child sexual exploitation, concluded that it 'supported the view expressed by stakeholders that implementation of the Icelandic therapeutic Barnahus (children's house) model was preferred to an approach that simply tweaked the existing system and suggests this is taken forward in a future strategic approach to tackle child sexual abuse and exploitation' (p7).

## 7. Current Policy and Service Development Plans

### The Gillen Review (2019)

In 2018, the members of the Criminal Justice Board commissioned an independent review of arrangements around the delivery of justice in instances of serious sexual offences. The review, led by The Right Honourable Sir John Gillen, a former Lord Justice of Appeal, and supported by an independent advisory panel, was published in 2019. It made 253 recommendations on how to improve criminal justice outcomes and the experience of victims who engage with the CJS and included a dedicated 'The Voice of the Child' chapter which contained 35 individual recommendations aimed at improving support for, and the experiences of, child victims of serious sexual offences. The Review highlighted that many of the measures outlined above were not effective or consistently applied, and also highlighted serious delays in the timeframe for the completion of cases and the negative impact of this process on children. Consequently, the review recommended that the Department of Justice should 'give urgent consideration to the advantages of the Barnahus scheme and Child House projects now operating in England and to consider the viability of a similar pilot in Northern Ireland.' (Recommendation 195).

It also recommended:

- Introduction of early pre-recorded cross-examination, initially of children and vulnerable adults, to be conducted away from the court setting. In time, consideration should be given to extending this to include all complainants in serious sexual offences;
- Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) interviews should be conducted by a cadre of specially trained and carefully selected police officers. In the case of children, the Barnahus system of employing the use of child psychologists should be considered;
- In the case of children and vulnerable witnesses, consideration should be given to centres remote from the court building with the use of live links;
- Fast-tracking and priority listing to be afforded to serious sexual offences involving children and vulnerable adults; and
- All publicly funded advocates should have to undergo specialist training on working with children and vulnerable victims and witnesses before being allowed to take on serious sexual offence cases.

It is also worth noting the overlap between these recommendations and those made by Sir Gillen in his review of Civil and Family Justice in NI (2017) in which he highlighted the need for “in-depth case management of cases involving children, with the introduction of a one-stop shop concept, fast-tracking of cases involving contact disputes and non-accidental injury and reduction of delay in achieving permanent outcomes for children.” Additionally, he noted that the learning from comparable reforms delivered within the criminal justice system was equally applicable to the civil and family justice system, recommending extending the use of special measures and support for child and vulnerable witnesses to the family courts, as well as a new culture of problem-solving which would bring together civil and criminal matters.

In response to the Gillen Report (2019) recommendations, the Department of Justice undertook an initial scoping study of a Barnahus model, in October 2019. As part of this scoping paper, the Department consulted with statutory and non-statutory organisations in Northern Ireland including PPS, PSNI, NICTS, Victim Support NI and NSPCC Young Witness Service. The study examined how voluntary and public sector organisations in NI could work together to provide children with access to justice while avoiding re-traumatisation/re-victimisation of children and providing high professional standards for their recovery.

The main challenges identified included:

- the introduction of a Barnahus model requires a strong commitment and contribution from a much wider network than justice organisations, as it involves wrap around care for the child and their family or carers with health and child protection elements too. The Department of Health, and other health and social care partners, would be a significant partner and potentially the lead/joint lead in any project;
- a significant cultural shift and changes to criminal justice processes will be necessary if the model extends to the giving of evidence from a location external to the court. This includes the changes to how children and young people are questioned, early disclosure of evidence, pre-recorded cross-examination and re-examination, a comprehensive use of live link, pre-agreed questions and legal representatives travelling to a location outside the court; and
- Additional resources would be needed but could be significant depending on the model that is implemented. This could include costs for a new or upgraded building, permanent staff such as a centre manager and the services of nurses, doctors,

paediatric consultants, social workers, police officers, therapeutic specialists, increased expenses for all professions (particularly if the services are provided on a 24 hour, 7 day a week basis) and potentially a case management system. That is not to say that this is insurmountable should there be a commitment that this is the best way forward.

Finally, the scoping study concluded that there were three options for consideration.

- Option one – all services provided under one roof up to and including the giving of evidence for court;
- Option two – all services provided under one roof up to and including the investigative interview and therapeutic support, and;
- Option three – improve existing services and continue to deliver the services at current sites.

### **DoJ Consultation A New Victim and Witness Strategy (2021)**

At the time of writing a new victim and witness strategy was being developed. This three-year strategy builds on the work of previous strategies, the recommendations from CJINI inspections, the Gillen Review and other relevant strategic priorities and programmes of work. While broad in scope and still to be finalised, it makes various commitments to develop services to ensure victims and witnesses receive the emotional, practical support and legal support they need.

This includes plans to:

- Develop a process of continuous needs assessment for victims and witnesses within the criminal justice system, from the report of a crime to case disposal;
- Develop a new service model that will integrate VSNI Victim and Witness Needs Assessment Service with the Victim and Witness Care Unit to ensure the enhanced provision of care;
- Provide publicly funded expert legal advice to adult complainants of serious sexual offences and develop a service model for the equivalent provision of legal advice for child complainants of serious sexual offences;
- Introduce a new Advocacy Support Service for victims of domestic and sexual abuse;



- Work collaboratively with partners to develop and implement a comprehensive and wrap-around approach to child victims of sexual offences, in line with the Gillen Review;
- Make provision for the roll-out of remote evidence facilities to vulnerable adults and child victims and witnesses of crime;
- Develop arrangements to pilot pre-recorded cross-examination and re-examination in appropriate cases, in line with Gillen recommendations; and
- Ensure that applications to court are made for all victims and witnesses who are eligible for and require special measures to give their best evidence.

The consultation also includes plans to establish a Victims of Crime Commissioner to provide a voice for victims and to champion delivery of their entitlements under the Victims' and Witnesses' Charters. It also plans to establish a dedicated thematic subgroup within the Victim and Witness Steering Group to identify the information needs of victims and witnesses, from the point of making a statement to giving evidence, and review the effectiveness of current operational practices in meeting these needs.

Also of note, in response to the recommendations laid out by the Gillen Review, the office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People have released two advice papers supporting the recommendation that Barnahus be given serious consideration for children and families in Northern Ireland (NICCY, 2018; 2020).

### **Progress to Date**

The Gillen Review Implementation Plan was approved by the Criminal Justice Board and published in June 2020. The five-year plan includes 14 strategic priority areas with a committed £1.6 million of funding for year one in 2020/21. At the time of writing, 11% of the 253 recommendations from the Gillen Review had been implemented (DoJ, 2020) with full implementation to be phased in from 2020/21 until 2024/25. To date, PSNI has re-structured their operation from two separate teams dedicated to cases involving children – one for current cases and one for historic cases to allow more focus on current, acute cases involving children. They have also undertaken a pilot between June 2020 and March 2021 to determine the benefits of using specialist ABE officers, and have conducted an evaluation of ABE facilities within the police estate. In November 2019, The Crown Court Liaison Committee issued a Practice Direction and Protocols for Vulnerable Witnesses in the Crown Court, reinforcing best practice in case management in trials involving vulnerable witnesses in serious sexual offence cases and case progression

officers have been appointed in Laganside, Newry and Craigavon Courts to manage cases and reduce delay. A voluntary protocol led by Judge Smyth in Belfast has been in place to expedite sexual offences cases involving children under 13 since September 2019 and, while data is not publicly available, this has been reported as a success by the Minister of Justice who has committed to extending it.

Additionally, Remote Evidence Centres in Belfast and Craigavon are currently being piloted and, following joint work by the PSNI and PPS to improve the disclosure process, there are plans to begin the process of establishing a pre-recorded cross-examination pilot in cases involving young victims of sexual crime. Whilst the Implementation Plan's target of having a Barnahus Working Group in place by the summer of 2020 had not been achieved, a Department of Justice-commissioned cross-sectoral, multi-agency steering group has been established which includes representation from the Department of Health. The group, which first convened in June 2021 aims to provide strategic direction and oversee the coordinated implementation of separate workstreams and projects to deliver the Gillen Review recommendations, including the recommendation to consider a Barnahus-type model.

## 8. Lived Experience Perspectives

### Contributors

The research team invited young people (ages 18-26) with lived experiences to contribute to the research through sharing their experiences with the criminal justice and recovery systems after sexual violence or abuse. Following relevant institutional ethical approvals, a third sector organisation identified eleven young people as eligible to participate in the research. Young people were eligible if they had experienced sexual violence or abuse when under 18 years of age (while resident in Northern Ireland); were not involved in an ongoing criminal case relating to the abuse; were not currently accessing therapeutic support from the recruitment organisation; and were able to be contacted. Five of the eleven young people expressed potential interest, and two ultimately participated. We would again like to thank all of the young people who considered sharing their stories and opinions in this research, regardless of their final decision. Their stories are their own, and those that were shared were shared with a very altruistic intention.

### Analysis

Responses were anonymised prior to analysis. A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to young people's descriptions of their experiences and their thoughts on the potential of a Barnahus model to change how children and young people experience the criminal justice and recovery process after a sexual violence or abuse. Four themes relating to young people's experiences emerged, and we have discussed those in relation to Barnahus, that is how a Barnahus may change their experiences. All details, e.g., names, ages, specific events, locations have all been omitted or slightly adapted.

### Four Themes of Discussion

Four overarching themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews with young people who had previous experience of abuse and of speaking with police and others in the criminal justice system: (1) the need to be believed and validated; (2) the impact of experiencing abuse on all aspects of their life; (3) feeling a loss of identity; and (4) feeling scared telling their stories in the criminal justice system. Each of these themes is discussed below.

### **The Need to be Believed and Validated**

A strong theme that emerged from interviews with young people who had lived experience of abuse and speaking with police and others was the need to be believed. Feeling believed validated their experiences and was fundamental to feeling supported in the early stages of their disclosure journey. As one of the young people stated:

*‘Whenever the abuse happened, I told my mum, but it wasn’t believed at the time [...] So for 2 years I had that doubt of, did I actually see it or did I just imagine it’.*

Consequently, at the time, one of the young people spoke of the difficult decision not to tell either the police or their family about the abuse, which led to a significant delay in seeking the necessary emotional and psychological support to recover. In the young person’s own words:

*‘It was weird, I didn’t know what was happening. It took me a couple of months and I spoke to my best friend. I didn’t say anything, They didn’t know what to say. I wanted to forget it had happened, but I couldn’t’.*

The need to be believed and validated is such an important need that it can affect how children and young people “enter” into the system via their disclosures. For those who do not feel believed, they may disappear from the system completely or not pursue safety, justice, and recovery.

Children and young people’s perceptions of being believed influence what they do after a first disclosure. Turning to the research literature, we do know that young people will often “test the waters” with an initial informal disclosure to judge the receiver’s response and whether they feel safe, believed and validated (Anderson, 2016). This also gives context to how children and young people enter into the criminal justice and recovery systems; if they feel believed, they feel they can trust professionals with their story. One young person described the stress of knowing they would give a formal report:

*‘I used to be happy and care-free and then coming up, like the run up to talking to the police I shut down, manic was the only way I could describe it’.*

Importantly, one young person described a weight being lifted off when the police heard and believed their story, transforming the abuse from a hidden personal story into ‘the family’s story’ because it had been validated and was now in the open for healing and restoration to come. Being able to have their stories heard and validated is key to recovery, as one young person stated:

*‘Until I built trust with her [counsellor] I wasn’t able to speak freely [...] I could tell her anything; so I told her everything [...] It gave me my life back’.*

The journey to recovery is often a complex, ongoing process that only begins with the child or young person feeling heard, believed, and validated.

Importantly enough, one of the fundamental tenets of Barnahus is children’s right to be heard and taken seriously, and their right to participate and engage in matters that concern them. The theme of the need to be believed and validated highlights how core this need is to young people’s justice and recovery journey and how having this enshrined in the Barnahus model can come alongside and support young people through their journey.

### **The Impact of Experiencing Abuse on All Aspects of Life**

A clear theme arising from young people’s stories of their personal journey, which is a process with no clear end point, was the significant impact on their emotional and psychological wellbeing and on other areas of their lives, such as education and intimate relationships, which is also well-supported in the literature (Angelakis et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2009; Brown et al., 2010; Leeb et al., 2011). Both participants talked about how the experience of abuse led to a change in who they were as people, describing it like a ‘*dark cloud gathering*’ and going about daily life in a very perfunctory way:

*‘I was just working, going to sleep, eating. Like that sort of thing; I wasn’t actually sociable at that time’.*

This also had significant implications on their capacity to engage and attend school. For one of the young people, the person who had committed the abuse lived in the same locality:

*‘He was going to the same school as me. It affected my mental and physical health if that makes sense [...] I was in constant fear of leaving the house’.*

The reason both participants sought emotional and psychological support was due to the impact on their intimate relationships. When they did receive help; it enabled young people to feel empowered and in control of their own bodies and lives once again.

This theme summarises the far-reaching impact that experiencing abuse has on children and young people. When turning to their disclosure journeys and the justice and recovery process, the Barnahus model is premised on placing children and young people's needs as the centre of all activities. More specifically, it is premised on focusing on the best interest of each child and young person who enters its doors; the unique needs of each young person are at the forefront of all decision-making. This is possible, in part, because of the co-location of services and interagency agreements that facilitate a bit more flexibility than what can typically be afforded through the system as-is model.

### **Feeling A Loss of Identity**

When asked if someone explained what the journey would look like and what could have been better about their experience, both young people described similar experiences despite differing personal journeys. Although both participants were young children at the time of the abuse, they talked about the lack of information given to them directly about what was happening in terms of the procedures and people involved and provided with a time frame for the process. Their descriptions highlighted the need that they had to be able to ask questions about the process, which was more adult-centred than child-centred. As one young person stated:

*'The police officer mostly talked to my mum and then the information was given from my mum to like me and my siblings. So there wasn't that first that police officer actually talking to me like about any procedures or anything'.*

This often created a constant sense of fear and anxiety; waiting for the justice process; waiting for this chapter of their life to close:

*'So I was like it was kinda one of those, it [letter from the Prosecution Service] dropped on my lap and I was like, what do I do like [...] I remember telling my mum I don't know what to do, do we go to court so I ended up going to the court because I wanted that closure of the book. I wanted*

*everything to be closed, I didn't want to have to kind of think about it anymore [...].*

One young person described feeling terrified about attending counselling:

*'I just remembered feeling really scared. I had to go to consultation [with a third sector organisation] feeling really terrified. I didn't know the person or how deep it would go'.*

For this young person, this was also complicated by the fact that there was a significant delay in the availability of therapeutic support. As one young person stated:

*'Waiting lists are so long. When I contacted them there was nothing [availability of counselling support]. Just text messages 'you are still on the waiting list. We haven't forgotten about you'. I wasn't sleeping and having flashbacks'.*

Feeling part of 'the system', and a resulting loss of identity was also reflected by another young person. In their words:

*'So, it was just kinda like panic, not panic like but that feeling I had been put in the system and I wasn't going to be remembered and I was just a number, a case number. I know technically I was a case number, but like...that feeling that I had been forgotten in the system, I was just that I wasn't actually a person'.*

The lack of information directed to them and the delays to accessing core services, while not intentional on behalf of the parties involved, communicated to the young people that they were part of a system and young people felt a loss of their individual identity through that.

One of the opportunities contained within the Barnahus model is the opportunity to reduce delays accessing services, to facilitate a model that provides timely and accessible information to children and families, and removing some of the structural barriers that make accessing services difficult for children and young people. In providing these services in a child-friendly manner and environment, children and young people feel the



difference (Rasmusson, 2010). Their worth and their agency, through a sense of power and decision-making, and this being valued by adults in positions of power, is communicated to them, and this is a key part of the healing process.

### **Feeling Scared Telling Their Stories in the Criminal Justice System**

The accounts of both young people painted a clear picture of how they experienced telling their stories during the evidence-capturing process in the criminal justice system. To them, the environments felt intimidating and adversarial. In one young person's words:

*'But I know like, I think the bit for me [with the] police officer I felt like I was in an interrogation; I was in like one of those rooms that had like, it felt quite intimidating'.*

The language used by the police officers and solicitors felt difficult to understand, and this made them feel scared giving their testimonies. As one young person stated:

*'Some of the questions might have been...might not have understood the way questions were worded. That's the only thing. Word the questions in an age appropriate way. How do you feel if an adult asking questions you don't understand. Depending on your age, can make you feel quite dumb or stupid in a way. You might not want to answer it. Because police or solicitor they don't always stop and go back to it. It can be quite scary'.*

Although certainly not the intent of the parties involved, young people felt scared during this process.

When turning to the Barnahus model, this is one of the aspects that spurred the need for an entirely different system approach to providing support to children and families who had experienced abuse. The ability to provide testimony from within a child-friendly environment has the potential to reduce a sense of fear and intimidation that young people feel when sharing their experiences of violence and abuse with officers of the criminal justice system.

In summary, the experiences and views of young people interviewed for this work reiterate issues identified in previous work about how children and young people's needs could be better met in the aftermath of sexual abuse and exploitation (Hayes et al., 2011; Pinkerton et al., 2015).

## 9. Organisational Stakeholder Perspectives

### Contributors

The research team invited key stakeholder organisations to contribute their thoughts about the Barnahus model and the perceived facilitators and challenges to implementation in Northern Ireland. Organisations across criminal justice, health and social care, and the third sector were contacted and invited to participate in focus groups or individual interviews. Invitations were sent to eight criminal justice organisations (seven agreed to participate, with one organisation nominating representation by another attending organisation), and we spoke with eight individuals in the criminal justice sector. In the health and social care sector, invitations were sent to 12 organisations (10 agreed to participate, with one organisation nominating representation by another attending organisation), and we spoke with nine individuals in the health and social care sector. Four organisations in the third sector were invited to participate, all agreed to participate, and we spoke with five individuals in this sector. The research team also spoke individually with Mr. Bragi Gudbrandsson (member of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child; former Director General of the Government Agency for Child Protection in Iceland) and Sir John Gillen, a Privy Councillor and former Lord Justice of Appeal in Northern Ireland.

### Analysis

After conducting the focus groups and follow-up interviews, aggregate responses were reviewed by the research team to establish recurring topics using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach gives focus to meaningful areas of discussion and includes both convergent ideas, that were present across participants, as well as divergent ones that represented differing viewpoints. Only aggregate information from the focus groups is provided and no direct quotes from focus group participants are included to minimise identifiability of individuals within the focus groups. Four main themes emerged from discussions with professional stakeholders and are presented below. We have interwoven paraphrased comments from the interviews with Mr Bragi Gudbrandsson and Sir John Gillen into the discussion.

## Four Themes of Discussion for the Northern Ireland Barnahus

### The Northern Ireland Barnahus

A common feature of existing Barnahus across Europe is the way that they have been able to adapt to the local legal, procedural and cultural context within which each new house is established. While a Barnahus has the potential to support the changes required to make both justice and safeguarding processes more child centred, they also need to be flexible enough to adapt to the local system in which they become a key component.

Across all sectors consulted for this research there were a number of common themes. Firstly, it was felt that within Northern Ireland there are a large number of agencies and services already working with child victims and witnesses of sexual abuse and exploitation. There were some concerns about resources, particularly highlighted by the criminal justice and health and social care sectors, that a specific standalone Barnahus might detract from other initiatives that are seen as integral to a working Barnahus model. At the same time, the need for a co-located space for children to benefit from these various services, and to ensure greater information sharing and coordination of services as children move through their justice, safeguarding and recovery journeys was prominent in discussions. In sum, Barnahus having the clear potential to be of benefit to children and families was a recurring message, though there were differing views on what format this might take, specifically what services would be provided in a Barnahus. In our discussion with Sir John Gillen, it was thought that it should be possible to have multiple Barnahus locations in Northern Ireland, given that preparing a child-friendly environment in a building with approximately four rooms is not exceptionally cost-prohibitive, and that if needed, the court should be able to move to hear a child's evidence (i.e., judge, barrister, or solicitor). Sir John Gillen also highlighted that, if needed, there could be some Barnahus models that were more of a model "light" without all of the bells and whistles of a full Barnahus model so that geography would not pose a problem.

In thinking of the Barnahus as a child-friendly house, some participants contrasted the proposed development with the existing Rowan Centre. While the Rowan Centre is highly regarded it was felt to be more adult focused in design and operation, with the feeling of a clinic rather than a therapeutic child's space. However, in considering the establishment of a building that would be the Barnahus, there was discussion about where it would be located and how it might meet immediate needs, relating to medical examinations and ABE interviews, from more ongoing work regarding counselling and other types of

therapeutic work. Some participants referred to a 'hub and spoke' model, with satellite facilities for the provision of recovery work closer to children's homes and schools.

There was also discussion particularly in the criminal justice sector that many of the recommendations within Sir John Gillen's report have the potential to further strengthen the comprehensiveness, as well as the timeliness of the professional response to children's disclosures about maltreatment. Professionals highlighted that various recommendations provided in the Gillen Review are in differing stages of implementation, for example recorded cross-examination, enhancing ABE interviews, using live links, and these were all thought to be good first steps that would be need to be finalised and in a good working state for a Barnahus model to be successful. There was recognition that change in the criminal justice sector had been slow, and was attributed in part to uncertainty in the political landscape. Professionals in the criminal justice sector highlighted that progress had been made in the plans to implement a pre-recorded cross-examination, but at the same time the question of how new disclosures, that is, additional information coming to light about a child's case, would be handled within a system of pre-recorded cross-examination. The current anticipated pre-recorded cross-examination pilot was thought to be a potential test that would inform future practice.

The broader research and policy literature highlight that one of the benefits of introducing Barnahus is the potential to develop the house into a centre of excellence. Within the focus groups, it was noted that there are challenges in recruiting and maintaining the pool of skilled forensic interviewers across both social work and the police, given that undertaking ABE interviews is only one of a range of duties for specially trained staff, and that there are disparities in the frequency with which different interviewers are needed in different parts of Northern Ireland. Having fewer staff who would be centrally co-located as a regional service, undertaking interviews on a more regular basis has the potential to increase expertise, and also allow a smaller number of staff to be dedicated to this work. It would also likely ensure that ABE interviews were conducted to a more consistent high standard, as has been the case for other countries regularly using Barnahus for all forensic interviews with children (e.g., Baugerud & Johnson, 2017). Indeed, the strength of the child-forensic interview within Barnahus was also highlighted by Mr. Bragi Gudbrandsson in our interview discussion.

Further, within a Barnahus as a centre of excellence, specialist supervision, and support to mitigate vicarious trauma could also be more readily made available to staff. An ancillary

advantage is that expertise would more readily be developed in interviewing children with additional needs, such as when English is not the first language, children with disabilities, and children who have been exploited and do not perceive that they have been abused. The Barnahus could also fulfil a role in providing training to the range of professionals coming into contact with children on their justice journey, such as prosecutors and the judiciary. Finally, the Barnahus as a centre of excellence also provides opportunity for greater public awareness raising and data-sharing between agencies and services (e.g., Walsh et al., 2014).

Another aspect that was covered within focus groups was that the Barnahus Implementation Board will need to give consideration to the location of the Barnahus in order to meet the needs of accessibility for both children and professionals. Some participants highlighted the importance of a designated space for children to provide testimony that is far enough from court that children will not risk encountering any alleged perpetrators, and that is not anxiety-producing because children cannot provide their best evidence when they are stressed (criminal justice sector); and that is close enough to children's and families' homes that they would be able to access services easily (health and social care sector). The consideration of long distances for children accessing Barnahus services has also been highlighted as a need to be considered in other countries as well, for example in Iceland and Norway (Fridriksdottir & Haugen, 2017), due to how it comes in contrast with international legal obligations, specifically the need for safety, efficiency, and taking the perspective of children and how they experience such need to travel to access services. Again, Sir John Gillen did not think that geography need pose a challenge in Northern Ireland. Multiple Barnahus centres could be installed without exceptional costs, and when needed, the court could travel to the child to hear the child's evidence.

Finally, there were also questions raised in each sector as to why restrict the service to children who have experienced sexual violence or abuse. This is because having a centre of excellence where multiple professionals and those with differing expertise help investigate multiple forms of abuse and speeding up the criminal justice and therapeutic support process would be of major benefit to professionals and children and families alike, especially given that multiple forms of abuse might have occurred and a full disclosure may only occur in a setting of trust. However, there was recognition that beginning with a focus on sexual violence, or perhaps even widening out to complex abuse cases, was a starting point.

Further nuanced considerations within discussions on the NI Barnahus:

- Barnahus is the best place for all young people; eligibility may need to be based on demand (i.e., if sitting unused, should be accessible for all children and young people);
- Concern that the current process is not equitable because not all children have access to the same services, depends on their geographical location. Barnahus has the potential to streamline the process and draw together resources more equitably; and
- Questions about how to best use all of the existing and emerging services for children; will Barnahus draw them together under one roof, or will these services be dropped?

### **Summary of the Northern Ireland Barnahus Theme**

To summarise, the theme of discussion surrounding the Northern Ireland Barnahus involved much talk of the use of resources and of service provision. In particular, where new funding resources would come from for the model, as well as how current resources that are available (e.g., The Childcare Centre, The Rowan Centre) would best be used. There were also questions about which services and procedures would be channelled through a Barnahus, and how the geography of Northern Ireland would be considered in the design of service provision. Specifically, how children would be able to access services without needing to commute with parents and carers long distances, as this was seen as a barrier to continuity of services for children and families.

### **Leadership: Who is going to take forward the establishment of a Barnahus?**

Across the focus groups and interviews there was a clear commitment to the concept and establishment of a Barnahus in Northern Ireland. At the same time, as described above, professional stakeholders particularly in the criminal justice sector felt that some of the practical pieces – pre-recorded cross-examination, enhancing ABE, using live links – needed to be more established before a Barnahus could be successful. Given some of the questions arising around what the model would look like practically, participants felt this aspiration required leadership to ensure that the commitment to a Barnahus was taken forward in a timely and comprehensive way. Leadership was expressed as being required at a range of levels and in a number of ways.

Firstly, while there was acknowledgement that the Department of Justice has been charged with leading on the implementation of the recommendations from Sir John Gillen's review, there was less clarity about ministerial level support for a Barnahus, and whether the Barnahus would benefit from joint sponsorship by the Minister for Justice, as the lead for criminal justice within the Executive, and the Minister for Health, as the lead for child protection. In this context there is already shared ministerial responsibility for the Northern Ireland domestic and sexual violence strategy, which relates to both adults and children, and within which the Barnahus would be a key element. This strategic leadership would clearly assist in bringing forward the plans for commissioning a Barnahus in Northern Ireland, and reinforces one of the conclusions from the Department of Justice's scoping review of October 2019.

In terms of the broader research literature, there are variations between countries in terms of which organisation is identified as the lead organisation for oversight of the model, which can range broadly from social services to law enforcement, according to legislative and cultural differences (Johansson et al., 2017). And in fact, given the multidisciplinary and interagency aspect of Barnahus, there is also potential for co-leadership roles given the professional salience of multiple agencies in responding to and serving children and families who have been affected by sexual abuse. Shared leadership within multidisciplinary teams can contribute to greater innovation and capacity, when the shared leadership each have a professionally salient role and contribution (Mitchell & Boyle, 2020).

Importantly for Barnahus, the sectors involved each have different needs and agendas that are in-line with their overall mandate, resources, and training, and this has to be navigated within the Barnahus space in such a way as to facilitate collaboration and minimize disruptive power dynamics that may seek to put one mandate over another (Johansson, 2017). Many of these power dynamics play out in "setting the agenda" for how things will be done at Barnahus because in setting the agenda - both the broader mandate as well as the day-to-day (e.g., which cases will have a police report filed, move to prosecution etc) become important. The broader purpose for the Barnahus is being established and re-established through the decisions that are made. For example, if the Barnahus is established to best meet children's and families' needs, but that in day-to-day decisions, that is not the driving deciding factor in determining which cases have a police report filed or which cases go to court, then the invisible power dynamics begin to shape the actual mandate of the Barnahus.



Along with strategic leadership, the need for operational leadership was also highlighted, specifically that clearly designated roles with responsibility for making the Barnahus a reality were needed. Such operational leadership would require an organisation which would lead on developing and running the Barnahus, and a senior manager to project manage the creation of this new service. This would require agreement about the type of Barnahus that would best meet the needs of children within the local context, which agency is to be operationally responsible for running the Barnahus, the funding arrangements for the service (both capital and recurring costs), and the governance structure. There is already experience of establishing the Rowan SARC that could likely be useful in this regard, although the range of contributors to the Barnahus is likely greater.

Finally, given the multidisciplinary and interagency nature of this area of work, the contributing organisations - such as the Police Service of Northern Ireland, Public Prosecution Service Northern Ireland, Health and Social Care Trusts, Victim Support Northern Ireland, NSPCC, Nexus Northern Ireland - all require an internal champion to help navigate the cultural, operational and administrative changes required within different organisations to help the Barnahus become established, and to realise the potential benefits for children and their families. These internal champions need to be nominated by the chief executive (or comparable level) of the organisation, and to have the authority to commit their agency to any changes required. Such individuals could then comprise the Barnahus Implementation Board to which the senior manager leading on implementation would report, and be supported by. The board, in turn, would be accountable to both ministers.

Embedding joint responsibility for the establishment and operation of the Barnahus would hopefully mirror the type of joint working envisaged within the Barnahus, resulting in stronger multidisciplinary working. Across a range of research and evaluation reports, in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, children and families have repeatedly reported their frustration at the lack of shared working practices. These result in the lack of routine information sharing and joint planning between services and professionals relating to the operation of the justice system for child victims of sexual abuse.

The Barnahus Implementation Board would be the forum in which decisions about the specific form of the Northern Ireland Barnahus would take, the services and procedures to be included and the timeline for implementation.

Further considerations from participants on the theme of leadership:

- The government structure supporting Barnahus is an important aspect of delivery quality and equitable services;
- Operationalisation of the specific roles moving forward will help to create forward momentum; and
- The remit of services should be determined by the leadership; what services will be included, how will these involve current versus new services, and how will these be rolled out.

### **Summary of Leadership and Commissioning Theme**

In sum, the question of leadership in terms of who would take forward Barnahus in Northern Ireland, and of what that would look like concretely, were highlighted in the theme of leadership. Given the multidisciplinary aspect of Barnahus, both the Department of Justice and the Department of Health were highlighted in terms of leadership role. The question of leadership was specifically related to the initiation and establishment of a Barnahus, which reflects the need for agency initiative and collaboration in championing the best-placed leadership team or organisation. In sum, shared leadership has much potential for innovation and capacity, but also involves navigating hidden and visible power dynamics that shape the overall purpose and mandate of the Barnahus.

### **Lens For Justice: Whose Needs Are Being Met?**

One topic that was discussed across the focus groups was the need to consider whose needs are being met through the criminal justice and recovery system, in both the current model and through a Barnahus model. “Justice” means different things to the different stakeholders involved in the Barnahus, whether that be children, families, or the professionals in criminal justice, social services, health care, and recovery who are working with the children and who are working to keep the public safe.

Emerging through the theme of justice was the idea that when there are tensions that arise in whose justice is being served, children and families in particular may struggle with their engagement in the criminal justice system. In other words, they may halt engagement with criminal justice procedures or even with therapeutic services because they may feel that they have lost control of their story and their desires for justice on their own terms. Sir John Gillen mentioned that approximately 40% of sexual offence cases drop out of the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland. In such cases, there is no justice for anyone

involved; children and families do not feel heard or have the acknowledgment that they are seeking, there is no formal acknowledgment that wrongdoing has occurred through a conviction, and children and families do not receive support for recovery. Services are then perceived as having failed to discharge their responsibilities.

Participants highlighted the need that children and families had for the child's experience to be validated, for the child to be heard, and for the child's experience to be acknowledged, and that this was part of the "justice" that children were seeking. In other words, through being heard and acknowledged that their experiences happened and were wrong, that they would have a sense of justice and be able to move forward to recovery. At the same time, participants also acknowledged that part of the criminal justice process for children and families is part of the greater "justice" process to ensure that society is protected and that wrongdoing is acknowledged and punished publicly. From the perspective of the criminal justice system, "justice" often refers to a conviction of wrongdoing; a formal acknowledgement that wrongdoing was publicly sanctioned.

Participants found that a strength that the Barnahus model brings is the idea that children's experiences with the criminal justice and therapeutic services matter for their recovery, and that Barnahus, through a child-friendly environment, one-stop location, designed to meet children where they are in terms of developmental, maturational, and emotional needs, could be a kinder experience for children and families as they engage with the criminal justice system. The voice of survivors could usefully be included in the Barnahus Implementation Board as a means of sense checking the plans developed.

Professionals in criminal justice also highlighted that, given the significant overlap between family courts and criminal justice, that pre-recorded evidence given by children could be used for both courts. Care would need to be taken in the interviews to include the information needed for both courts. For example, given that the focus for family proceedings is broader than that of a criminal justice proceeding, there would be a need to think about how to meet the standard of information required for both proceedings so that children would not have to be involved with two legal proceedings.

At the same time, professionals in the criminal justice sector also highlighted the need to consider fairness and the justice process for defendants in how a criminal case would function within a Barnahus. In particular, some professionals questioned how the issue of new disclosures (new information relating to a child's case) would be handled if the child

had already been interviewed and a cross-examination had already been pre-recorded. There was an expectation that the current anticipated pre-recorded cross-examination pilot may bring some clarity to that area of practice.

Regarding the justice process, Mr. Bragi Gudbrandsson and Sir John Gillen were able to lend their expertise to the discussion. Mr. Bragi Gudbrandsson highlighted the strength of the Icelandic and Scandinavian model that questions from the legal officers (e.g., defence, judge in case of Iceland) are fed to a child forensic interview via an earpiece that the interviewer wears and that the interviewer puts the questions that the judge has approved (or approved prior to the interview if the judge is not present) into developmentally appropriate, non-leading, non-suggestive language, while at the same time taking care not to distort the questions.

Sir John Gillen mentioned that in Northern Ireland, disclosure needs to be dealt with at an early stage during which the judge should organise the defence and prosecution to determine what the disclosure is, and to which documents or evidence the defence will require access and for what period of time access will be granted. Sir John added that pre-recorded cross-examination could also be handled at an early stage, after disclosure, and that the video recording of the child providing their testimony and being cross-examined could be shown to the jury in court without the child's involvement being necessary. In response to the challenge of new disclosures coming up after the child's testimony and cross-examination being recorded, he indicated that the likelihood of this happening was low, a more theoretical than practical issue, but that if it does occur despite disclosure being fully completed, questions for the child being pre-approved by the judge, and barristers best efforts, that the judge could reconvene the court and the judge could approve the process of the child being re-interviewed around a very specific set of additional questions.

When taking a step back to survey the existing literature on multidisciplinary teams responding to childhood abuse, one of the most researched contributions is the fact that the quality of the evidence in investigations into child abuse is considerably higher, and likely in consequence, the rates of prosecution for perpetrators is higher when the Barnahus (or CAC) model is used (e.g., Bracewell, 2018; Millar & Rubin, 2009; Smith et al., 2006; Westphaln et al., 2021; Wolfteich & Loggins, 2007). This highlights that justice, from the point of view of prosecutions, convictions, and successful court cases, is one of

the most prominent outputs associated with multidisciplinary response teams, such as in Barnahus.

In comparison, there is very little research on children and families' experiences with a multidisciplinary team response (e.g., Jones et al., 2007; Rasmussen, 2010). Although not explicitly stated, the landscape of the literature paints a strong contrast that justice comes from the perspective of the courts. Even though court-based justice may have the views of children and families in mind, the experiences of children within the court system, even the Northern Ireland court system (e.g., Hayes & Bunting, 2013), as well as children and families' desires do not likely mirror those of the justice system and the bigger question of whose justice are we serving through the Barnahus model needs to be established from the outset so that power dynamics (as discussed above in the theme discussion of leadership) can be navigated from various justice lenses.

Further discussion points from participants relating to justice:

- A barrier to equitable delivery of services through Barnahus is insufficient resources; the length of time that it takes to process forensic evidence for child victims of sexual abuse delays the recovery process;
- There is a need for the NI criminal justice system to focus on victim/survivor needs through the process;
- NI has many services associated with the Barnahus model, but they are not streamlined; children need to navigate the bureaucracy of accessing different services when they need to focus on recover; .
- Need for a victim representative on the Criminal Justice Board to increase the victim/survivor- centred lense;
- Young people do not always find the conviction integral or important; many are mainly looking for healing and recovery for the family; and
- Need for a designated space for children to provide testimony that is far enough from the court that children will not risk encountering any alleged perpetrators, and that is not anxiety-producing because children cannot provide their best evidence when they are stressed.

### **Summary of Lens for Justice**

In sum, the question of whose needs are ultimately being served through the current system, and whose needs will be served through Barnahus, were highlighted in the lens for justice theme. The tension between the differing mandates of organisations involved in

delivering justice and therapeutic services gives context to why justice might look differently and have different associated outcomes depending on perspective. The need to consider children's needs for justice, in terms of what justice looks like to them, was highlighted as an area where the system needs to be adjusted to come alongside children in their recovery journey.

### **Co-production and Upholding the Rights of the Child and Family**

A fourth theme that emerged through discussions with participants, was the idea that children and families have specific needs that are particular to their unique cases. Because of this, participants expressed that the system needs to be flexible enough to not have a prescribed approach that was thought to be in the "best interests of children generally" rather than the "best interests of the child in this specific case." There was a strong sentiment that children and families need to be consulted for which services they feel they need and for how they would like to receive them, and that they should be co-producers of the model and services available to them. One key aspect of this that was highlighted was the need for Barnahus services to be immediately available, and at close proximity, for children and families as soon as a disclosure is made, so that children do not have to wait until facilities are available to be seen and so that families do not have to travel great distances at irregular times. Participants also highlighted that these supports should be for both children and their families as the trauma impacts each person within the family differently and that the families also needed support for recovery, and to be best placed to support their child's recovery.

Additionally, there were hopes that the Barnahus model would provide flexibility in responding to children's unique needs and desires by limiting the bureaucracies of the current system (e.g., reducing the amount of paperwork and times that children and families need to repeat the same information to different providers). In particular, there was an acknowledgement that children and families should be the key drivers in the recovery process. For example, through what they would like their criminal justice involvement to be, what services they feel that they need, and to not have children and families be driven by the system procedures that are not responding to their unique needs and desires.

Participants indicated that a great benefit of the Barnahus model is the fundamental aspect of putting children and families at the forefront, as one of the concerns of the current system is the reoccurrence of children and families who have left the criminal justice and recovery process only to reappear in the system with mental health or

safeguarding concerns again years later as a result of unresolved trauma from past experiences of abuse or re-traumatisation through the criminal justice system. Participants across sectors indicated that long-term support should also be available to children and families, e.g., through additional counselling, as children grow older.

From a research perspective, previous findings suggest that parents and caregivers tend to evaluate the services received from a multidisciplinary and interagency team more highly than a provision of services that is not unified (Jones et al., 2007), even while the same findings suggest that children did not tend to evaluate their experiences with a multidisciplinary and interagency team more highly (Jones et al., 2007). There are several considerations for why parents and caregivers may rate their experiences more highly, while children may not. First, parents and caregivers tend to need to “figure out the system” and to help their child navigate through the system, seeing different professionals, getting to different physical locations, and parents and caregivers may also be judging the child-friendliness of the locations to which they bring their child and processes that their child must go through during the course of an investigation and through the recovery process. A unified approach to services, where children are seen by a multidisciplinary and interagency team that is “one-door” for the child, can simplify the process from the parents’ perspective and may make parents more at ease about how their child will experience the whole process, which may be why they rate such services more highly. At the same time, even a unified “one-door” approach can still be very difficult for children, who may question why they are being interviewed in a non-biased manner that can cause doubts as to whether they are being believed or heard, and who may still, quite understandably, find the process difficult (Jones et al., 2007).

Further, studies that have focused on the Barnahus model in particular (rather than a multidisciplinary and interagency model more broadly) have found that both parents and children appreciated their experience in Barnahus (Rasmusson, 2010). Specifically, parents and children indicated that they felt safe in the environment and found it to be child-friendly, and that they appreciated the information that was provided to them (Rasmusson, 2010). The findings from a further study with children who were summoned to Barnahus suggest that, at first, children may feel some anxiety when they do not know what the purpose of their trip to the Barnahus is, for example, if they are picked up from school and brought to Barnahus by a known adult from school in cases where the suspected perpetrator of abuse is both parents (Olsson & Klafverud, 2017). However, once they are situated in Barnahus and see the environment (e.g., toys in waiting room,



home-like environment in waiting areas), they became more comfortable with the process and felt as though the environment was one where they could be children (with the notable exception of the interview room, which, void of toys, conveys a serious tone where they felt they had to do serious work; Olsson & Klafverud, 2017). Overall, though, the foundational principles of the Barnahus that facilitate children's participation and recovery provide a benefit to children and young people even through what is understandably a difficult experience.

Finally, an additional aspect of co-production and responsiveness of services that was highlighted was the need for advocacy or for a predetermined, consistent person who is with the child and family throughout the process to explain the steps, options, and to provide information to the child and family. Participants in the third sector and in the criminal justice sector highlighted that this may be served through ChISVA (Children's Independent Sexual Violence Advocate) or through a guardian (i.e., Northern Ireland Guardian Ad Litem) as they can be very knowledgeable about the criminal justice process and the different agencies involved. In some instances children may be going through justice and care proceedings simultaneously.

Further discussion points from participants regarding co-production:

- Remit should allow for individual assessment; allow for practitioners to make the assessment of what approach would best meet needs of child and family;
- Domestic and sexual violence services are adult-focused; need services that are designed around children's needs;
- Include flexibility for additional services, such as counselling, that may be needed long-term for the child and family and are difficult to obtain once the case closes if not initially advocated for;
- Barnahus has strong potential to minimise re-traumatisation of the child; and
- Consideration that the outputs of Barnahus, of children and families thriving, should be the main driving thrust behind Barnahus.

## **Summary of Co-production with Children and Families and Responsive Services and Procedures**

In sum, Barnahus is premised on children's rights as enshrined in the UNCRC, and co-production with children and families is a foundational aspect of the design and purpose of Barnahus. That is, children are active participants who engage; who are listened to and their views heard in the decision-making process because this is an inherent part of the model (Hill et al., forthcoming). Responsiveness of services, and flexibility, to be able to meet the unique needs of children and families accessing services, is part of the philosophy of the multidisciplinary and interagency model (Jackson, 2004).

## 10. Conclusion and Recommendations

### Summary

Four overarching themes emerged from discussions with professional stakeholders in criminal justice, health and social care, and the third sector. Broadly, these were: leadership and the question of who will have responsibility for realising the plans for the Barnahus in Northern Ireland; what the Northern Ireland Barnahus model would look like, operationally, and of the potential for the Barnahus to become a centre for excellence for training and for data-sharing between core agencies, and lead in the education of the wider public; the lens for justice in terms of ensuring the focus is on children and families' needs; and co-production with children and families to ensure responsive services and procedures that are designed flexibly to suit the unique needs of children and families using the centre.

### Recommendations

Based on discussions with those with lived experience and organisational stakeholders in criminal justice, health and social care, and the third sector in Northern Ireland, we have compiled a list of recommendations regarding the introduction of a Barnahus model in Northern Ireland. These recommendations are rooted in the belief that the Barnahus could further embed the principles of the UNCRC into services and procedures for children in Northern Ireland. Our recommendations are by no means exhaustive, but were reiterated through discussions with stakeholders and also emerged through the academic and practice literature. These recommendations also stem from the Council of Europe recommendations for Barnahus (2018). The recommendations fall into two broad categories - the establishment of the Barnahus, and the operation of the Barnahus:

#### Establishment of the Barnahus

1. While there is a broad consensus on the benefits that a dedicated Barnahus would provide, there is a clear need for the Department of Justice and the Department of Health to agree Ministerial responsibility for the Barnahus, as elements of the core services and procedures currently fall within the remit of different departments and agencies.
2. A designated project lead and strategic project board should be appointed, comprising a Barnahus Champion within each relevant service/agency, including third sector representation.

3. This project board should also have representation from those with lived experience of the justice system regarding sexual abuse and exploitation in childhood.
4. The project lead and project board should clarify the remit and commissioning arrangements in terms of the Barnahus. This will include the arrangements for commissioning and funding the service, alongside operationalising what services and procedures are provided by the Barnahus directly, and which services are delivered in collaboration with existing services.
5. There is a need for a designated space for children that does not also serve adults (adult victims or adult perpetrators), and that is flexible enough to meet the diverse needs of children, due to developmental stage, disability or ethnicity.
6. Co-production with children and young people in the design of the NI Barnahus model is key to help better understand the lived experiences and the needs of both the child and their wider family.
7. Ensure that the Children and Young People's Commissioner and the proposed Victim of Crime Commissioner are both able to contribute to the discussions about the remit and governance mechanisms within any proposals for the Barnahus.

### **Operation of the Barnahus**

The Barnahus has the potential to capitalise and bring together a range of important recent developments and to augment these in a holistic and co-ordinated service for children:

1. The Barnahus should ensure that each child has a designated individual who acts as an advocate and source of information and discussion for the child and family. This advocate should be present throughout the criminal justice and therapeutic process; and could be part of the “spoke” services (i.e., available remotely) and procedures for children and families living in more remote locations of NI.
2. Providing testimony, including cross-examination, should be as contained within Barnahus services and procedures, as outlined by the Council of Europe, for example through pre-recording of evidence held under the oversight of a court judge, and observed by the council for defence, prosecution, law enforcement, child protection, and the child's advocate (Council of Europe, 2018). The forensic interview should be recorded (audio and visual) for use in any indictments. There may be an exploratory interview for the initial disclosure as well as a court testimony. Both should be recorded to a very high quality to ensure that the child's voice and testimony are heard and seen clearly, and so that informal credibility assessments of the child are not negatively impacted by poor-quality recording.

3. Clarify the legal process for how any additional disclosure of evidence, post-testimony recording, becomes part of the criminal justice proceeding (e.g., is the child recalled for an additional interview to Barnahus, under similar conditions as the first court testimony recording).
4. Ensure that all Barnahus services and procedures are offered under one roof in an environment that is child-friendly (e.g., home-like environment that is suitable for different age ranges of children and young people) and local to the child.
5. Provide appropriate public funds for NI Barnahus to ensure that the model is sustainable over time. External funding may be beneficial for the initial start-up phase (Council of Europe, 2018) but key services delivered by the third sector should have certainty about their role on a longer commissioning timeframe.
6. Formalise agreement protocols for information sharing between agencies involved in NI Barnahus, specifically core information as relates to the child's case to reduce the need for children and families to repeat information with different services and professionals.

## Conclusion

Our report builds on the Department of Justice scoping review from October 2019 and makes a clear statement that option one for a Barnahus is the most supported model - all services and procedures provided under one roof up to and including the giving of evidence for court. Professional stakeholders in the criminal justice sector further added that the criminal justice proceedings that are being currently tested and piloted would need to be in place for the model to have the greatest opportunity for success.

In sum, the Barnahus model facilitates a streamlined “one-door” approach to interagency collaboration and services for children and families who have been affected by forms of violence. The model fully conforms to international children's rights standards, including the UNCRC and the Lanzarote Convention, and is championed by the Council of Europe. Central features of the model are a child-friendly environment, access to information and services that are offered as part of the criminal justice and child welfare investigation, as well as therapeutic services. Overall, discussions with Northern Ireland stakeholders highlighted the need for leadership in moving the Barnahus forward; for a bespoke Northern Ireland Barnahus that would consider the Northern Ireland context and needs; the consideration of the different lenses for justice that are being used to drive the model; and the coproduction of services and procedures with children and families to ensure the rights of each child and each family are met.

Finally, in the words of Sir John Gillen during an interview with the research team, he highlighted what the attitude in Northern Ireland must be moving forward:

“The attitude [toward Barnahus] must be a “can do” not “I can't do”. We should be saying what can we do here to do this? Because the concept is absolutely first class. It's worked in Norway, Greenland, Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania, it's working in England. I'm just a bit concerned that you can sit down if you're a civil servant and think of 100 reasons why all the money shouldn't be spent here. You know children are being absolutely devastated by this whole process - that's without price.”

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## **Appendix A: Scope of Questions Discussed with Relevant Professional Stakeholders**

Focus groups discussed a broad scope of topics relating to the implementation of Barnahus, including:

- What could the Barnahus model add to the current processes and systems for children who disclose or are suspected of having experienced sexual abuse or exploitation?
- What might be some of the challenges in introducing a Barnahus model in Northern Ireland, and, just as importantly, how could these be overcome?
- What is already happening or is planned to happen in the near future that would support the development of a Barnahus in Northern Ireland?
- In your opinion, from the perspective of children and families, what difference could the Barnahus model make?
- Who do you think will need to be involved in the development of Barnahus to ensure that it is successful in meeting the needs of children, their families and the wider justice and child protection systems?

## **Appendix B: List of Stakeholder Organisations**

Organisations who participated in the research process during either the focus groups or individual interviews included:

NSPCC Young Witness Service  
Victim Support NI  
NEXUS NI  
Barnardos  
NI Police Service  
NI Public Prosecution Service  
NI Bar Library  
NI Law Society  
NI Criminal Justice Inspectorate  
NI Department of Justice  
NI Office of Lord Chief Justice  
Directorate of Social Work for the Health and Social Care Board  
Directorate of Social Work for the Belfast Trust  
Directorate of Social Work for the Northern Trust  
Directorate of Social Work for the South Eastern Trust  
Directorate of Social Work for the Western Trust  
NI Safeguarding Board  
NIGALA  
Rowan Centre  
Royal College of Pediatrics & Health  
The Child Care Centre  
NI Department of Health

## Appendix C: Scope of Questions Discussed with Young Adults with Lived Experiences

Young adults with lived experiences discussed individually with a researcher their own disclosure journeys (see example questions below), and their thoughts about how a Barnahus model would change the disclosure journey and experience. Specifically, young adults discussed questions such as:

Can you tell me about your journey? Who was the first person you talked to, and can you tell me about what you experienced with that? [question repeated]

Can you tell me, did you feel like someone explained to you what this journey would look like?

Can you tell me, what do you think could have been better about your experience? What would you have liked to be different?



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