

Progress on establishing a ‘Barnahus’ approach to supporting child victims of sexual abuse

28 February 2023

Over the eight years of the current Commissioner’s term, NICCY has scrutinised services, practice and legislation relating to Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and provided advice on how these could provide stronger safeguards for children and young people. . This work initially focussed on inputting to the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) in Northern Ireland and then on reviewing and monitoring government implementation of the recommendations of the Inquiry.¹ It is important to note that NICCY’s repeated analysis of CSE Progress Reports from the Departments of Health, Education and Justice concluded that these did not provide clear evidence that actions taken by the government had improved outcomes for children who were at risk of or been subject to CSE or improved outcomes in the pursuit and prosecution of perpetrators.² Departments moved away from the publication of Progress Reports to instead integrate this work into the activity of the Senior Officials Group on Child Protection, which is led by the DoH. The last CSE Progress Reports were published in 2018, and while NICCY had understood that annual reports on the work of the Senior Officials Group, including on CSE, would be released, to date these have not been received.

Also in 2018, The Right Honourable Sir John Gillen undertook a review of law and procedures in cases of serious sexual offences and NICCY’s advice to the review recommended that the introduction of the Barnahus model to Northern Ireland be considered.³ The Barnahus or Child House model, which was first established in Iceland and now operates in many European countries, seeks to ensure a child-centred response to victims of child sexual abuse by providing child protection and medical, therapeutic and criminal justice processes within a single child-friendly location at which support to children is provided both at the immediate point of disclosure or reporting and over the long term.⁴ Importantly, the model has also been identified as supporting the implementation of the

1 K. Marshall (2014) Child Sexual Exploitation in Northern Ireland: Report of the Independent Inquiry. Belfast: RQIA.

2 NICCY’s Review of CSE Action Plans and Progress Reports are available at:

<https://www.niccy.org/about-us/our-current-work/high-level-corporate-objectives/children-s-right-to-health-protection-from-violence-or-abuse/child-sexual-exploitation-cse/>

3 NICCY (2018) Advice on the Review of arrangements to deliver justice in serious sexual offence cases.

<https://www.niccy.org/publications/2018/september/07/review-of-sexual-offences-cases/>

4 D. Wenke (2017) Enabling Child Sensitive Justice, Council of the Baltic Seas. Available at:

<https://www.childrenatrisk.eu/promise/wp-content/uploads/PROMISE-Enabling-Child-Sensitive-Justice.pdf>

Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse,⁵ which was ratified by the UK government in 2018.

In highlighting profound concerns about delays and failings for child victims in current arrangements in Northern Ireland, the Gillen Review recommended that urgent consideration should be given to the advantages of Barnahus and that the viability of the model be assessed.⁶ NICCY's 2019 *Time for Change* seminar with Sir John Gillen and Bragi Guðbrandsson, Member of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and founder of Barnahus, provided a more detailed exploration of the model.⁷ Following on from this, NICCY's 2022 commissioned research *Putting the Child at the Centre*, which engaged directly with a wide range of stakeholders from across justice, HSC and survivors of sexual abuse, documents the strong evidence regarding the benefits of the model to support children to give their best evidence, minimise re-traumatisation and promote recovery while meeting justice standards.⁸ The research also illustrates broad support for progressing the approach in Northern Ireland and sets out a clear pathway for making Barnahus a reality for child victims.

The Commissioner launched the research at a roundtable on 24 February 2022 attended by Sir John Gillen, Bragi Guðbrandsson, the Minister of Health, the Minister for Justice, Her Honour Judge Smyth and the Office of the Lady Chief Justice, who all warmly welcomed the report. The Ministers committed to further assessing how Barnahus could be delivered. Throughout this period, NICCY has engaged with the Department of Justice (DoJ), which is leading the Gillen Implementation Plan, particularly in relation to Strategic Priority Area 5: 'Support for child victims (including Child House "Barnahus" type Model)'. While we acknowledge the range of related initiatives currently underway, such as those that work on remote evidence centres and the Voluntary Protocol for cases involving victims under 13 years, we highlight that only a full system reform through Barnahus will properly meet the needs of child victims of sexual abuse and provide a higher standard of justice for all involved in such cases. It is a deep disappointment that a decision on a Barnahus in Northern Ireland, which had broad support, has not been progressed. Another example of the detrimental impact of the absence of NI Executive and Assembly on the lives of children and young people.

⁵ Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/protection-of-children-against-sexual-exploitation-and-sexual-abuse/1680794e97>

⁶ Sir John Gillen (2019) Report into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland. <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/gillen-report-may-2019.pdf>

⁷ NICCY (March 2019) Time for Change seminar. Available at: <https://www.niccy.org/timeforchange>

⁸ <https://www.niccy.org/about-us/our-current-work/high-level-corporate-objectives/children-s-right-to-health-protection-from-violence-or-abuse/a-barnahus-model-for-ni/>