

Advice to Government – Department of Justice, ‘Victims and Witnesses of Crime Strategy, 2025-2030’

July 2025

The Office of the Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) was created in accordance with ‘The Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order’ (2003) to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people in Northern Ireland (NI). Under Articles 7(2)(3) of this legislation, NICCY has a mandate to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law, practice and services relating to the rights and best interests of children and young people by relevant authorities. The remit of the Office is children and young people up to 18 years, or 21 years, if the young person is disabled or was in the care of social services. In determining how to carry out these functions, the paramount consideration is the rights of the child and NICCY is required to base all its work on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

In issuing a response to the draft Victims and Witnesses of Strategy, 2025-2030 (the draft Strategy) consultation, we do not need to repeat our submission from November 2024, but to highlight a number of specific areas for the Department and Minister to consider. A copy of our previous submission on the Call for Views is available [here](#).

Comments on the draft Strategy

NICCY welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the draft Strategy and that the Department has conducted, and published, a Children’s Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA). Furthermore, we welcome the recognition of children and young people specifically as victims and witnesses of crime, as one of the five pillars. The actions relating to children and young people in this draft Strategy must also be reflected in all the other pillars, priority areas and associated actions.

We welcome the inclusion of children and young people within ‘Pillar 2: Communication’ and that in all communication with victims and witnesses is carried out in an accessible, trauma-informed and compassionate manner, information must be understood by all victims and witnesses, including children and young people, and those with additional needs. We do consider that under the first strategic objective in Pillar 2, that instead of *more* victims and witnesses will receive the information they need in a timely manner it should be *all* victims and witnesses will receive the information they need in a timely manner as outlined in the Victims Charter.¹ We also consider that the draft Strategy could specifically reflect Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).

¹ See: Department of Justice, ‘Draft Victims and Witnesses of Crime Strategy, 2025-2030’ (Available at: [Draft Victims and Witnesses of Crime Strategy 2025-2030](#), accessed on 04.07.25), p.30 [*italics added*]

Under Pillar 4, NICCY recommends that, alongside the ECHR and Human Rights obligations, UNCRC obligations are referenced and reflected alongside the operationalisation of the Committee's most recent Concluding Observations which make specific reference to child victims.² We do however welcome that children's rights have been reflected in the inclusion of Pillar 5 within the Strategy, as well as the inclusion of the Lundy Model of participation. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has recently published its draft General Comment No. 27 on children's right to access to justice and to an effective remedy, which includes a number of specific recommendations relating to children and young people as victims that the Department should consider within the draft Strategy and its action plans.³ We would also welcome further information on Pillar 5 action plans, the inclusion of the Lundy Model and how it will be implemented, and information on the substantial proposals and commitments for children and young people within action plans. We would welcome clarification that children and young people as victims will be recognised within the other pillars in the Strategy too.

NICCY notes that the Department has stated that they will deliver 'a child-centred approach by providing tailored, responsive and specialised support for children and young people in an age-appropriate manner, to reduce trauma and understand their needs, including ongoing consideration of a Barnahus-informed model for Northern Ireland'. The inclusion of Barnahus was a key recommendation made by NICCY in the November 2024 'Call for Views'.⁴ Whilst we welcome the inclusion of Barnahus and the recognition of high need in cases of child sexual abuse within the Strategy, NICCY wishes to reiterate that a Barnahus for NI must be delivered as a matter of urgency and suggest that the draft Strategy reflects this. Further supports for child victims and witnesses of crime should also be outlined in this Pillar and the key priority area should be split, with Barnahus constituting a separate action.

We welcome the emphasis on supporting child victims and witnesses within the justice system. However, we urge the strategy to explicitly recognise and resource the vital role of parents and carers in the recovery and participation of children and young people who have experienced crime, particularly sexual violence. Parents and carers are often the primary emotional and practical support for children, and their ability to navigate the justice process directly affects the child's engagement and wellbeing. NICCY recommends that the Strategy include clear commitments to provide guidance, emotional support, and legal advice to parents and carers alongside that offered to the child as a key element of a trauma-informed, child-centred justice system.

² See: UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'Concluding observations on the combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland' (2023) (Available at: [Concluding observations on the combined 6th and 7th periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland](#) ;, accessed on 04.07.25)

³ The UN Committee's draft General Comment is available here: [OHCHR | Call for submissions on the draft of general comment No. 27 on children's right to access to justice and to an effective remedy](#). It is expected that the final draft of the Comment will be adopted by the UN Committee in January 2026, with the official launch including a child friendly version expected in May 2026.

⁴ NICCY has previously published recommendations and research relating to the creation of a Barnahus for Northern Ireland, available at: [A Barnahus Model for Northern Ireland - Niccy](#), accessed on 04.07.25

We note that as part of the Victim Charter, and recognised within this draft Strategy, that information, understanding and awareness of systems and structures in place, including the decision-making process is a key theme. We agree that children and young people must be provided with accessible information, services and facilities to support engagement in the criminal justice process, in a way that ensures they feel protected and safe and can give their best evidence. However, we consider that there is a need for wider education and knowledge on the justice system and processes in general, something which has been raised with NICCY by children and young people previously. During a recent roundtable with elected representatives from the Committee of Justice relating to the Justice Bill (held July 2025) a number of young people expressed that they had no previous awareness of the police or justice systems prior to becoming 'involved' with them. They considered that wider education on the justice system would be beneficial, from a young age – with a tailored, age-appropriate curriculum delivered in schools. Measures including child and youth awareness of the Victim Charter could be a helpful starting point, as well as clarification on what the duties and obligations on relevant authorities are for victims.

We note that the Department intends to set up an online portal with information for victims and witnesses to access. This must include resources for children and young people, in an accessible way, and NICCY encourages the Department to engage with children and young people directly on the design and use of such a portal.

Given the increase in knowledge and awareness of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE), NICCY considers that there could be further inclusion and recognition of child victims of CCE within this draft Strategy, and reflection actions that can be and will be taken to respond as appropriate. The recently published definition of CCE and the themes outlined in the 2024 CCE Action Plan could also be incorporated within this draft Strategy, including the use of the National Referral Mechanism for child victims.⁵

Data

It is difficult to ascertain the numbers of children and young people who are witnesses of crime, and we encourage the Department to work with partners to collect and collate such data as part of this draft Strategy. We note that a recent Young Life and Times survey asked 16-year-olds who they would report gender-based violence experiences to if they were personally a victim. Respondents were most likely to say they would report this to a family member (63%), a close friend (48%), the police (28%) or a teacher or other staff member in school (25%). The survey found that approximately one in ten 16-year-olds said they would either not be comfortable reporting this (12%) or that they did not know who they would report it to (10%).⁶ NICCY recommends that within Pillar 5 actions, the Department seeks

⁵ Department of Justice, Department of Health, Department of Education, 'Child Criminal Exploitation Action Plan' (2024) (Available at: [Ministers launch Child Criminal Exploitation Action Plan | Department of Justice](#), accessed on 04.07.25)

⁶ The Executive Program on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime, 'The Prevalence and Impact of

to address under-reporting of crimes including gender-based violence alongside consideration of the impact of exposure to violence in general, legacy of the conflict and reported threats by paramilitaries.

As found in a recent study of Adverse Childhood Experiences in NI, a significant proportion of all age groups, including those in the younger age bands, reported direct exposure to conflict-related violence. For instance, 3.4% of 18–24-year-olds and 8.9% of 25–34-year-olds reported being threatened by paramilitaries. Such events would have had to have occurred between 2006 (when the 18-year-olds were born) and 2023 (when the 18-year-olds transitioned from childhood and became eligible for the study). Findings from the Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminality and Organised Crime Programme research also suggest high levels of exposure to violence, and victimisation, in NI amongst young people.⁷ It would be beneficial for this draft Strategy to embed previous findings and recommendations that have been made to ensure that children and young people who are victims and witnesses to crime, and violence, are adequately supported.

Further comments

Delay remains a serious concern for NICCY particularly for those children and young people as victims of sexual offences, but also as a systematic issue across the criminal justice system. The ‘UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice’ (also known as the Beijing Rules), describe the speedy conduct of formal procedures in juvenile cases as a ‘paramount concern’.⁸

NICCY has consistently raised concerns about delay in the youth justice system in NI. The issue has also been addressed in several independent reports, namely the 2010 ‘Review of the Youth Justice System in Northern Ireland’, the 2021 ‘Tracing the Review’, relevant CJINI reports on the care and treatment of Victims and Witnesses in the criminal justice system (2011, 2020) ‘Telling them Why’ (2012), Youth Justice Review (2013, 2015), Child Sexual Exploitation (2014, 2020), ‘Avoidable Delay’ and ‘Avoidable Delay – A Progress Report’, for example.

We have also previously advised the Department on the introduction of statutory time limits of 120 days in the Youth Court, which has never been taken forward, as well as the need for robust case management.⁹ The 2021 ‘Tracing the Review: Developments in Youth Justice in Northern Ireland 2011-2021’ stated that ‘despite the reduction in the numbers of young people being processed through the courts issues of delay persist and have even become more problematic since 2015.’¹⁰

Adverse Childhood Experiences in Northern Ireland’ (2025) (Available at: [The Prevalence and Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences in Northern Ireland](#), accessed on 04.07.2025)

⁷ Walsh, C. ‘Disrupting the cycle of youth violence: the role of social support for youth in a Northern Irish youth work programme’ (2023) (Available at: [summary24.pdf](#), accessed on 04.07.25)

⁸ UN, ‘UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice’ (1985) (Available at: [Microsoft Word - Document1](#), accessed on 04.07.25)

⁹ NICCY, ‘Advice to Department of Justice in relation to their Consultation on Time Limits in the Youth Court’ (2014) (Available at: [niccy-response-to-statutory-time-limits-february-2014.pdf](#), accessed on 04.07.25)

¹⁰ Carr, N., & McAlister, S., ‘Tracing the Review: Developments in Youth Justice in Northern Ireland 2011-2021’ (2021) (Available at: [TRACING THE REVIEW PDF.pdf](#), accessed on 04.07.25), p.60

Child's Rights Impact Assessment

NICCY welcomes that the Department has conducted a Child's Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) on the draft Strategy. In relation to question 7, we further encourage the Department to consider other strategies and programs that are in place within the NI Executive, such as the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime, 'Keeping Children and Young People Safe: An Online Strategy for Northern Ireland 2020-2025', the CCE Action Plan, the 'Mental Health Strategy, 2021-2031' and 'Making Life Better'- Strategic Framework for Public Health 2013-2023' alongside others that are mentioned within the draft Strategy document.¹¹ The Children's Services Co-Operation Act (NI) 2015 could be further utilised here, specifically on the pooling of budgets and resources for delivery.

On question 8 of the CRIA, further statistical information may also be available, if collected from other sources and services assisting children and young people who victims and witnesses of crime are. NICCY seeks to ensure that information, as far as possible, is collected and collated on children and young people and reflected in data and information gathering on this draft Strategy (which is not routinely reflected in current information). We do therefore welcome the specific inclusion of 'children and young people are consulted, and their experiences are captured through age-appropriate surveys and other means of engagement' within Pillar 5.

On questions 14 and 15 of the CRIA, NICCY does consider that there may be differences on the impact of such a Strategy on different groups of children and young people. For example, some groups of children and young people may not be aware of the final Strategy, some facing structural, access or language barriers in reporting that they have been a victim of a crime, those children and young people who may be under the coercive control of others (or witnesses of), and therefore, less likely to come forward, those who have less trust in the criminal justice system for a variety of reasons. We have previously advised the Department that specific consideration should also be given to children and young people who are victims/witnesses who are LGBTQIA+, from minority ethnic backgrounds and those with a disability, and the intersectionality between many of the section 75 groups.

As part of ongoing measurement and monitoring, we encourage the Department to review the draft Strategy outcomes for children and young people and their rights, using the Child Rights Impact Evaluation tools assesses the effects, both intended and unintended.

Without access to the delivery, action plans, performance framework and estimated or actual budget allocations at this stage, NICCY cannot provide comment on the specific SMART targets that are to be put in place. We do recognise that the Department have stated that in developing associated delivery plans they will seek, so far as possible, to set out the costs associated with implementation, and in some cases 'preparatory scoping work may need to be carried out before there is a reliable estimate of costs'. NICCY would welcome further clarification of this, and proposed resource bids and allocations from the Department to deliver on this Strategy.

¹¹ See: [Draft Victims and Witnesses of Crime Strategy 2025-2030](#), p.22

Conclusion

Broadly, NICCY agrees with the proposed scope and vision of the draft Victim and Witness Strategy, the vision to support 'all victims and witnesses and improving confidence in the criminal justice system' and the strategic priorities. Sustainable financial support and resources must be in place for organisations who support child victims and witnesses and awareness raising of these services should continue.