

## **Barnardo's NI Response to 'Hidden Crimes Secret Pain'**

### **Introduction**

Barnardo's NI worked with 11,000 children and their families in communities across NI last year. We provide an extensive range of services that aim to support and help children and families. We work with disabled children, young people who are at risk of offending, children in care and families in need of support. In responding to this proposal for a sexual violence strategy, we have specifically drawn on our experience of working with children and young people who have been sexually abused, sexually exploited, who have suffered domestic violence or who have engaged in sexually harmful behaviour.

We have not chosen to answer all of the questions but only those that we felt were appropriate.

### **Question One**

The definition used in the Strategy needs to include recognition of 'capacity' to give consent in terms of age, maturity, emotional and intellectual capacity and relationship to the other party.

There needs to be a clear recognition in the document that all sexual abuse is by nature violent.

### **Question Two**

Providing information on the experience of victims of sexual violence but also recognising the need to follow up with services and strategic responses. It is important that the public has some sense of the reality of sexual violence and that the victims know they are not alone.

### **Question Three**

There are a wide range of agencies that could assist with increasing public knowledge including service providers, criminal justice agencies,

the media, the judiciary and those who work with victims of sexual violence.

#### **Question Four**

While Barnardo's recognises the importance of gathering children's attitudes to sexual violence in order to allow us to best plan how those attitudes can be influenced and addressed, there are risks associated with undertaking such work. We would have some concerns that if not undertaken appropriately then you could minimise or normalise the experiences of sexual violence in children's lives. We believe it is particularly important that this work is undertaken by those already working with children and who could gather this information in a skilled and knowledgeable way. For example; Women's Aid has already gained experience in this area of work.

#### **Question Five**

There is a multiplicity of complex issues tied up with this. Fundamentally it requires a change in the societal attitudes regarding sexuality and power that contribute to acts of sexual violence. This must include taking a more serious view of the making and distribution of sexually abusive images particularly of children and young people. It also includes education initiatives and early intervention with children and young people at risk.

#### **Question Six**

Barnardo's believes it is government's duty to give a clear message ahead of public opinion that seeks to stem the tide of normalising sexual violence. However, government must do this not simply through a media or public education campaign but in the development, implementation and resourcing of policy and practice. Barnardo's would suggest that one practical step to begin this process would be to make child protection a priority in the Policing Plan for which there needs to be both funding and monitoring of effective outcomes.

#### **Question Seven**

Barnardo's have had some positive experiences of the media portraying the issues of sexual violence and sexual exploitation sensitively and in a way designed to increase public understanding. Our Beyond the Shadows service BTS have engaged successfully on several occasions with the media – BBC Newline (5 night prime time focus) Sept 04; UTV – Sex Crimes in NI series, 19<sup>th</sup> Oct 06; numerous radio programme and newspaper articles. Unfortunately this is more the exception than the rule.

### **Question Eight**

Children and young people need to experience healthy relationships and respect so safeguarding vulnerable children is of vital importance. Educative programmes need to be provided on a consistent basis across NI and to both genders. The Women's Aid programme in both primary and post primary schools is a good model from which to learn.

### **Question Nine**

A range of agencies including voluntary children's organisations, children's services, judiciary, community sector, media, government departments and probation services.

### **Question Eleven**

Barnardo's has real concerns that data in-relation to sexual offences is not analysed in a way that assists us to know what kind of crimes have been committed. For example, they often include a substantial category of 'other' and do not provide a specific focus on the sexual exploitation of children. We also have concerns regarding the sharing of soft information, the need for closer inter-agency information sharing and recording of specific individuals or addresses where there are known child protection concerns.

### **Question Twelve**

The main risk and protective factors are fairly widely known through both practice experience and research. However, there is still a lack of

strategic multi-agency management in-relation to this. There needs to be intra and inter agency co-operation on agreeing a risk and protection framework involving key agencies and sectors.

### **Question Thirteen**

Barnardo's believe that it is crucial that the judicial system is seen to recognise the seriousness of crimes of a sexually violent nature and issues sentences that are proportionate.

The vast majority of children and young people who experience sexual violence and sexual abuse do so within their own families or home. It is important to ensure that the child protection system is fully resourced.

### **Question Fourteen**

Parents and professionals who work with children should be provided with the skills to recognise the early warning signs of sexual violence. For example; sexual grooming and manipulation.

Children should be provided with information, commensurate with their age, to enable them to recognise dangers. For example; good touch, bad touch. We would endorse the promotion of campaigns such as Stop It Now.

We also need to ensure that we protect children from re-victimisation by providing widely available therapeutic services and reducing waiting lists for these services.

### **Question Fifteen**

Child protection should be named as a priority in the NI Policing Plan.

Children under seven should not be relied upon as witnesses.

The law should be amended to accept the testimony of professional witnesses eg. Social Workers. Often young people will disclose to a social worker and not to the police. Barnardo's have a case example of a young person who disclosed information to a social worker regarding the

sexual exploitation of other young people. However, this was deemed to be insufficient to proceed with prosecution because there was no direct statement from the young person to the police. We know and understand the many reasons that children and young people do not tell what has happened to them yet we fail to provide other means to enable a prosecution.

### **Question Sixteen**

It is important that when the judicial system is deciding on questions of bail that these decisions are made in the best interests of the child and that the child and their carer are fully informed.

The legal process needs to be more efficient. It currently takes a long time to resolve cases and this can have implications for the availability of therapeutic services.

When a case is not going forward for prosecution consideration still needs to be given to the use of civil measures to protect children and young people from risky adults. There is a need for agreed thresholds for this between the judiciary and the police. To date we are only aware of four Risk Of Sexual Harm Orders having been made in NI. There is an obvious lack of knowledge on the use of these, their consistent application and the threshold of evidence required.

### **Question Seventeen**

It is important that early assessments of vulnerability can be made and acted on to prevent young people who may have had previous experiences of abuse becoming further exploited. Essentially acting as soon as concerns arise to provide safety and security for children would reduce the risks from abuse and exploitation.

### **Question Eighteen**

Campaigns such as 'Thinkuknow' are helpful as are general programmes re; healthy relationships. However, young people who are particularly vulnerable because of their life experiences will need work on promoting protection in their lives.

Useful websites are – [www.thinkuknow.co.uk](http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk) or [www.faceuptoit.org](http://www.faceuptoit.org) – the latter is a website produced by young people with experience of sexual exploitation who work with a Barnardo's service in Scotland.

### **Question Nineteen**

Barnardo's (Young People's Therapeutic Service) is one of three service providers which operate a service specifically for young people who engage in sexually harmful behaviour. We are aware that both the service response and the response of the judicial system is patchy and unsystematic in-relation to these young people. However, the research evidence clearly indicates that therapeutic intervention is much more effective with these young people than with adult offenders and therefore it is much more urgent that they can access therapeutic intervention.

It is important that early intervention or prevention programmes with children and young people include the possibility of inappropriate behaviour from a peer or sibling along with other issues.

Parents and families need to be aware of the early signs of sexually inappropriate behaviour and have access to appropriate information and support.

Professionals need further information and training regarding normative and inappropriate sexual behaviour among children and young people.

### **Question Twenty**

This could be achieved by consulting with victims and by inter-agency working.

### **Question Twenty One**

Priority should be given to those children and young people who find it difficult to tell their experiences and find other ways to progress with prosecutions.

### **Question Twenty Two**

Information needs to be categorised by type of offence, relationship of perpetrator to victim, age of both perpetrator and victim, outcome of prosecution and length of sentence.

### **Question Twenty Three**

An Inspection of the handling of cases involving sexual violence should include specifically a review of those cases involving sexual exploitation, a review of those cases involving young people engaged in sexually harmful behaviour, review of sentencing in cases of sexual violence and a review of bail decisions in such cases.

### **Question Twenty Four**

Support services and models for resourcing and delivering them can only be fully developed through dialogue with survivors and the groups that represent them by identifying messages from research, in particular what works and in working to address the gaps identified.

### **Question Twenty Five/Twenty Six**

It is in our experience particularly important that children and adult victim/survivor care and support services are separated. We would support the development of a children's SARC service in NI and would like to see more provision of therapeutic and accommodation services.

Since survivors of sexual violence are not a homogeneous group, there is clearly a need for a wide range of services.

### **Question Twenty Seven**

There is a clear need for a multi-agency steering committee to take this forward which must include the full range of service provider organisations including voluntary organisations.

### **Question Twenty Eight**

Police, criminal justice agencies, social services, medical professionals (including mental health), education, legal professions, residential centres, voluntary and community sector organisations.

### **Question Twenty Nine**

Barnardo's welcomes the introduction of UNOCINI and hopes that it will enhance the assessment and decision making process for children. However, it is a generic tool and we are not clear that it will be able to pick up on children and young people engaged in sexually harmful behaviour. We think there is a need for an agreed and robust assessment tool for these young people and one that will be universally used and fit with UNOCINI.

### **Question Thirty**

Barnardo's is aware of a number of existing help-lines such as Childline and Women's Aid and we think it would be more appropriate for a sexual violence help-line to be placed within an existing framework. We would also support separating the children's help-line from the adults.

### **Question Thirty One**

The most effective way to increase awareness about services that are available is word of mouth, publicity, public information campaign and presentation opportunities. However, it is crucial that the available services have secure funding to allow them to consolidate and develop their work.

### **Question Thirty Two**

Regional standards should apply to all services addressing the impact of sexual violence.

### **Questions Thirty Three – Thirty Five**

A variety of skills and training are necessary for those working directly with children and young people who have experienced sexual violence or for young people engaged in sexually harmful behaviour.

It is important that this is co-ordinated and that all those providing services or in contact with children and young people who may have experienced sexual violence get appropriate training.

### **Additional Comments:**

The title of this Strategy resonates with the experience of Barnardo's. We are aware of how hidden the sexual abuse and exploitation of young people is and it is unrealistic to expect children and young people to disclose at first as their pain and trauma make this almost impossible. Government policy needs to reflect the secret nature of these crimes and find other ways to prosecute the adults involved rather than relying on the complaint of the young person.

We would also want to highlight the importance of recognising the need for support for the families of sex offenders as they are a marginalised group with an extreme lack of services available to support them at present.

There is a need for a pro-active policing approach which must be strategic and at an operational level needs to include surveillance. We can learn from practice elsewhere, for example, the Awaken Project in Blackpool takes a multi-agency stance to protect young people. We would welcome this being replicated in Northern Ireland.