

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

August 2026

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) has long advocated for the introduction of a Barnahus model for children and young people who are victims of sexual abuse and sexual offences.

Since 2018, NICCY has consistently called for a Barnahus approach in NI. This position was supported by Sir John Gillen's 2019 ‘Review of Serious Sexual Offences,’ which recommended that the Department of Justice give serious consideration to introducing the Barnahus model.¹ NICCY subsequently produced a range of reports, including ‘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’ in 2022 and made recommendations highlighting weaknesses in the current system and arguing for a child-centred, rights-based alternative.² In 2023, NICCY published an update report on progress to implement the Barnahus model in NI, available [here](#).

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has made recommendations on the tackling child sexual exploitation and abuse, and in the 2023 Concluding Observations, specifically referenced the implementation of the Gillen Review in NI, recommending the expansion of Barnahus-type models across the UK.³ Concerns have also been raised internationally about child victims being required to attend court and undergo cross-examination, with recommendations supporting the use of recorded evidence wherever possible.

Additionally, the UK's obligations under the Lanzarote Convention require criminal investigations and proceedings involving children to minimise trauma, protect victims, prioritise cases, and ensure timely access to support.⁴

Progress Since the Gillen Review

NICCY welcomes progress made in implementing the Gillen Review recommendations. By 2025, 174 of 253 recommendations had been completed, including:

¹ Key Recommendation 12 as outlined in the Report into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland. (Available at: [gillen-report-may-2019.pdf](#), accessed on 16.7.25)

² NICCY, ‘Putting the Child at the Centre – Barnahus (Children’s House) – a one door approach to supporting children who have been sexually abused in NI’ (2022) (Available at: [Putting the Child at the Centre - Niccy](#), accessed on 16.7.25)

³ Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding observations on the combined sixth and seventh reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, (2023), Article 33 (d).

⁴ Council of Europe, ‘Lanzarote Convention: Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse.’ (Available online: [1680794e97](#))

- The Sexual Offences Legal Advisers (SOLA) schemes, and the launch of the Children's SOLAs service in 2024;
- The establishment, and expansion of Remote Evidence Centres; and
- The judge-led voluntary protocol to expedite serious sexual offence cases involving child witnesses under 13, with plans to extend it to victims under 16.

Furthermore in 2025, the Minister of Justice introduced a Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill which includes provisions to bring onto statute, the Commissioner for Victims and Witnesses of Crime, provide pre-trial independent legal representation for complainants in serious sexual offence cases, and strengthen protections relating to disclosure applications in such cases, amongst other provisions relating to hate crime.⁵ While these developments are positive, NICCY argues that wider systemic reform remains necessary to achieve a truly child-centred justice response and has issued advice to government on this draft Bill.

The development of a more child-centred response to child sexual abuse and serious sexual offences remains a significant priority for NICCY and for the Commissioner personally. As part of NICCY's ongoing work to identify and promote international best practice, the Commissioner has visited and engaged with a range of specialist services and Barnahus-style models, including the Rowan Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC), The Lighthouse in England, Barnahus West in Galway, and the Barnahus Centre operated by the Save the Children Foundation in Bucharest, Romania. These visits have provided valuable insight into how integrated, multi-agency approaches can reduce trauma, improve children's experiences of the justice system, and ensure timely access to healthcare, therapeutic support and advocacy. NICCY continues to engage with practitioners, policymakers and international experts to examine emerging evidence and models of best practice, with a view to supporting the development of the most effective and rights-compliant Barnahus model for NI and has recently submitted advice on the preferred options being considered by both the Departments of Justice and Health.

Evidence of Continuing Need

Statistics demonstrate the scale of sexual offending and the urgency of reform. According to the NSPCC, in their July 2026 Sexual Offences briefing, 53% of all sexual

⁵ <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/news/bill-will-improve-experience-criminal-justice-system-victims-and-witness-crime> See: [Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill](#)

offences recorded are against children.⁶ The most recent Police Service of NI (PSNI) figures from 2024/2025 show that:

- Sexual offences have increased significantly over the past two decades as the level these offences is 3.5 times higher than in 2000/07;
- Recorded rape and sexual assault offences remain close to historic highs as they increased to their highest level in 2022/23 (1,268 offences), with 1,218 recorded in 2024/25, more than five times higher than the lowest level of 232 offences recorded in 2000/01;
- Sexual assaults also reached the highest level recorded in 2022/23 (1,923 offences) with 1,822 recorded in 2024/25, around three times the lowest level recorded in 2002/03;
- Sexual offences involving children have more than doubled since 2007/08;
- Almost two in five sexual offences reported in 2024/25 were committed against individuals when they were children, although reported later in adulthood; and
- Online sexual offences, grooming, and exploitation continue to present growing risks to children as in 2024/25 victims aged under 18 (accounting for 27% of all victims) were most likely to be victims of online stalking and harassment or online sexual offences, while those aged 18+ (accounting for 73% of all victims) were most likely to be victims of online stalking and harassment or online blackmail.⁷

Data from the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) on cases involving sexual offences indicates that in 2024/25:

- 625 files involved victims under 18;
- 622 prosecution decisions were made;
- The majority resulted in no prosecution; and
- Court outcomes demonstrate relatively low numbers of completed convictions compared to the volume of cases entering the system.⁸

NICCY continued to highlight gaps in data collection, including the limited ability to track child victims through the justice process or assess outcomes linked to specialist services such as the SARC.

⁶ NSPCC, 'Statistics briefing: child sexual abuse (2026)' (Available at: [Statistics briefing: child sexual abuse](#))

⁷ [Trends in Police Recorded Crime in Northern Ireland 1998/99 to 2024/25](#)

⁸ [Statistical Publication - Cases Involving Sexual Offences 2024-25 | Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland](#)

Why Barnahus?

It is NICCY's continued position that the current response to child sexual abuse is fragmented and can further traumatisise children. Victims may be required to engage with multiple agencies, repeat their accounts to different professionals, attend various locations, and wait extended periods for investigations and court processes to conclude.

The Barnahus model seeks to address these issues by bringing key services together in one integrated setting. It combines:

- Forensic interviewing;
- Child protection services;
- Medical examinations and healthcare;
- Therapeutic and psychological support; and
- Criminal justice processes.

Under this model, services are organised around the child's needs rather than expecting the child to navigate complex systems. NICCY believes this approach reduces re-traumatisation, improves recovery outcomes, strengthens evidence gathering, and promotes better collaboration between agencies. Drawing on successful models in Nordic countries and elsewhere, NICCY maintains that Barnahus represents international best practice and aligns closely with children's rights obligations.

Conclusion

NICCY strongly supports the urgent introduction of a Barnahus model in NI. While recognising progress made since the Gillen Review, children who experience sexual abuse still face a fragmented and potentially re-traumatising system. A Barnahus model would provide a more coordinated, child-centred response to children and young people who have experienced sexual abuse and other forms of sexual violence. At present, children may have to navigate multiple services, professionals and settings across health, social care, policing and the justice system, creating a risk of fragmented support and repeated retelling of traumatic experiences.

A Barnahus model would bring these agencies together around the child, enabling more timely access to specialist assessment, therapeutic support and justice processes in a safe and developmentally appropriate environment. This would strengthen safeguarding practice, reduce the risk of re-traumatisation and help ensure that children's rights, needs and best interests remain at the centre of the response. While we acknowledge the range of related initiatives currently underway, including the options paper for a Barnahus being led by the Departments of Health and Justice, it remains a deep disappointment that a decision on such remains to be finalised. It is therefore of utmost

importance that the NI Executive prioritises this in the remainder of this mandate, including choosing the best model for children and young people and associated budget and resources for its implementation.