**DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND ABUSE ADVOCACY PROJECT**

**GENERAL INFORMATION**

**The Purpose:** The overall purpose of the new service is to provide co-ordinated and tailored support, responsive to individual needs, in partnership with established services to qualifying victims of domestic and sexual violence and abuse. It will mean victims are well-informed, listened to, advocated for and referred on to specialist services, if required. The Service is intended to help victims feel safe and to help ensure that the risk of any further harm, is greatly reduced or eliminated.

PSNI statistics show that whilst general crime has decreased, domestic and sexual violence and abuse incidents, crimes and offences have been growing year on year since this data was first collected in 2004/05. PSNI statistics for the period 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2020 show that 31,848 domestic abuse incidents were reported to the Police, equating to 17 domestic abuse incidents per 1,000. There were nine murders with a domestic abuse motivation committed between March 2020 and February 2021.

Statistics published by the PSNI show that “*for crimes with a domestic abuse motivation, around one in four result in a charge summons. Three in five crimes do not proceed further due to evidential difficulties; more than two in five are where the victim does not support action*.” Approximately 41% of domestic abuse crimes in Northern Ireland do not proceed because the victim does not support the action.

PSNI data for February 2020 to February 2021 show that 3,208 sexual offences including rape were reported, representing around four per cent of all crime recorded. Delay, under-reporting and complainants withdrawing from cases are major difficulties in relation to sexual offences in Northern Ireland. Up to two out of every five offences are reported to the PSNI more than 12 months after the offence occurred. Police recommended prosecution or diversion for just over two-fifths (40.5%) of all suspects.

The Department of Justice (DoJ) and Department of Health (DoH) strategy “Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland was published in 2016 and its vision is to “*have a society in Northern Ireland where domestic and sexual violence is not tolerated in any form and where effective, tailored preventative and responsive services are provided, all victims are supported, and perpetrators are held to account*”.

The new Advocacy Service connects to the support strand of this Strategy, but also to all four Directorates of the DoJ, Access to Justice; Safer Communities; Justice Delivery; Reducing Offending which are linked to Northern Ireland Executive Draft Programme for Government (PfG) Outcome 7 which aims to “*have a safe community where we respect the law and each other*”.

This new service will also support the introduction of a new domestic abuse offence in late 2021, with a focus on non-physical behaviour (including controlling and coercive behaviour). It will also be relevant in the context of stalking legislation that will be brought forward, where there is a personal connection between the individuals (intimate relationship or family member). The stalking and domestic abuse legislation will give victims more opportunity to seek legal redress for crimes and create a need for increased advocacy to give them confidence to understand and use the new measures.

**The Partnership:** Belfast and Lisburn Women’s Aid (BLWA), Foyle Women’s Aid (FWA) and the Men’s Advisory Project (MAP) have over 100 years of combined experience supporting victims (men, women, adults and children) of domestic and sexual violence and abuse across a range of support services.BLWA, FWA and MAP have come together as a Partnership with the primary aim of developing a new service to provide qualifying victims of domestic and sexual violence and abuse with access to a high quality and streamlined support service tailored to individual need. BLWA, FWA and MAP have a long-established partnership working together on many projects delivering victim centred, trauma informed support services to men, women, children and young people who are victims of domestic and sexual violence and abuse and human trafficking including: emergency accommodation; high risk response; practical and emotional support; group work; signposting based on advanced risk assessment; and support planning processes. BLWA and FWA are partners in service delivery, communication and promotion projects and FWA and MAP work together in the Family Justice Centre project.

**The Service Delivery Model:** The Partnership recognises, from its experience of working with all victims, regardless of religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status, sexual orientation, gender, disability or dependents, that timely, specialist, trauma-informed input is crucial in the immediate aftermath of a crime. It is crucial to engage victims at this early stage so that they receive the support they need. This also provides the opportunity to address the complex and varied reasons for the failure of too many sexual and domestic violence and abuse cases proceeding through the criminal courts. The Advocacy Service will go some way to meeting those challenges.

The Advocacy Service will provide a unique victim-centred service for qualifying victims of domestic and sexual violence and abuse across Northern Ireland. It will provide individual and coordinated support, which is responsive to individual need and also links the victim into a comprehensive network of specialist agencies where appropriate. This helps ensure that the risk of any further harm, is greatly reduced or eliminated.

The service will be designed to increase confidence in the criminal justice system as a means of redress for victims of domestic and sexual violence and abuse in Northern Ireland. That will lower attrition rates considerably which improves outcomes for victims generally. It will also prove to be of great benefit to the criminal justice system, which will manage its business more efficiently and effectively. This will speed up the process, free up court time and resources and, ultimately, streamline the court process.

The Advocacy Service will operate from 8am to 9pm, Monday to Friday, and 9am to 5pm on Saturdays and Sundays. This front-line service will be available to victims regardless of religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status, sexual orientation, gender, disability or dependents.