



## TRUST BOARD / SLT COVER SHEET

	<p>The cover sheet purpose is to provide the Trust Board/Committee with a clear summary of the paper being presented, how it impacts on the people we serve, key matters for attention and the ask of the Trust Board/Committee</p> <p>The Accountable Director must satisfy themselves that the cover sheet is accurate and fully reflects the paper. The expectation is that the Accountable Director has read and agreed the content of both the cover sheet and paper.</p>	
<b>Meeting and Date of meeting</b>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Trust Board</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>27 November 2025</i></p>	
<b>Title of paper</b>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Executive Director of Social Work report</i></p>	
<b>Accountable Director</b>	<b>Name</b>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Colm McCafferty</i></p>
	<b>Position</b>	<p style="text-align: center;">Director of CYP Services and Executive Director of Social Work</p>
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<b>This paper sits within the Trust Board role of:</b>	<p style="text-align: center;">Accountability</p>	
<b>This paper is presented for:</b>	<p style="text-align: center;">Assurance</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>(Notes on completion at end of document)</i></p>	
<b>Links to Trust Strategic Priorities</b>  	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<p>Collaborative Working</p>
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<p>Learning Organisation</p>
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<p>Safety, Quality &amp; Experience</p>
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<p>Community First</p>
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<p>Whole-Life Approach</p>

## **1. Reason for Presentation of Paper / Report**

This report is a scheduled update to Trust Board on the Executive Director for Social Work's areas of responsibility. It is presented for assurance and information purposes.

## **2. Detailed summary of paper contents:**

This report is an update on the Executive Director for Social Work's areas of responsibility. The paper provides an overview of issues relating to the social work and social care workforce, including challenges in relation to delivery of statutory functions.

This reporting cycle has a primary focus on Domestic Abuse and provides assurance (including identification of areas for development) in relation to the arrangements within Southern Trust for responding to Domestic Abuse and protecting victims, including children who may be impacted. The update to Trust Board provides assurance in relation to how the Southern Trust is fulfilling its responsibilities in relation to The Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy (2024 – 2031) and the Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls (EWAG) 2024-2031.

## **3. Areas of improvement/achievement:**

- The Social Work profession, working across Directorates within the Southern Trust, continues to deliver a high degree of compliance in respect of the discharge of Statutory Functions (SF).
- The overview of service provision in relation to Domestic Abuse provides assurance in relation to the Trust's arrangements.
- The Southern Trust Area Domestic and Sexual Abuse Partnership (SADSVP) have robust arrangements in place, aligned to The Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy (2024 – 2031) and the Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls (EWAG) 2024-2031, to ensure an effective multi-agency response to domestic and sexual abuse and violence.

## **4. Areas of concern/risk/challenge:**

- The Trust's ability to consistently fulfil all statutory duties continues to be impacted upon by Social Work staffing challenges across both children's and adult services.
- There is a need for Domestic and Sexual Abuse Partnerships to be resourced with a coordinator and consideration of a dedicated Partnership chairperson to drive forward initiatives, and to hold all member agencies to account. This has been raised by joint DOH/DOJ bids for transformational funding for 2025 allocation.
- There are significant gaps in holding perpetrators of domestic and sexual violence to account within the legal process and work is ongoing within the Department of Justice in this regard.
- Further development is required regionally and locally in relation to the process for Domestic Homicide Reviews and sharing the learning from these reviews.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Funding is a significant barrier to progressing supports and services for victims of domestic and sexual abuse. The 2024-31 strategy has invited applications from Voluntary &amp; Community (V&amp;C) sector for funding. Whilst this is a welcomed approach, there is a need to consider further funding across key front line statutory agencies and the need for recurrent funding to support victims of abuse, particularly within the V&amp;C sector. This is being considered by the Expert Reference Group and the Strategy Oversight Board.</li> </ul>	
<b>5. Impact on Statutory Duties: Provide details on the impact of the following and how.</b>	
<b><i>Financial Impact</i></b>	<b><i>Safety and Quality Impact</i></b>
No, there are no Financial Impacts	Yes, there are Quality, Safety or Experience Impacts
<b>6. Risk Assessment (Risk level and state if a risk assessment be completed)</b>	
N/A	
<b>7. Other Business Intelligence/data (If appropriate)</b>	
<b>8. Impact: Provide details on the impact of the following and how. If this is N/A you should explain why this is an appropriate response.</b>	
<b>Corporate Risk Register</b>	Yes regarding Social work Staffing shortages and impact
<b>Board Assurance Framework</b>	Yes
<b>Equality and Human Rights</b>	Yes

## Trust Board Role Fulfilment

<b>Strategy</b>	<i>Papers in this category should address forward-looking priorities, long-term objectives, or service transformation. These are typically focused on shaping the future of the organisation and will often involve decisions on direction, investment, or innovation.</i>
<b>Culture</b>	<i>These papers aim to influence or reflect the values, behaviours, and staff or patient experiences within HSC. They may relate to leadership development, equality, diversity and inclusion, staff engagement, or initiatives intended to reinforce our organisational ethos.</i>
<b>Accountability</b>	<i>Papers falling into this area relate to governance, assurance, performance monitoring, compliance, and risk. They provide evidence that responsibilities are being fulfilled, standards are being met, and corrective actions are being taken where necessary.</i>

#### **Reasons for Paper Presentation**

<b>Approval</b>	<i>Used when an item requires a formal agreement or endorsement by the meeting / committee members. Examples are approving minutes, budgets, proposals or policies.</i>
<b>Assurance</b>	<i>Used when an item can be measured against a certain criteria / standard. Examples are a project is on course with delivery or financial targets are being met.</i>
<b>Information</b>	<i>Used when an item is presented for the purpose of updating or informing the attendees without requiring a decision or action, such as reports, updates, or announcements.</i>
<b>Discussion</b>	<i>Used when an item is listed primarily for open discussion, brainstorming or gathering input from the members without requiring an immediate decision.</i>

## **Executive Director of Social Work Report for Trust Board**

### **1. Introduction**

This report is an update on the Executive Director for Social Work’s areas of responsibility. The paper provides an overview of issues relating to the social work and social care workforce, including challenges in relation to delivery of statutory functions.

The report provides an update on the current position in respect of Social Work staffing which has remained on the Corporate Risk register due to long standing vacancies and challenges to recruit due to regional shortages of qualified social work staff.

This reporting cycle has a primary focus on Domestic Abuse and provides assurance (including identification of areas for development) in relation to the arrangements within Southern Trust for responding to Domestic Abuse and protecting victims, including children who may be impacted.

Domestic Abuse has a very significant and negative impact on children, adults and communities and places considerable pressures on many aspects of Health and Social Care provision, both in relation to immediate impact and in responding to inter-generational trauma experienced by victims.

### **2. Workforce**

The Trust remains committed to building a strong, sustainable and motivated social work workforce through continued focus on attraction, recruitment and retention. Alongside this focus internally, there is significant emphasis on the promotion of social work as a career in order to ensure that current and future social work workforce demands can be met.

Both the Southern Trust and the Department of Health (DOH) have invested in the Open University (OU) as a progression route for social care staff to gain a social work qualification. To date, fifteen people have qualified through this route and filled vacancies within the Trust. Currently 23 social care workers are in progress and recruitment is underway for the next intake commencing in September 2026.

### **3. Statutory Functions (SF)**

The Trust's Annual Statutory Functions (SF) reports provide a review of the discharge of the statutory functions and highlights areas where compliance has not been achieved. There are many consistent themes and challenges impacting on the delivery of Statutory Functions across the region. In summary, these are associated with workforce vacancies and absence rates, which therefore impact on compliance in terms of unallocated cases, annual reviews and other areas of service delivery.

#### **Children and Young People Services**

- There have been improvements in the level of absence/vacancies overall within Children's services, however there are specific service areas where absence and vacancies continue to present a significant challenge in relation to service delivery.
- Staffing levels directly impact on the level of unallocated cases. SPPG have acknowledged the positive steps SHSCT has made in reducing unallocated cases within Family Intervention Teams and that there are no unallocated Child Protection cases.
- The service continues to have a small number of unallocated Looked after children. This has been reducing as staffing levels improve. Currently there are 31 Looked after children without an allocated social worker (reduced from 60 in the summer). There are robust monitoring mechanisms in place.

#### **Adult Community Services (ACS)**

- ACS continues to be challenged with unallocated cases and completion of Annual Reviews for service users.
- ACS is actively engaged in piloting a skills mix model whereby social care practitioners can undertake care management reviews in accordance with Department of Health guidance (March 2025). A governance framework has been developed to support this work. It is anticipated that the development of skills mix will also impact positively on current levels of unallocated cases and annual reviews. Progress is being achieved in respect of a reduction in unallocated numbers which confirms the benefits of the Skills mix approach which the service is committed to.

#### **Physical Disability and Sensory Impairment**

- There are currently 32 service users within the Physical Disability service with outstanding packages of care. This is a reduction of 22 on the same period last year. It is hoped that work underway under the 'Timely Care' Strategy will maximise domiciliary care capacity.

## **Mental Health Services**

- Work is ongoing in relation to reducing waiting lists for new assessments. The Directorate continue to monitor waiting times and have developed a text reminder service to reduce non-attendance at appointments.
- The issue of delayed access to acute mental health beds is a complex and persistent challenge across the region. Bed managers in Bluestone have implemented systems to ensure all available resources are used as an alternative to admission or to support discharge.
- The Out of Hours Approved Social work services (Belfast Trust are commissioned to deliver the service) continues to experience very considerable difficulties as a consequence of absence rates, vacancies and ability to manage conveyancing challenges in respect of detained patients. This impacts directly on southern Trust day time services and occasionally on patients being cared for in Emergency Care departments.

## **Learning Disability Services (LDS)**

- LDS are challenged to meet requirements in relation to completion of annual reviews and allocation of cases. It is anticipated that the introduction of a skills mixed approach will have a positive impact on compliance
- The service is developing an action plan to support the provision of short breaks for service users with complex health care and behavioural needs.
- Challenges exist in relation to resources available to support children transitioning to Adult Services. A Transitional Care for Young People forum has been established to improve transition and is chaired by the Executive Director of Social Work.

## **4. DOMESTIC ABUSE SERVICES IN SOUTHERN TRUST**

The purpose of this update to Trust Board is in respect of the publication of two major frameworks; The Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy (2024 – 2031) and the Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls (EWAG) 2024-2031, and to provide assurance in relation to how the Southern Trust is fulfilling its responsibilities in line with the above strategic frameworks.

Both Frameworks emphasise a whole-society and whole system approach, increased alignment of statutory, community and voluntary sectors, prevention and early intervention, and robust performance frameworks.

Domestic abuse is defined as:

*Threatening, controlling, coercive behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, virtual, physical, verbal, sexual, financial or emotional) inflicted on anyone (irrespective of age, ethnicity, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation or any form of disability) by a current or former intimate partner or family member. Domestic abuse can take many forms, which may involve physical violence.*

Within the Southern Trust, a multi-agency response to domestic abuse is aligned to the following areas:

- Prevention & early intervention: embedding awareness, challenging controlling/coercive behaviour, safe relationships education, outreach to underserved groups.
- Protection & response: ensuring victims (including children) get prompt specialist help, work with partners to support safe accommodation, legal support and multi-agency coordination.
- Perpetrator intervention & justice: working with justice partners (police, Public Prosecution Services and courts) to ensure effective prosecution, use of new protective legislation (stalking, non-fatal strangulation) and risk management.
- Partnerships & data/learning: local Domestic and Sexual Violence Partnerships will map the five pillars of the DSA Strategy, monitor performance via the national Performance Framework, and integrate with the EAWG agenda where women and girls' gender-based violence is concerned.

Many victims of domestic and sexual abuse live their lives in fear and are significantly impacted upon by the abuse they have suffered. It can have an enormous impact on all aspects of a person's life: their physical and mental health; their identity and relationships with friends and family; housing and their finances. The issues involved are complex, needing a sustained multi-faceted response and often access to services across health and social care at all levels of need.

Domestic abuse is complex in terms of who is involved as well as what, where, when and why it occurs. It can affect anyone regardless of their social standing or socio-economic class and can take place across many different relationships and locations including Intimate Partner Abuse, (IPV) in current and former partner relationships, with post separation being a high risk trigger, abuse by family members, (including child to parent abuse), abuse involving multiple needs and can include children (under the age of 18) as victims of domestic abuse.

The impact of domestic and sexual abuse is personal to each individual affected. Women are disproportionately affected and more likely to experience multiple incidents of abuse, and often face many barriers to reporting abuse. Men also suffer domestic and sexual abuse and due to societal norms are less likely to seek help and support. Research also highlights domestic and sexual abuse occurs in same sex relationships and child to parent domestic abuse.

Domestic and sexual abuse is commonly under-reported in ethnic minority communities. People may be at particular risk because of language barriers and a lack of local connections or understanding of how to navigate local services. Cultural values

can also prevent disclosures of abuse out of fear of dishonouring family or their community. An individual may also be dependent on the person abusing them for immigration status, lack financial independence and have no recourse to public funds. This has been noted as a significant factor within the SHSCT area due to the significant ethnic and migrant population.

### Prevalence of Domestic Violence

An overview of the context of domestic abuse in Northern Ireland, as reported to the police, is set out below. However, the true figure is likely to be much higher due to underreporting by those who cannot, or do not feel able to report to police.

Most recent report from PSNI statistics for year July 2024 to June 2025 highlight;

<p><b>29,740<sup>1</sup></b> domestic abuse <b>INCIDENTS<sup>2</sup></b> responded to by police</p>	<p><b>18,246</b> domestic abuse <b>CRIMES</b> recorded by police</p>	<p>On average every <b>18 MINUTES</b> domestic abuse was reported to police</p>
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**1 in 4 cases involved a parent child relationship**

Information relating to prosecutions regarding domestic or aggravated offences involving domestic abuse remain low in comparison to reported incidents<sup>3</sup> for period Apr 2024 – March 2025

**2501 cases** dealt with via courts under the Domestic and Civil Proceedings Act with 56.3 conviction rate.

### Domestic Abuse Homicides

<sup>1</sup>[Domestic Abuse Statistics | PSNI](#)

<sup>2</sup> 1st May 2023: the Home Office introduced a change in respect of these ‘behavioural crimes’ by reversing the requirement to record the most serious additional victim-based offence. In practice these changes meant that between 1st April 2018 and 30th April 2023 there was some ‘double counting’ of offences when an incident involved a conduct/behaviour offence (Harassment, stalking, coercive or controlling behaviour) and another offence, which would have led to an increase in the number of crimes recorded. From 1st May 2023, this practice was reversed, and the current approach is more similar to the period prior to 1st April 2018, where a conduct/behaviour offence will only be recorded when it is deemed to be the most serious offence.

<sup>3</sup> [Prosecutions at courts and case processing time for domestic abuse related cases dealt with in 2024-25 published today | Department of Justice](#)

**10 Domestic Homicides** during period July 2024 to June 2025  
**(8 female and 2 male victims)**

All ten domestic abuse homicides were murder offences.

Since the introduction of Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHR) in 2020 there have been 28 domestic homicides in Northern Ireland. The SHSCT have been involved in 8 DHRs, 7 where victims were resident within the SHSCT area and 1 where the victim resided in another Trust area and the Alleged Perpetrator resided in the SHSCT area. There has been an increase in DHR over the years with the above period being the highest number of domestic homicides.

### The Southern Health and Social Care Trust

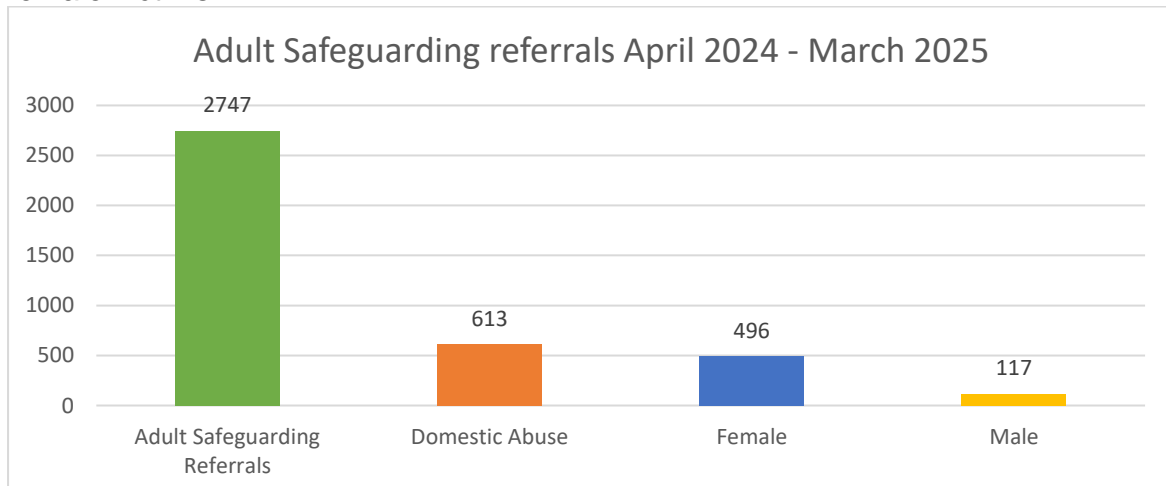
#### Domestic Abuse Referrals and Activity

PSNI, whilst not the only referrer to HSCTs, are in the main the first point of contact for victims who report an incident of domestic abuse. PSNI have an 'Enforcement Order' in place where all incidents of domestic abuse are referred to the HSCTs.

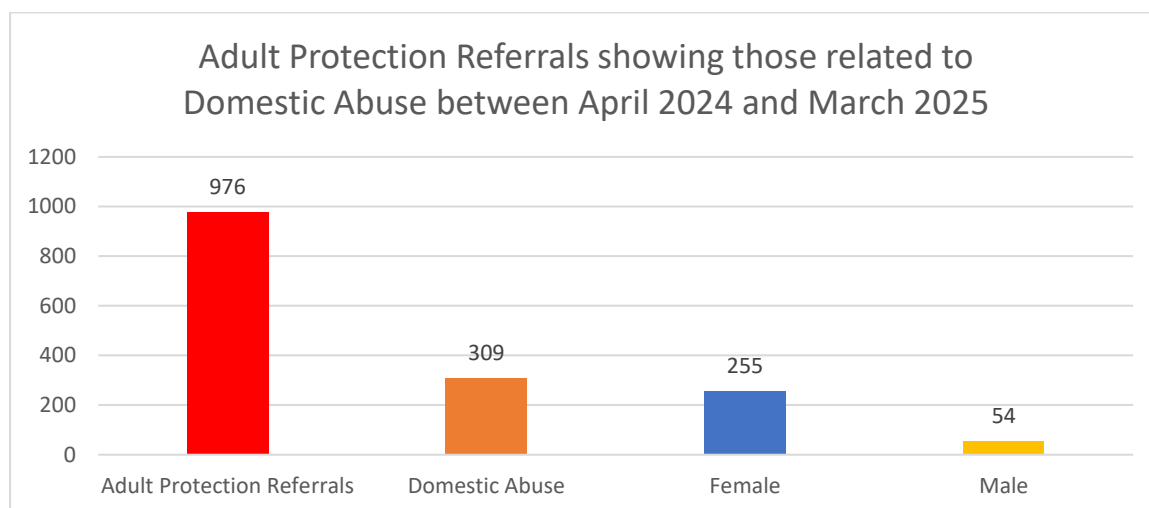
During the period 2024-25, 1267 children (3.5 children per day on average) and 1335 adults were referred to Children's Services due to Domestic Abuse. In addition, there were 193 children referred due to risk of potential significant harm and whilst these are not coded as domestic abuse, the reason for a safeguarding referral can also relate to child protection concern regarding domestic abuse.

#### Domestic Abuse and Adult Safeguarding

A referral to Adult Safeguarding is made when an adult may be at risk of harm due to their life circumstances or personal characteristics. In many situations this can be as a result of a domestic abuse incident. The chart below shows 22% of adult safeguarding referrals involved domestic abuse incidents. 81% of these related to female victims.



In some situations, there is reasonable belief that the adult may not be able to protect themselves from future harm and therefore the referral is forwarded for further assessment by the Adult Protection Gateway Team (APGT). As shown below, 32% of adult protection referrals requiring risk assessment and safety planning related to domestic abuse by APTG. 82.5% of these related to female victims.



Following initial assessment by the Adult Protection Gateway Team a total of 65 referrals (21%) required further ongoing risk assessment and protection planning with the individual in either community teams or with the Adult Protection Gateway team.

### **Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC)**

The MARAC operational guidance ([safelie.org.uk](http://safelie.org.uk)) sets out arrangements in respect of the MARAC process, whereby Police, children’s social services, health and other relevant agencies meet twice per month to review referrals where there are high risk concerns in respect of the safety of an individual or family. The MARAC provides a confidential local forum to discuss how to help victims at high risk of murder or serious harm. Within the MARAC, information is shared about the victim, the family and perpetrator. An action plan is developed for each victim. Collectively, the meeting writes an action plan for each victim.

### **Referrals into MARAC 2024-2025 in Southern Trust Area**

The main referring agency into the MARAC process is the PSNI, followed by the Health and Social Care Trusts and then Women’s Aid. Other referring agencies include, Housing Executive, Education, Victim Support and Probation.

In 2024-25 there was a total of 331 cases heard at MARAC in Southern Trust, 278 of these cases were agreed as high risk, 92 of which were repeat cases. There were 422

children identified as being connected with either the victim or perpetrator in MARAC cases. The Southern Trust has seen an increase in referrals to MARAC over the past two years, a trajectory which is likely to continue.

The Department of Justice (DOJ) commissioned an Independent review of the MARAC process and the findings have been approved via the Joint DOJ/DOH Senior Oversight Group. The report concluded that, taken together, the core recommendations provide an appropriate framework for a new model. We will provide more detail on decisions around specific recommendations in due course.

Both Justice and Health Ministers have approved a move to a focused implementation phase, with a view to standing up new arrangements by the end of 2025/26 financial year. There is now a now a dedicated Police lead (Superintendent grade) to introduce the replacement multi-agency model. The SHSCT will have a key interface remit in the implementation of the revised model.

### **Impact of domestic violence on victims and children and young people**

While children's experience of domestic abuse are distinct to them, they are also often connected to the abuse of their parent or carer. They can also be victims in their own right and can develop associated complex needs. The impact of seeing, hearing or experiencing the effects of abuse is significant and the long-term consequences of this trauma can stretch into adulthood. Adverse childhood experiences can have lasting, negative effects on a child's development, health and well-being, leading to behavioural problems, difficulties at school and increased risk of difficulties in future relationships. There may also be complex needs for those children in refuges, who may face additional barriers in getting support. Additionally, there is often a stigma attached to attending school from a refuge.

The prevalence of children and young people living with parents who have experienced domestic abuse is greater within the most vulnerable children, including children on the Child Protection Register. Research also highlights that many Looked After children and young people have greater adverse childhood experiences, including high prevalence of experiencing domestic violence.

All victims and children referred to the SHSCT receive an assessment, which identifies the pathway for further support and intervention; referral to Family Support Hubs for Early Intervention supports, ongoing support via Trust Domestic Abuse and Engagement Service or bespoke care plan in relation to a Child in Need via Family Intervention social work Teams.

### **Women's Aid**

In the Southern Trust locality, the Trust commission Women's Aid Armagh & Down (WAAD), to provide refuge and supports to women and children who have experienced domestic abuse. During the period Apr 2024 – Mar 2025 WAAD have reported the following activity in respect of supports provided:

WAAD Adult Support

- 1559 referrals for 1342 women,
- 95 referrals have been received for 85 women to avail of refuge.
- 35 women and 22 children availed of refuge accommodation.
- There are presently 22 women on the waiting list for refuge support.
- Support for 38 women through pregnancy
- 1318 children and young people's mothers engaged in support
- Any female referred for refuge, where there is no place available, is supported to seek refuge elsewhere and/or support provided in the community.

#### WAAD Children's Support Services

- 166 children and young people referred.
- 133 children and young people actively engaged in support.
- 15 children and young people engaged in group support programmes.

There is a significant demand for supports for victims of domestic abuse and children living within domestic abuse within family networks. WAAD provide an education programme within schools, via a SHSCT service level agreement:

- 610 students across 19 schools engaged in Helping Hands or Heading for Healthy Relationships programmes
- Post Operation Encompass support (via SAHRA Project) was provided to 41 children and young people in schools.

The Trust also work in partnership with Men's Advisory Project to provide support to male victims of domestic abuse via a regional service provision commissioned via the Department of Health (DOH).

### **The Southern Area Domestic and Sexual Abuse Partnership**

In 2005 the Government launched "Tackling Violence at Home", a multi-agency response to addressing domestic violence in Northern Ireland. This strategy, along with action plans aimed to ensure a collaborative approach under the themes of Prevention, Protection and Support. As part of the delivery of this strategy, five domestic violence partnerships were established in each Health and Social Care Trust area to ensure implementation at a local level.

In March 2016, "Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse" – a seven year strategy was launched which had a vision and focus on the elimination of both domestic and sexual violence and abuse in Northern Ireland. All local domestic violence partnerships extended their remit in line with Government strategy to include sexual violence and abuse.

The Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy (2024 – 2031) and the Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls (EWAG) 2024-2031 launched in 2024, provide the framework for The Southern Trust Area Domestic and Sexual Abuse Partnership (SADSVP) alignment of a multi-agency response to domestic and sexual abuse and violence.

The Southern Area Domestic and Sexual Abuse Partnership chair engaged with the Innovation Lab (commissioned DOJ and DOH) regarding research into the local Area Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse Partnerships and made recommendations to strengthen the Partnerships to align with strategies, policy and legislation. Revised governance and reporting arrangements have been approved by the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy Oversight Board. The Southern Trust's Assistant Director for Family Support and Safeguarding represents the Southern Trust and the SADSVP on the regional Expert Reference Group (ERG) and represents all 5 Partnerships on the Strategy Oversight Board. Further work is underway to strengthen the partnership with supports pending funding.

The Southern Trust Area Domestic and Sexual Abuse Partnership (SADSVP) is chaired by the Southern Trust's Assistant Director for Family Support and Safeguarding. It is made up of 25 members across 14 partner agencies including; Southern Trust Adult and Children Safeguarding leads, Training and Development Team, Mental Health Services, Principal Officer for Public Protection Arrangement, Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference Representative, PSNI, Women's Aid, Men's Advisory Project, Nexus, Probation, Police and Community Partnerships, Barnardos, Public Prosecution Service, Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Trade Unions and Victims Support. The Partnership members collaborate with key agencies in relation to regional and local developments and innovations. This is a key forum in respect of the local response to Domestic abuse and is also influential in respect of regional policy and relevant escalations to the DOH and DOJ.

## **Regional Developments**

The Partnerships were key drivers to the revision and implementation of the Domestic and Sexual Abuse (DSA) Strategy (2024 – 2031), including the Governance Framework Strategy Oversight Board and Expert Reference Group (ERG). This has led to strengthened governance arrangements regionally.

The Partnership's local area Strategic Action Plans are developed to align with the DSA Strategy and the Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls (EWAG) 2024-2031

A significant body of work has progressed within the past 3 years with a number of notable achievements under the strategy including:

### *Legislation*

- Introduction of a new domestic abuse offence in 2022, criminalising a pattern of non-physically abusive behaviours.
- Provision for an entitlement to paid safe leave for victims of domestic abuse under the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Act (NI) 2022. This has recently been updated for inclusion in the SHSCT Domestic Abuse Policy and Safe Leave Policy.
- Protection from stalking legislation was brought forward (includes outside a domestic or family context) alongside the Justice Act (NI) 2022. This provides for

new offences of up-skirting, down blousing, cyber flashing; an adult pretending to be a child for the purpose of child grooming as well as the extended scope of abuse of position of trust offences to the areas of sport and faith. The offence of disclosure of private sexual images to include 'threats to disclose' implemented in November 2023.

- Non-fatal strangulation and preventing the so-called 'rough-sex' defence.
- Work in relation to Domestic Abuse Protection Notices and Order, is being progressed via the DSA Strategy.
- Domestic Violence and Abuse Disclosure Scheme (DVADS)<sup>4</sup> - Revised guidance will be launched. The 'Right to Ask' is the powerful message behind this scheme. The PSNI is empowering both men and women who are potential victims of domestic abuse and / or are their concerned friends, with the right to ask about a new partner.

### *Training and Awareness*

- The eLearning package to raise awareness regarding domestic abuse has been rolled out across SHSCT and available across public and voluntary sector. This remains an area of priority for the SHSCT with the objective that key staff are sufficiently attuned to the Domestic abuse and how to assist victims.
- Raising awareness of the new domestic abuse legislation – The SADSAP have supported multiple regional media campaigns, such as 'It's Never OK'.
- The Social Services Learning and Development Team have a domestic abuse training framework in place that covers Level 1 awareness raising for all staff, Level 2 training for staff who have contact with service users, as well as more in-depth training at Level 3 and 4, targeted at staff as relevant to their role with service users. The Trust Domestic Abuse, Safety, and Support worker contributes to the delivery of training set out within the training framework.

### *Learning and Review*

- Domestic Homicide Reviews were introduced into statute in Northern Ireland in 2020, to learn lessons from tragic deaths arising from domestic violence. Since the last report a number of DHRs have been published and the Partnership and its members work together to seek to implement any learning from the published DHR.
- The <sup>5</sup>Gillen Review 'Report into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland' Part 1, Gillen (2019) made a number of recommendations:

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<sup>44</sup> [Domestic Violence and Abuse Disclosure Scheme \(DVADS\) Leaflet - English](#)

<sup>5</sup> Gillen, J, (2019) *Gillen Review: Report into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland, Part 1*, DOJ. [gillenreview.org](http://gillenreview.org)

- Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) interviews were introduced in SHSCT area to improve the standard and quality of ABE interview recordings, alongside a smaller cadre of specially selected skilled and trained officers to conduct ABEs. Following the successful Joint PSNI / SHSCT Pilot it was concluded that there was a need for regional implementation of the ABE Cadre model. Following a successful business case in 2025, funding has been allocated to SHSCT to house a regional ABE service for all 5 Trusts in NI. This service will go live in Jan 2026 and implementation plans are well underway.
- Establishment of a Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime, including representation of victims of domestic abuse.
- REMOTE EVIDENCE CENTRES (RECs) provide vulnerable witnesses with a safe, comfortable and secure environment as they wait to give their evidence, and as they give evidence. They also remove any chance witnesses could encounter the defendant in or around the court building. RECs therefore enable vulnerable and intimidated victims and witnesses to give their best evidence, help to reduce attrition and assist in enhancing public confidence in the criminal justice system. RECs are intended to enable victims to give their best evidence and increase their confidence in the justice system.

RECs are now operational in Belfast and Craigavon, in addition to the longstanding NSPCC led facility in Western Area.

There is an increase of over 600% REC trial bookings in 2024 compared to 2023. This trend continued up until Sept 2025 with a further 90% increase in bookings. In 2024, 344 witnesses (199 adults and 145 children) attended a REC to give evidence. In 2025, DOJ project around 500 witnesses to attend a REC.

It is encouraging that conviction rates for REC cases, as at Sept 2025 stands at 91%, and for the whole of last year was 92%. Over half of convictions have been by guilty plea, which has meant that the victim has not had to provide any oral evidence at the trial.

It is hoped that the RECs will be extended to other Court areas across the SHSCT area.

## Services

- Pilot of a free public transport for those going to refuge or temporary accommodation completed. Work is underway with Departments regarding how to make transport more accessible for victims of abuse.
- Legal Advice for Complainants (The SOLA Scheme).

The Adult SOLA<sup>6</sup> scheme launched on 1 April 2021 has now provided free legal advice to over 2,000 adult complainants in serious sexual offence cases. The Child SOLA (CSOLA)<sup>7</sup> scheme launched on 5 February 2025. While only in place for a few months, the CSOLA service has already received over 300 referrals.

The SOLA scheme is delivering important support to complainants in serious sexual offence cases, improving their experiences and confidence in the criminal justice process by providing a wide range of legal advice, with particular focus on the privacy rights of complainants with respect to the disclosure of medical and counselling records or previous sexual history.

- The Barnahus Model is a concept that offers a child-friendly approach to sexual crime where law enforcement, criminal justice, child protective services, and medical and mental health workers cooperate in a ‘joined up’ approach to ensure the best support for child victims. A cross-departmental Barnahus Working Group that includes the Department for Health (DoH) and Department of Justice (DoJ) is leading work to identify potential models and costed options for Barnahus model for NI. The outcome of that work, including a preferred option, is expected to be presented to Ministers in the Autumn. The SHSCT SAFE4U Service offers supports to victims via a single service, with the exception of medicals, which are facilitated in the Regional Centre, ROWANS.
- Under the Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims, SOTA) Act (NI) 2022 a number of important reforms recommended in the Gillen Review, were introduced as a result of the further implementation of the SOTV Act, including:
  - the exclusion of the public from court in serious sexual offence trials and appeal hearings
  - the extension of existing lifelong anonymity for victims until 25 years after death
  - an increase in the penalty for anyone who breaches anonymity law.

Under the Act, only those necessary to the effective functioning of the trial; a friend or relative to support the complainant; and the accused, along with bona fide representatives of the press will be permitted into court. This helps to reduce the re-traumatisation of witnesses as they give evidence. Likewise, ensuring the anonymity of victims until 25 years after their death provides further important protections.

Before the end of the current mandate, DOJ hope to introduce further legislation recommended in the Gillen Review that will improve the experience of victims, this includes:

- legislative proposals to enhance the protection of complainants’ personal information in the third-party material disclosure process. This

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<sup>6</sup> [Sexual Violence - SOLAs \(Sexual Offences Legal Advisers\) - Victim Support NI](#)

<sup>7</sup> [CSOLA - Children's Sexual Offences Legal Adviser - Victim Support NI](#)

includes information such as counselling notes and some social service or medical records.

- proposals to enable third party representation in court in pre-trial hearings in relation to applications by defence to introduce evidence of the complainant's previous sexual history at trial and for disclosure of the complainant's personal information held by third parties. This would allow the role of the SOLAs to be extended to include representation to the court.

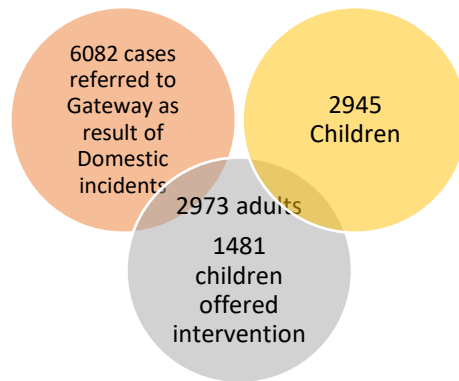
Following a positive response to a public consultation in relation to the above legislation, DOJ hope to introduce these provisions in the Victims & Witness Bill to be introduced in Spring 2026.

The SADSVP Action Plan is aligned to the regional strategy and includes areas for local development.

### **Local Developments**

The Southern Area Domestic & Sexual Violence Partnership have pioneered a number of projects:

- The Identification and Referral to Improve Safety (IRIS) primary care project re domestic abuse is now in Year 5. This service is supported via Multi-Disciplinary Teams within the Community GP Practices. Of the 58 available surgeries in the Newry and Craigavon Federations, 27 surgeries are signed up to IRIS, totalling a patient population of 155,152. IRIS is currently in 2 surgeries and 25,152 patients above target. 24 of the Surgeries are fully trained, 1 is partially trained and 2 are awaiting training.
- The SADSVP supported the Operation Encompass pilot, this is a safeguarding scheme where, when PSNI attend a domestic abuse incident with children present, the child's school is informed by the next morning so tailored support can be put in place. Since the commencement of the pilot in 2021 the scheme has now been implemented across all schools in the Southern Area and rollout completed in May 2023 across 1162 schools regionally. There have been 23,448 referrals made to schools.
- Due to increasing demands across CYP Services alongside reduced social work capacity, Gateway were unable to provide early intervention in a timely and effective way resulting in unallocated family support cases. In response, the service introduced an Early Intervention Domestic Abuse Service (EIDAS) as a key to the prevention of escalation of concerns regarding domestic abuse. The service became operational in July 2023 in response to an increasing number of referrals as a result of incidents of domestic violence; 3898 children had been referred in the year between April 2021 to March 2022.
- Activity regarding EIDAS Service between July 2023 - October 2025



- The EIDAS are currently piloting a Coercive Control model 'Is it time to Talk' in conjunction with University of Ulster'.
- The SADSVP are also working with key partner agencies to roll this model across Voluntary and Community sectors providers.
- Safety and Healthy Relationships Advocate (SAHRA). Women's Aid have created a pilot project initially with two post primary schools and laterally with primary schools in the Southern Area, to respond to the needs of pupils and teaching staff. This pilot has provided one to one specialist support to pupils with lived experience of domestic and sexual abuse, alongside specialist onsite Domestic and Sexual Abuse training for all school staff. This has complimented Operation Encompass, acting as the next tier of support for teachers and pupils. SAHRA have support 41 children and young people during Apr 2024- Mar 25.
- Within the SHSCT, Domestic Abuse and Support Service (DASS) is in place within the acute hospitals, including a pilot of an out of hours service implemented for six-month in both DHH and CAH Emergency Departments. The service celebrated 5 years' service in 2025 and has successfully ensured early intervention for victims of this domestic abuse and increased the safety for each woman who engaged. It also relieved the pressure on Acute. The evaluation has been shared with DOJ and DOH and joint funding Business Case has been commissioned via DOJ to secure resource for a regional roll out of the service.
- Engagement with voluntary and community sector re increasing awareness and support to victims of domestic and sexual violence; engagement via the councils with the night time economy re Ask for Angela, engagement via Trusts and Women's Aid with supermarkets, pharmacies, hairdressers and barbers re safe spaces and support to victims who present with concerns re domestic violence or abuse.
- Promoting Positive Relationships programme. This intensive behavioural change programme, focused on men who perpetrate domestic abuse, is delivered in partnership with Probation NI, Women's Aid and SHSCT. It is now in Year 6, funding was reduced in 2024 to included 60 places regionally for statutory and non-adjudicated offenders, Probation Board for NI are the lead body, supported by the Trusts, this remains a priority area for delivery under the DSA Strategy.

The group work programme offers a 26 week programme to men who have engaged in domestically abusive behaviours whom have not been adjudicated through the court process. The Southern Trust have availed of 12 places each year and over the past 5 years have held a waiting list for allocation. There remains a gap in provision of the programme, as it does not cater for BME population who require interpretation service (verbal and/or written).

- Social media campaigns. The SADSVP, in conjunction with ABC and NMDD councils, have delivered social media campaigns over the Christmas period and mid-year focused on healthy relationships, including the impact of domestic and sexual violence, technology aided abuse, mental health and have targeted campaigns to children and young people, ethnic minority groups and older people, on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, snap chat and TikTok, which are accessed across the age span, including by young people.
- Every year between 25 November and 10 December, there is a period known as the 16 Days of Action against gender based violence and a multi-agency plan is in place to raise awareness in relation to domestic abuse and sexual violence. The Partnership will focus on a numbers of areas; media campaign re femicide, bystander and stalking campaigns will be reissued. A plan across all agencies will be co-ordinated via the Partnership.
- Safe4U Service has been implemented within SHSCT, this includes supports for children and young people who engage in Harmful Sexual Behaviour and Child Sexual Abuse Recovery Support. The Service was launched in March 2025 and includes assessment and interventions in relation to; Harmful Sexual Abuse (HSB) specific assessment, and therapeutic intervention service for children/young people (8 – 17 years), Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) Recovery Service (4 – 16 years), Achieving Best Evidence Cadre and Child Exploitation service, in the SHSCT area.
- Participation in regional “Voice of Young People” project in partnership with SBNI, SHSCT and Women’s Aid Federation, involving children and young people with lived experience.
- SHSCT continue to offer a fast track service into addiction services for victims of domestic abuse who are discussed at MARAC.
- SHSCT continue to progress the pilot project for offenders in PPANI which includes violent offenders. They are offered the Fast Track services if addiction has being a factor in their offending. It is hoped that early intervention will support the offender to avoid causing serious harm through re-offending.

### **Future Planning and Areas for Development**

The SADSVP model work wells, with all partner agencies invested in driving forward change and innovation related to supporting victims of domestic and sexual abuse,

including children. However, there is a need for members of the Partnership to ensure a consistent engagement in this work. In addition, Partnerships need to be resourced with a coordinator and consideration of a dedicated chairperson to drive forward initiatives, and to hold all member agencies to account. This has been raised by joint DOH/DOJ bids for transformational funding for 2025 allocation.

There are significant gaps in holding perpetrators of domestic and sexual violence to account within the legal process and work is ongoing within the Department of Justice in this regard. However, all agencies can play a role in developing a cultural change in society in relation to domestic and sexual violence. This includes the need for increased uptake of training within SHSCT, to ensure that all employees are aware of the laws in relation to domestic abuse and have an awareness in relation to recognising and responding to domestic abuse and violence.

Further development is required regionally and locally in relation to the process for Domestic Homicide Reviews and sharing the learning from these reviews. Presently there are five published reviews and sharing the learning opportunities have been held with the agencies involved in the DHR. There is a need for learning to be shared across partner agencies including HSCTs. Work is underway via DOJ in this regard and the SHSCT leads and SADSVP will contribute to any learning as relevant.

Funding is a significant barrier to progressing supports and services for victims of domestic and sexual abuse. The 2024-31 strategy has invited applications from Voluntary & Community (V&C) sector for funding. Whilst this is a welcomed approach, there is a need to consider further funding across key front line agencies and the need for recurrent funding to support victims of abuse, particularly within the V&C sector. This is before the Expert Reference Group and the Strategy Oversight Board.

## **CONCLUSION**

This report to Trust Board provides assurance in relation to the commitment of the Social Work profession across all Directorates to fulfil their delegated statutory duties despite the ongoing challenges in relation to staff recruitment and retention, and increasing demand across Social Work services.

The overview of arrangements within Southern Trust in relation to The Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy (2024 – 2031) and the Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls (EWAG) 2024-2031 provides assurance in relation to the robust arrangements in place, and extensive innovative work to ensure that victims of domestic abuse are appropriately supported through effective multi-disciplinary engagement and partnership working. The report highlights the significant prevalence of Domestic abuse reflected in the number of referrals, increasing trajectory, impact throughout the life cycle and the particular vulnerability of children.

These trends, associated data (significantly high numbers of Domestic Homicide in this region) and extensive research available underlines the requirement to continue to focus on prevention, effective support services and critically influencing Government policy.