

Mapping Services for Male Adult & Child Victim-Survivors of Domestic & Sexual Abuse in Northern Ireland

Executive Summary

August 2025

Acknowledgements

The team would like to sincerely thank all those who participated in the review. We are grateful to the support services for their time and the valuable feedback they provided on services available to male adult and child victims in Northern Ireland.

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Foreword

Domestic and sexual abuse are persistent and insidious plagues in our society, affecting individuals across all ages, ethnicities and backgrounds.

The provision of appropriate, properly funded and specialised support services is regularly identified as crucial to victim recovery.

While much attention has been rightly paid to female victims and more work is needed to address their needs, we must also ensure that no group of victims is left behind. All victims of domestic abuse and sexual crimes deserve services that provide the support they need, when they need it. This includes male victims, whose experiences and needs have often been overlooked.

This review maps the availability of support services for male victims of domestic and sexual abuse across Northern Ireland. Feedback from our previously commissioned research into the **Male Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence: The ME/IPV Study** highlighted a stark lack of appropriate support compelling us to take a closer look at male service provision. The impact of such abuse on men and boys is profound, compounded by feelings of isolation, shame and helplessness. Male victims face unique challenges, from societal stigma and reluctance to come forward, to the scarcity of services tailored to their needs.

I extend my sincere gratitude to all those who participated in this review – I understand that responding to such research is yet another task to fit into an already pressured workload and appreciate that such efforts are driven by a desire to improve the support available to those you work with.

I also thank the researchers for their dedication and commitment to ensure that the report is as meaningful as possible and their willingness to extend the timeframe to facilitate additional responses.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this review. Time and resources necessitated a limited approach, which meant that we were unable to secure the necessary ethical approvals both the research bodies and the Health Trusts require in order to engage with health professionals working in this area.



We were also unable to engage directly with men and boys to understand what type of services they would wish to be available.

Despite this, I strongly believe the findings will be useful for policy makers in this area. These findings are bleak, but not surprising. This report echoes feedback from both male victims and support organisations over many decades.

The scarcity of dedicated services and the collapse of existing services due to lack of sustainable funding are longstanding issues. This issue goes beyond justice. It is a crucial matter of social policy and a pressing public health issue, with significant implications for the well-being and recovery of male victims.

Addressing the scarcity of services requires a cross-departmental response from the Executive, but there must also be immediate action to better promote the services that are currently available. Improved visibility and clear signposting of existing support, such as helplines and community-based services, can help to break down barriers and connect men and boys to the services they need.

I commend the commitment of those agencies working to support male victims, but it is evident that more must be done. The Executive must step up to address the needs of this group of victims, ensuring that male victims are seen, heard, and supported in a manner that is both effective and sustainable.

This report is a call to action – to improve the range, accessibility and visibility of services, so that no victim is left without the support they deserve.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'G Hanna', written over a horizontal line.

Geraldine Hanna

Commissioner Designate for
Victims of Crime Northern Ireland

Executive summary

This report presents the findings of an exercise mapping the landscape of services available to male victims of domestic and sexual abuse in Northern Ireland. The primary goal was to gain a clearer understanding of the current support infrastructure, identify service gaps, and provide actionable recommendations to enhance provision for male victim-survivors. Domestic and sexual abuse are significant policy concerns and while the needs of female victim-survivors have become more clearly articulated, the needs of male victim-survivors, and the effectiveness of services that support them, are under-evaluated.

This report was commissioned by the Victims of Crime Commissioner Designate in response to earlier research that highlighted the challenges male victim-survivors of domestic and sexual abuse face in accessing appropriate services.

There are a number of limitations to the mapping exercise which are important to note when considering the findings presented in this report. These relate to:

- the tight timeframe within which the mapping exercise was undertaken
- the quality and comprehensiveness of quantitative data provided
- low uptake of the survey
- limited participation and representation of services across survey and interviews, particularly the statutory health services and organisations delivering supports at local levels and/or providing support to marginalised groups.

These issues had a direct effect on the robustness of the report findings, which cannot be considered a comprehensive picture of service provision for male victim-survivors of abuse in Northern Ireland. While the mapping exercise generated important findings, the limitations in participation and representativeness, served to reduce the overall scope of the mapping exercise and impacted the range of the service map, the accuracy of the gap analysis, and the depth of the sustainability assessment.

Literature review

To provide context for the mapping exercise, the review team undertook a brief literature review exploring the key issues affecting victim-survivors of abuse in Northern Ireland. Key themes explored included the prevalence of domestic and sexual abuse among men and boys, male victim-survivor experiences of domestic and sexual abuse and its impact, barriers and enablers to disclosing and accessing support and existing service provision in Northern Ireland. Below is a summary of the key points to emerge from the literature review which informed the design of data collection tools and the team's approach to engagement with service providers.

- Domestic and sexual abuse are prevalent issues in Northern Ireland, albeit the true extent of its prevalence is difficult to measure due to underreporting.
- Domestic and sexual abuse are gendered issues meaning they affect both men and women, albeit women are disproportionately impacted.
- It is estimated that 1 in 7 men have experienced domestic abuse in their lifetime.
- There is a lack of statistical information regarding prevalence of male sexual abuse in NI.
- Men experience many forms of abuse, including:
 - Coercive control, including being belittled and blamed for things that were not their fault
 - Using the environment to instil fear i.e. throwing objects or slamming doors
 - Physical violence including broken bones, scarring, bruising and poisoning
 - Sexual degradation and sexual abuse, which includes sexual contact/activities without consent, rape, reproductive coercion and threatening with the publication of intimate or sexually explicit material.
- Both domestic abuse and sexual abuse can have long term and detrimental impacts on male victim-survivors' mental and physical health.
- Male victim-survivors experience barriers to seeking help. These include:
 - Not recognising that what they are experiencing constitutes abuse
 - Blaming themselves for their abuse
 - Stigma, shame and feeling emasculated
 - Not thinking anyone could do anything to help or support
 - Not knowing where to go for support
 - Lack of available services and supports
 - Fear of not being believed
 - Concern about the impact on children of seeking help/leaving the relationship or family home.
- There are some notable trends in how men access support:
 - Men tend to share their experiences with friends or family
 - If men seek formal support, they seek out counselling, therapy or specialist domestic abuse services. This includes helpline support
 - Men report negative experiences when receiving support, such as being dismissed or accused of abuse
 - Men also have concerns around inappropriate handling of confidentiality and a lack of choice regarding the gender of support provider
- There are many gaps in service provision in Northern Ireland. Research found that:
 - There is a lack of awareness around availability of supports
 - There are inconsistencies in the way in which victim-survivors are responded to/ referred onwards

- There is a lack of advocacy services and accompaniment services i.e. court accompaniment
- There is a lack of research relevant to the Northern Irish context around:
 - Victim-survivors with disabilities
 - Racial and Ethnic diversity
 - LGBTQ+ Victim-survivors
 - Refugees and asylum seekers
 - Early intervention and education.

Desk-based review of existing services

To develop a picture of existing services and supports in Northern Ireland for male victim-survivors, the team undertook a desk-based review to synthesise information available online relating to services available. The findings from this exercise were used to inform the review team's approach to participant recruitment. In addition, it provided some additional insights, including:

- Echoing findings from the literature, our desk-based review reveals only a small number of services and support that are specifically designed to provide specialist support to victim-survivors and even fewer that provide targeted supports to men and boys.
- Consistent with gaps identified in existing literature for Northern Ireland, there are no male refuges or specialist accommodation services for men who are victims of DSA.
- Helplines and remote support are typical, with face-to-face provision often an option in only certain areas and typically towns and cities that are more densely populated.

While a small number of organisations provided information online about support pathways and what to expect when accessing support, most provide scant information, rendering this exercise time consuming and likely only representing a partial picture of service provision.

Survey findings

The survey findings outline a high-level overview of respondent organisational profiles, the supports provided to male victim-survivors of DSA, an overview of financial information and perceptions of capacity to deliver support to male victim-survivors in Northern Ireland.

Data provided by respondents to the survey was limited and, in some cases, incomplete. In addition, the limited sample size reduced the validity and reliability of findings from the quantitative survey. This meant the data was inconclusive and prevented the team drawing any conclusions from the survey data about the financial sustainability of the DSA support sector.

Despite these significant limitations, the survey did provide an overview of service provision, highlighting key trends, potential gaps, and areas that warranted further exploration. To explore these findings in greater depth, qualitative interviews were carried out with service providers. The survey results informed the design of the interview questions, allowing the review to move beyond surface-level data and gain a deeper understanding.

Interview findings

A range of key themes emerged from analysis of the interview data. They are organised under eight overarching themes which relate to i) accessing services and support ii) needs and issues experienced by male victim-survivors of abuse iii) barriers for male victims in accessing services and supports iv) motivations for accessing supports v) benefits and outcomes for male victim-survivors in accessing support vi) barriers and enablers for service providers in delivering supports vii) strengths and weaknesses of current provision and viii) participants' recommendations for service improvement.

Accessing services and support

Men access services in a variety of ways. This includes self-referral or referral by a “concerned other” such as a professional, family member or friend. Organisational websites are important sources of information, advice and support for male victim-survivors, particularly when access to support is needed out-of-hours.

The typical adult service user journey varies but often involves initial contact to explore suitability of the service and share details of support offered, followed by a more in-depth assessment of need and provision of needs-led support. This is similar for boys, with a key difference being the level of parental involvement, which tends to be higher for younger children. There was variation regarding the length of time a case remains open for ongoing support and policies regarding re-referrals, with organisations striving to provide a continuum of support, particularly if a service user is engaged with the criminal justice system.

Needs and issues experienced by male victim-survivors of abuse

Services described supporting men and boys affected by a range of sexual traumas including childhood sexual abuse (CSA), familial sexual abuse, institutional abuse, domestic abuse and coercive control. Male victim-survivors of abuse need a non-judgemental supportive ear and validation; support to understand what constitutes abuse; emotional support in managing a complex range of emotions, including loss of masculinity and for some, issues relating to sexual identity, homelessness, debt and finances, immigration, information about their rights, and support to navigate the legal system. There are gaps in this mapping exercise relating to the specific needs of male children, and minoritised groups, however a strong theme to emerge was that male victim-survivors of all ages benefit from a safe space to speak about their experiences.

Barriers for male victim-survivors accessing support

The review identified a range of barriers for male victim-survivors in disclosing and accessing support for their abuse. These included societal perceptions and gender biases which render male victim-survivors “invisible”; shame, stigma and perceived loss of ‘masculinity’; concerns relating to anonymity; and preferences for certain genders of persons providing support. Structural barriers including poverty and access to transportation, as well as a lack of tailored services and supports that reflect the needs of male victim-survivors including those with intersectional identities such as LGBTQ+, ethnic minorities and older men.

Motivations for accessing support

While few organisations discussed the enablers for male victim-survivors in accessing support, those that did offered some helpful insights which aligned to findings in the wider literature. Men are prompted to seek support for a range of reasons, including life events, periods of emotional crisis, encouragement from a current partner and/or a desire for support to manage the impact of the trauma on day-to-day life.

Benefits and outcomes of accessing support services

Participating organisations identified a range of benefits and positive outcomes reported for men accessing support. These include provision of information and awareness of available supports; access to a safe, supportive space to speak about their experience and their emotions and belief, and validation and affirmation of their experiences. Access to peer support was also identified as a key mechanism through which men experience reduced loneliness and isolation. While organisations were more limited in the degree to which they could speak about the benefits and outcomes for male children, those that did described the importance of young people having access to a safe space and a trusted adult outside the family home.

Barriers and enablers for service providers in delivering support

Most service providers felt they did not have capacity to meet the needs of male victim-survivors and felt that with more funding and resources they could do more. Even where some services did report having the capacity to meet service demand, they noted that ‘demand’ did not necessarily reflect ‘need’ owing to the significant barriers for men coming forward to access support.

Short term, insecure and insufficient funding was identified as a central challenge to which all other barriers to service delivery were connected. Lack of funding limited what services could provide and for some organisations in the community and voluntary sector this resulted in a reliance on volunteers and pressure to fundraise.

Strengths and weaknesses of current provision

Organisations struggled to identify strengths of current provision for male victim-survivors, with the exception of the provision of 24-hour support via the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline and notably, the knowledge, passion and resilience of grassroots community and voluntary sector organisations providing support to male victim-survivors.

A range of weaknesses and gaps were identified. These included limited specialist support services for male victim-survivors including lack of local face to face supports and accommodation/refuges; limited awareness of supports available to male victim-survivors; lack of sustainable funding impacting capacity to deliver services and, in some cases, resulting in service closure at a great loss to the sector e.g. Men’s Action Network (MAN). Lack of organisation within the men’s service sector and challenging dynamics between services for men and women which limit opportunities for partnership were also identified as significant challenges for service providers.

Participants' recommendations for service improvement

Participants identified a range of service and sector improvements to enhance provision for male victim-survivors of abuse in Northern Ireland. These included:

- Aspirational shift in the way that society views gender, sex, power, violence and harm and the need for education and local champions to support change.
- Perceived need for improvements in strategy development and ring-fenced funding to support implementation, including calls for a men's health policy and a safer aging policy for older people of all genders.
- Centre the voices of those with lived experience in service development.
- Undertake some form of engagement with men and boys to learn about their needs, barriers they face and ideal service delivery.
- Additional funding and resource that is sustainable and reliable.
- Expand provision e.g. early intervention services, refuges/ shelters.
- Contextually relevant research and development of evidence base to inform future planning and improved service provision.
- Awareness raising initiatives for victim-survivors and professionals regarding the availability of supports.
- Prevention, early intervention and recidivism supports for perpetrators of abuse, including female perpetrators.
- Promote interconnectivity and integration of services, creating wraparound service.
- Foster positive relationship between men and women's service sectors.

Discussion

Consistent with recent research, the review found evidence of significant gaps in service provision for male victim-survivors in Northern Ireland (Spikol et al, 2024). Despite the evidence that men represent a substantial proportion of victim-survivors in known cases of domestic and sexual abuse, there are limited services and supports available. Where dedicated services and supports are available to male victims in Northern Ireland, these are grassroots organisations run wholly or in part supported by volunteers and with precarious funding arrangements.

The **lack of adequate and sustainable funding** was a frequently cited barrier for services and supports in ensuring they could provide an effective, quality and needs-led service for male victim-survivors.

The review highlights a significant **gap in the availability of accessible information about support services**. A lack of awareness among male victim-survivors of available supports and how these can be accessed was consistently mentioned by service providers as a significant barrier for male victim-survivors in Northern Ireland. This echoes findings from Spikol et al. (2024), reinforcing the need for public education on the prevalence of male experiences of domestic and sexual abuse and the need to raise awareness about existing services and supports, as well as how these can be accessed.

Findings from this review suggest that there are some **challenging dynamics and contention** within the domestic and sexual abuse support sector, particularly between men and women's services. There was a sense from participants that this was in part fuelled by concerns over funding, which has been noted to contribute more generally to siloed working and competition within the community and voluntary sector (NICVA, 2024).

On the whole, there is a need **for improvements in data collection in Northern Ireland**. There is limited data available for the prevalence rates of male experiences of both domestic abuse and sexual abuse in Northern Ireland. Research and statistics related to the Northern Irish context could be used to perform ongoing needs analysis and inform the design and delivery of services for male victim-survivors of all forms of abuse in NI.

Consistent with the literature, a strong theme to emerge from this review was the **delegitimisation of men as victim-survivors of abuse**. Echoing findings from research, this review found evidence of the significant barriers that men experience in disclosing and accessing help and support for their experience of abuse. Notions of traditional masculinity and the fact that experience of domestic and/or sexual trauma 'violate' this identity was particularly emphasised in the literature and by participants. This narrative and associated societal perceptions need to be challenged to create an enabling context for men and boys to seek help and support (Spikol et al., 2024).

The findings of this mapping exercise suggest that the system is struggling to manage and support the complexity of need for victim-survivors of abuse more generally and that this has resulted in **male victim-survivors being "overlooked"** when it comes to provision of services and supports.

Key recommendations

Noting the limitations, our engagement with service providers across the domestic and sexual abuse service sectors suggests there are opportunities to improve service provision for male victims who have experienced abuse.

1. Service improvements

- Further exploration of gaps in provision e.g. expansion of refuges/shelters.
- Invest in prevention, early intervention and recidivism supports for perpetrators of male abuse.
- Strengthening of services and supports should go alongside awareness raising around prevalence and service availability to ensure system capacity to respond to an increase in referrals.

2. Lived experience

- Centre the voices of those with lived experience in service development.
- Undertake some form of engagement with men and boys to learn about their needs, barriers they face and ideal service delivery.
- Undertake further research with services and service users around the provision of generalist (gender-neutral) and tailored support (for men, LGBTQ+ and other minoritised communities).

3. More and sustainable funding

- Develop funding arrangement which ensures sustainable and reliable funding.
- Enhance the flexibility of current service delivery model. This should ensure that sufficient time is afforded to the victim-survivor to build trust with support and extending provision of support where necessary.

4. Awareness raising

- Raise awareness of the gender-inclusive Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy.
- Develop educational tools and initiatives to dispel social myths around domestic and sexual abuse and male victim-survivors.
- Undertake awareness raising initiatives for victim-survivors regarding the availability of supports.
- Undertake awareness raising initiatives for professionals regarding the availability of supports for male victim-survivors.

5. Develop a contextually relevant evidence base for Northern Ireland

- Improved statistics on prevalence of abuse, disaggregated by age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation.
- Data on access to interventions and effectiveness of interventions.

6. Partnership working for the sector

- Promote interconnectivity and integration of services and explore the potential for creating a wrap-around service or support hub model.
- Implement approaches to foster positive relationship within the wider domestic and sexual abuse sector.

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