



ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PART 1 OF THE DOMESTIC ABUSE AND CIVIL PROCEEDINGS ACT (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2021

YEAR THREE REVIEW

APRIL 2026

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Artificial Intelligence
BWV	Body Worn Video
CJI	Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland
DANA	Aggravated by Domestic Abuse – Sentence Not Enhanced (Court result record)
DAPN(s)	Domestic Abuse Protection Notice(s)
DAPO(s)	Domestic Abuse Protection Order(s)
DARA	Domestic Abuse Risk Assessment
DASE	Aggravated by Domestic Abuse Sentence Enhanced (Court result record)
DASH	Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Harassment and Honour Based Abuse (Risk Assessment)
DoH	Department of Health
DoJ	Department of Justice
DVADS	Domestic Violence and Abuse Disclosure Scheme
EVAWG	Ending Violence Against Women and Girls
HMICFRS	His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (in England and Wales)
HMCPSI	His Majesty’s Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (in England and Wales)
IT	Information technology
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Assexual
MARAC	Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference
NICS	Northern Ireland Civil Service
NICTS	Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service

NISRA	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
NSPCC	National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
PBNI	Probation Board for Northern Ireland
PCSP	Policing and Community Safety Partnership
PEEL	Police Effectiveness, Efficiency and Legitimacy inspections (led by HMICFRS)
PPB	Public Protection Branch (in the PSNI)
PSNI	Police Service of Northern Ireland
PPANI	Public Protection Arrangements Northern Ireland
PPS	Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland
THRIVE	Threat, Harm, Risk, Investigation, Vulnerability and Engagement (call assessment mnemonic)
UK	United Kingdom

TERMINOLOGY

DOMESTIC ABUSE

For this Review Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJI) used the Department of Justice (DoJ) and Department of Health (DoH) *Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024-2031*¹ definition of 'domestic abuse'; that is *'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.'*

Victim

CJI uses the term 'victim' to describe anyone who has been subjected to an offence in a domestic context, but this also encompasses anyone described as a 'survivor', 'injured party' or 'complainant'.

Key Sections of Part 1 of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021

Section	Title	Description
Section 1	The domestic abuse offence	Creates a domestic abuse offence where a perpetrator engaged in a course of behaviour which was likely to cause physical or psychological harm to a victim, to whom they were personally connected.
Section 5	Meaning of personal connection – domestic abuse offence	Defines what two people are personally connected.
Section 6	Personal connection notice – domestic abuse offence	Makes provision in relation to the domestic abuse offence, that a relationship between two individuals is taken as established, unless challenged.

1 *Department of Justice and Department of Health, Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024-2031, September 2024, available at <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/dsa-strategy-09-24.pdf>.*

Section	Title	Description
Section 8	Aggravation – victim is under 18	Provides for the aggravation of the domestic abuse offence, where a person under 18 years of age is the victim or one of the victims.
Section 9	Aggravation – relevant child involved	Provides that an aggravation of the domestic abuse offence could occur through abusive behaviour being (or threatening to be) directed at a person under 18 years of age, or the use of them to facilitate the abusive behaviour.
Section 11	Exception where responsibility for children	Provides that the domestic abuse offence does not apply where a person has parental responsibility for another person who is under 16 years of age (which can be dealt with under offences relating to child abuse).
Section 12	Defence on the grounds of reasonableness	Provides that it is a defence for the accused to show that the course of behaviour was, in the particular circumstances, reasonable.
Section 13	Alternative available for conviction	Provides that, where the Court is not satisfied that the domestic abuse offence has been committed, it can convict the accused of a specified alternative offence of harassment or putting people in fear of violence.
Section 15	Domestic abuse aggravator	Provides for any other offence, other than the domestic abuse offence, to be aggravated where it involves domestic abuse.
Section 18	Meaning of personal connection – offence aggravated by domestic abuse	Defines what two people are personally connected.
Section 19	Personal connection notice – offence aggravated by domestic abuse	Makes provision in relation to an offence aggravated by domestic abuse, that a relationship between two individuals is taken as established, unless challenged.
Section 23	Special measures	Enables those subject to the domestic abuse offence, or an aggravated offence, to automatic eligibility for consideration of special measures.

Section	Title	Description
Section 26	Operation Encompass	Enables information sharing with an education provider about an incident of domestic abuse involving a pupil or student.
Section 27	Protective measures for victims of abuse	Provides for regulations to make provision to introduce measures to protect victims of domestic abuse, including through Domestic Abuse Protection Notices and Orders.
Section 28	Eligibility of victims for civil legal aid	Provides for a waiver of the financial eligibility rules normally used in determining a person's application of civil legal services.
Section 30	Statutory guidance	States that the Department of Justice must issue guidance about Part 1 of the Act.
Section 32	Training within relevant bodies	Places a duty on specific organisations (including the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service) to provide annual mandatory training on the effect of Part 1 of the Act to staff.
Section 33	Independent oversight	Sets out that an independent oversight person is to be appointed to advise and make recommendations on the effectiveness of the operation of Part 1 of the Act and in relation to guidance under Section 28.
Section 34	Report on the operation of this part	Requires the Department of Justice to prepare a report on the operation of the domestic abuse offence, child aggravators and generic aggravator.

CHIEF INSPECTOR'S FOREWORD

This third Review Report is a pivotal year for the implementation of Part One of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 ('the Act') when early stage implementation issues should be a thing of the past and effective use of this legislation is embedded as business as usual.

There has been an intended focus in this Review on how the Act is being implemented to recognise the impact of domestic abuse on children. That included how the specific Act provisions and child aggravators are being identified, included in prosecutions and reflected in convictions and sentence records.

This year saw a return to investigation and prosecution file reviews and the evidence Inspectors gathered, analysed and assessed from these is detailed in this Review Report. While I acknowledge this may be of more interest to some readers than others, I think it is important to inform and encourage organisations to conduct their own regular assessments.

We found that positive progress has been made in raising criminal justice system wide awareness about domestic abuse as an offence with an increase in Section 1 (domestic abuse offence) prosecutions and use of the Section 15 (domestic abuse) aggravator.

Inspectors met dedicated and professional Police Officers and Prosecutors who articulated the complexities of dealing with domestic abuse. I do not underestimate the challenges they and their colleagues

face every day in responding to incidents, engaging with victims and their children and progressing investigations and prosecutions. However, the provision of consistent and quality practice, including sustainable supervision and quality assurance, was impacted not only by headcount but also through ineffective application of required skills.

Targeted and tailored training for those who need it was a common thread, it cannot be a one-off event or a numbers game. Equally important is ensuring that each organisation's investment in training is matched with robust evaluation of how it is being applied to improve performance, services and outcomes for victims and how it impacts the criminal justice system wide response to domestic abuse.

The very low use of the child aggravators through to conviction remains a concern and is at odds with the high number of domestic incidents attended where children are present and *Operation Encompass* referrals. The Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland need to understand why this is happening and the barriers to the aggravators being applied in relevant cases.

This Review Report makes recommendations to support better implementation and consistent use of the Act's powers to protect victims and their children and bring abusers to justice. It is clear much has been done but there is still a road to travel to ensure the Act is used as intended and its full impact realised.

This year's Review Team was led by David MacAnulty supported by Dr Claire Feehan; the case file reviews benefitted from expertise provided by Inspectors from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services and His Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate. I am grateful to them all for their work.

My thanks also to the Department of Justice, Police Service of Northern Ireland, Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service Officials, Police Officers, Prosecutors and staff who informed this Review Report. I am also grateful to the voluntary and community organisations, including Victim Support Northern Ireland, Women's Aid Northern Ireland, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Men's Advisory Project, Rainbow Project, Nexus and Assist Northern Ireland whose contemporary experience and insights also informed this report.



Jacqui Durkin

Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice
in Northern Ireland

April 2026



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is CJI’s Year Three Review of the Effectiveness of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 (‘the Act’) as required under Section 33 of the Act which requires independent oversight of Part 1 of the Act. This Review Report follows closely the approach of the Year One Review. Year Two provided an update report on progress from Year One.

Inspectors conducted fieldwork across the inspected organisations and stakeholders, which included interviews, focus groups and file review of 73 Police Service of Northern Ireland investigation files and 76 Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland case files. Evidence used in the report was triangulated from these qualitative and quantitative findings. The Inspection Team for the case file review included Inspectors from His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services and His Majesty’s Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate.

The strategic framework underpinning the Act was well established prior to its implementation. The Department of Justice led the initial strategic approach, and the *Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024-2031* (‘the Strategy’) was developed in collaboration with other government Departments and stakeholders. The Strategy’s vision for Northern Ireland aligned with the *End Violence Against Women and Girls Strategic Framework 2024-31*.

By 2025, the strategic direction was well embedded and understood across the criminal justice organisations. However, the Review found that while strategic intent remained strong, there were ongoing challenges in delivering practice that was consistent and sustainable, particularly due to resource and training constraints. This was disappointing over three years after the introduction of the Act.

Training across the criminal justice agencies emerged as a significant concern. The Act placed a duty on the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland, and the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service to provide annual mandatory training for the purposes of ensuring the effective discharge of responsibilities in relation to dealing with domestic abuse cases. Although initial training was delivered, the quality and consistency of training had declined over time. Training varied across policing Districts, with local teams often operating in isolation and resource pressures limiting opportunities for reflective learning.

The amount of dedicated domestic abuse training provided within Police Foundation training was inadequate and supervisory training was also identified as a gap, particularly for new and temporary Sergeants. The current approach to training was not meeting the requirements of the Act and recommended a system-wide focus on providing regular, up-to-date, and specialist-led training for all staff dealing with domestic abuse cases.

A central theme was the voice of the child and the use of child aggravators under Sections 8 and 9 of the Act. Children’s voices were often not heard in practice. Case file reviews revealed that the identification and application of child aggravators remained inconsistent and, in many cases, were absent. There was a reluctance among some Police Officers to engage with children during domestic abuse investigations, and a lack of confidence in how best to obtain evidence from or about children. Although there had been some improvement in the identification of child aggravators since Year 1, progress was insufficient. The number of cases where child aggravators were applied remained very low, and there was a significant drop-off in the use of these aggravators as cases progressed through the system. The failure to adequately hear and respond to the voices of children was a fundamental weakness in the implementation of the Act and required urgent attention.

Positive improvements in the outcomes for victims were found when domestic abuse was identified and prosecuted.

Police Officers responded within time limits and were recording risk better than in the Year One Review. The information being recorded needed to be improved so that it could be used by others to improve the criminal justice journey of victims. The use of specialist Remote Evidence Centres was a success with better outcomes for victims in terms of experience and case outcomes. The Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland were dealing well with Section 15 aggravated offences which was a substantial improvement over Year One.

The data collected and reported by the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland, and the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service was found to be inconsistent and potentially misleading. Changes to Home Office Counting Rules and the reliance on victim-based crime recording meant that not all domestic abuse crimes were being captured in official statistics. There was a lack of joined-up data across agencies, making it difficult to assess the true extent of domestic abuse and the effectiveness of the criminal justice responses. Public messaging around the seriousness with which the criminal justice system takes domestic abuse, and the sanctions imposed, was undermined by these data issues. The Review recommended a system-wide approach to improving the accuracy and completeness of data collection and reporting, to ensure that outcomes reflect the strategic efforts being made.

RECOMMENDATIONS

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATION 1

Within six months of the publication of this Review Report, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service should undertake a strategic review of Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 (the Act) training to ensure the requirements of the Act, including mandatory training and job skills required to effectively implement the Act, are being fulfilled. Each organisation should ensure training is being applied and where performance issues are identified, take timely and targeted corrective action. The Department of Justice, in producing their annual training statement required by the Act, should analyse the information provided by criminal justice organisations and report on both the quantity and effectiveness of training.

Paragraph 2.23

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATION 2

Within six months of the publication of this Review Report, the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland should work together to deliver a child-centred approach to investigations and prosecutions and ensure that the voices of children are heard and considered as intended by the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021. This must include the identification, application, adequate file records and reporting of the Section 8 and Section 9 child aggravators in investigations and prosecutions.

Paragraph 4.18

OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATION 1

Within three months from the date of publication of this Review Report, the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland's Policy for Prosecuting Cases of Domestic Abuse should be amended to reflect the internal guidance on the use of cautions for domestic abuse offences in exceptional circumstances only.

Paragraph 4.38

OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATION 2

Within three months of the publication of this Review Report, the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland should consult the Judiciary to ensure agreed arrangements for the accurate, complete and consistent recording of Domestic Abuse - Sentence Enhanced and Domestic Abuse - Sentence Not Enhanced outcomes are reflected in all relevant Court records.

Paragraph 5.13

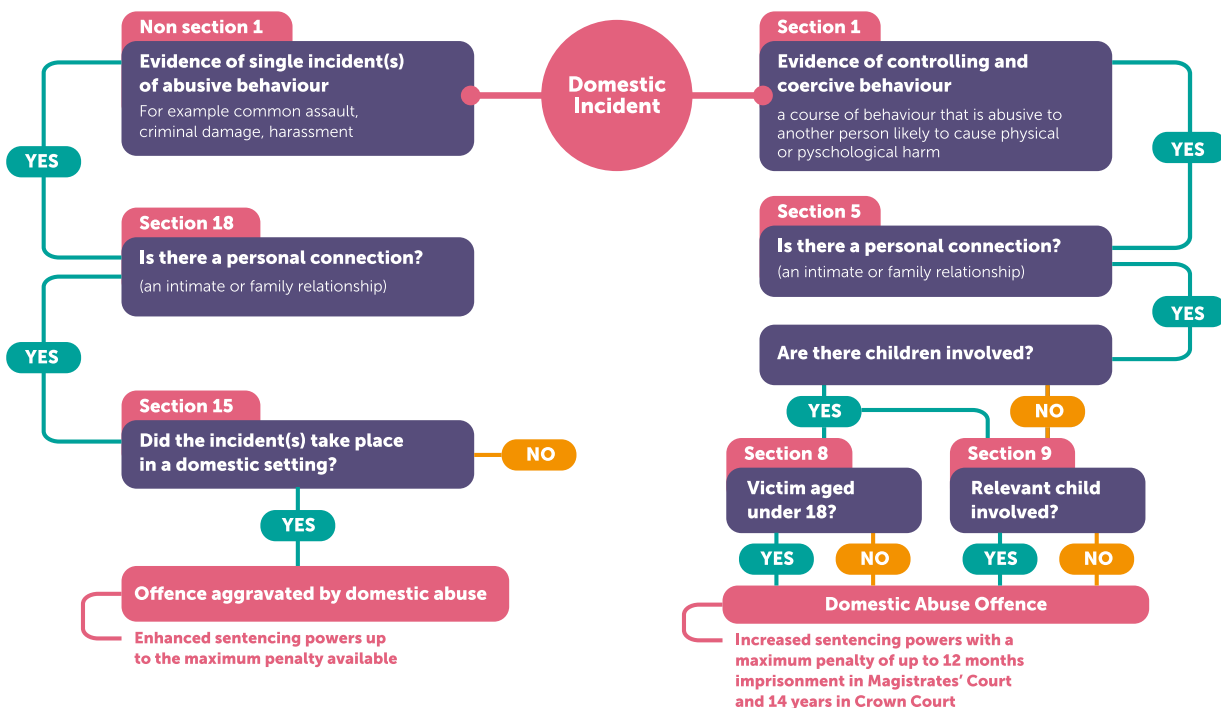
Where Areas for Improvement have been identified, these are included in the body of the report.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

THE DOMESTIC ABUSE AND CIVIL PROCEEDINGS ACT (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2021

1.1 *The Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021*² (the Act) came into effect in Northern Ireland on 21 February 2022. The Act introduced a new domestic abuse offence (Section 1) addressing a gap in the law by criminalising a course of abusive behaviour, occurring on two or more occasions against an intimate partner, former partner or close family member. The Act also established aggravating factors to be considered when sentencing cases of domestic abuse involving a child victim under the age of 18 (Section 8, child victim) (except where parental responsibility applied under Section 11). Additional aggravation applies where a child was present or heard the abuse, was a victim of the abuse or was used to direct abuse at the victim, as defined under Section 9 (a 'relevant child'). Section 15 provided for enhanced sentencing where other offences, beyond the domestic abuse offence, were proven, allowing for penalties up to the maximum available. The key sections of the Act are outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Summary of the key sections of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021



2 [Legislation.gov.uk, Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2021, March 2021](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2021/2/contents), available at <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2021/2/contents>.

1.2 The Act also introduced measures to strengthen support for victims of domestic abuse. These included changes to special measures arrangements for victims (Section 23), improved protective measures (Section 27), and enabled information sharing between the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and schools through *Operation Encompass* under Section 26. In addition, Section 28 provided for civil legal aid to assist victims of domestic abuse.

1.3 Section 33 of the Act provided for independent oversight of Part 1, requiring the first Review to be completed within two years of the commencement and annually thereafter for a minimum of six years. The Minister of Justice requested Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJI) to undertake this role. The first Review of the effectiveness of Part 1 of the Act was published in April 2024³ and included two Strategic and nine Operational Recommendations. These were addressed to the Department of Justice (DoJ), the PSNI, the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland (PPS) and the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS). The recommendations were all accepted. The Year Two Review Report, published in April 2025⁴, evaluated progress made against the recommendations from the first Review. It found that reasonable progress had been achieved on both Strategic Recommendations and four Operational Recommendations, with good progress noted on two Operational Recommendations. However, two recommendations showed insufficient progress, and one demonstrated no meaningful progress. A summary of the Year One Review recommendations and the corresponding Year Two progress status is provided in Appendix 4.

1.4 This Year Three Review of the Act follows the same approach as the Year One Review in conducting case file reviews and takes cognisance of the recommendations made and followed up in Year Two. However, rather than restate the establishment of policies and strategic approaches, this Review focuses on the developments between Years Two and Three as the two previous Reviews have clearly stated the context and background to the Act and the responses to its implementation.

DOMESTIC ABUSE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

1.5 The headline reported annual statistics show that, in the 12 months to 31 March 2025, there were 29,751⁵ incidents recorded by the PSNI where there was a domestic abuse motivation. From these recorded incidents, the police recorded 15,812 incidents where one or more domestic abuse crime occurred, culminating in 18,393 domestic abuse crimes in total. This indicated that just over half (53%) of all domestic abuse incidents involved one or more crimes.

3 CJI, *Review of the effectiveness of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021*, April 2024, available at <https://www.cjini.org/reports/review-of-the-effectiveness-of-the-domestic-abuse-and-civil-proceedings-act-northern-ireland-2021/>.

4 CJI, *Annual Review of the effectiveness of Part 1 of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021, Year Two – Progress Review*, April 2025, available at <https://www.cjini.org/reports/annual-review-of-the-effectiveness-of-part-1-of-the-domestic-abuse-and-civil-proceedings-act-northern-ireland-2021-year-two-progress-review/>.

5 PSNI, *Trends in Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland*, 28 November 2025 available at <https://www.psni.police.uk/system/files/2025-11/1359050981/Domestic%20Abuse%20Incidents%20and%20Crimes%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%202004-05%20to%202024-25.pdf>.

This was the fourth consecutive year where at least one crime was recorded in more than half of all recorded domestic abuse incidents. In 2024-25 almost one fifth of all crimes recorded in Northern Ireland had a domestic abuse motivation. There were six domestic abuse homicides in 2024-25, all the victims were female. The figures showed that the gender distribution of all domestic abuse victims was approximately two thirds female and one third male. Further analysis of these statistics is provided in Chapter 7.

UNITED KINGDOM (UK) GOVERNMENT, NORTHERN IRELAND AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE ORGANISATIONS

- 1.6 The UK Government published a Home Office and Ministry of Justice response⁶ to the Domestic Abuse Commissioner 2025 report *Shifting the Scales*. The document outlined government initiatives and systemic changes aimed at improving the multi-agency response to domestic abuse and related crimes. It acknowledged that the criminal justice system was not designed for the current scale of domestic abuse and offered practical approaches to dealing with domestic abuse in England and Wales. It was notable that separate funding was to be made available for any improvements. In December 2025, the UK Government published an updated strategy⁷ which outlined a full crackdown on violence perpetrated against women and girls. Among the commitments, Domestic Abuse Protection Orders (DAPOs) will be rolled out across England and Wales placing mandatory curfews, electronic tagging, exclusion zones and notification requirements on abusers, with offenders who break Orders facing up to five years in prison. These Orders cover all forms of domestic abuse including economic abuse, coercive and controlling behaviour, stalking and 'honour' based abuse and, with no maximum time limits placed on the Orders, victims can be provided with protection for as long as they need. Nearly £2 million of new investment has been promised.
- 1.7 The Domestic and Sexual Abuse *Action Plan*⁸ was an initial three-year plan to support the delivery of the *Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024-2031*.⁹ It sought to reflect the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAWG) principles where appropriate. As reported in the Year 1 Review Report, all the criminal justice agencies advised the Inspection Team that in Northern Ireland, any changes, development and improvements would continue to come from current budgets as no new money was forthcoming.

6 Home Office, Ministry of Justice, policy paper, *Government response to Shifting the Scales: Transforming the criminal justice response to domestic abuse*, March 2025 available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/response-to-shifting-the-scales-report-on-domestic-abuse/government-reponse-to-shifting-the-scales-transforming-the-criminal-justice-response-to-domestic-abuse>.

7 Home Office, Ministry of Justice, *New VAWG [Violence Against Women and Girls] strategy will leave offenders with nowhere to hide*, 17 December 2025 available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-vawg-strategy-will-leave-offenders-with-nowhere-to-hide>.

8 Department of Health and DoJ *Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024-31 Action Plan Yr 1-3* available at <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/Domestic%20and%20Sexual%20Abuse%20Strategy%202024-2031%20Action%20Plan%20Year%201-3%20-%20FINAL.PDF>.

9 DoJ, *Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024-2031*, September 2024 available at <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/domestic-and-sexual-abuse-strategy-2024-2031>.

- 1.8 In response to domestic abuse incidents, the Northern Ireland Assembly passed the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022¹⁰ that entitled domestic abuse victims to 10 days paid safe leave each year (funded by the employer). A public consultation on the Department for the Economy's proposed approach to developing the appropriate regulations concluded in September 2024, and the Economy Minister confirmed¹¹ her intention to implement the provisions of this Act before the end of the Northern Ireland Assembly mandate.
- 1.9 The PSNI had appointed King's Counsel to assess their response to their EVAWG and domestic abuse strategies which was underway at the time of this Review. It was anticipated that this Review would help shape the context of the next iteration of each strategy. No formal update on this work was available for inclusion at the time of this Review being drafted.
- 1.10 The PSNI and the PPS 'no file decision' pilot (the Pilot) began in 2023. This aimed to remove cases with no evidential opportunities including domestic abuse cases from the PPS decision stage. It was anticipated that this would improve the performance of those cases that could be investigated and prosecuted and reduce delay. This process was still considered a 'Pilot' at the time of this Year Three Review however, Inspectors received a copy of a *Summary of Pilot File Submission Arrangements between the PPS and PSNI, January 2025*. That report highlights that only cases in Categories Five to Eight (e.g. assault, minor motoring offences) were eligible for the *no-file decision* process with the PPS deciding all serious cases (Categories One to Four) such as murder, rape, firearms offences, grievous bodily harm and non-fatal strangulation. This brought Northern Ireland closer to the approach in England and Wales, where Police Officers already had similar authority. Oversight of the process was held jointly between the PSNI and the PPS under the Working Together Programme Board.
- 1.11 The Pilot review by the PSNI and the PPS found that there were fewer no file decisions approved than anticipated. Both organisations thought this would improve with continued use, training and quality assurance. Both organisations reviewed 90 'no file decision' case files and found that 9% (eight) were not compliant with the agreed guidance. The process was reducing the time it takes to notify victims and suspects of no prosecution decisions and there was an improvement in timeliness when compared with the PPS file submission process. Quality standards had not suffered. PSNI file timeliness had improved, but the PPS decision times for summary prosecutions had not. Initial projected annual savings for both the PPS and the PSNI were about £500,000 each. These results were all unverified by the Inspection Team and Inspectors look forward to seeing a full review of the Pilot along with specific consideration of Domestic Abuse cases.

10 *Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022* available at <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2022/27/section/1/enacted>.

11 *Department for the Economy, Minister reaffirms support for victims and survivors of domestic abuse, 25 November 2025* available at <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/news/minister-reaffirms-support-victims-and-survivors-domestic-abuse#:~:text=It%20places%20a%20statutory%20obligation,issues%20connected%20to%20domestic%20abuse>.

- 1.12 The Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) process is a critical component of domestic abuse risk management and safeguarding. A Review of MARAC was commissioned by the DoJ. Frustrations were raised with the Inspection Team around how long it was taking to make decisions or take action to address the MARAC review recommendations. The DoJ told Inspectors that a series of meetings and workshops had taken place from December 2024 culminating in recommendations in an options report which were approved by the Departments of Health (DoH) and DoJ in July 2025. Funding and a project lead had been appointed following which a series of further meetings had occurred after the fieldwork stage of this Review. Inspectors look forward to the implementation of these recommendations.
- 1.13 There were three Domestic Homicide Reviews published in 2025, each of which contained important learning for the criminal justice system in identifying and responding to high-risk domestic abuse cases. The *Marcella*¹² Review outlined that women who were subject to coercive and controlling behaviour, had limited control of their own life, including how they parent their children. The Review noted that professionals did not fully understand this. Domestic violence and abuse also can undermine a child’s fundamental right for safety and security. The response by organisations to address the children’s exposure to this, and improve the environment in which they lived, was inadequate. The Review also reported on the increased need to call out abusive behaviours, and make safe interventions, if the culture within society toward domestic violence and abuse is to change. In keeping with the findings from CJI’s Year One and Year Two Reviews, the *Marcella* Review also made a recommendation to the DoJ to revise and refresh the current Domestic Abuse eLearning package into a shorter version and roll this out to external agencies. Once refreshed and shortened, the DoJ advised it will liaise with Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) Human Resources to have this training rolled out further across the NICS.
- 1.14 As stated earlier, this Year Three Review is an annual progress update examining the effectiveness of the implementation and operationalisation of Part 1 of the Act. The full methodology is contained in Appendix 1 and the Terms of Reference in Appendix 2.

12 DoJ, *Domestic Homicide Review – Marcella, February 2025* available at <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-02/MARCELLA%20Executive%20Summary.pdf>.

CHAPTER 2: STRATEGY AND GOVERNANCE

STRATEGY

- 2.1 The strategic setting guiding the implementation of the Act had been in place for a number of years leading up to and during the implementation of the Act. The DoJ had driven the initial strategic approach for the criminal justice system and there was support for how well this was planned for and introduced initially among those criminal justice organisations and stakeholders interviewed. The Act was considered by the DoJ as one strand of the *Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024-2031*¹³ (the Strategy) which was published in September 2024 by the DoJ and the Department of Health (DoH). The Strategy was developed in collaboration with the Departments for Communities, Education and The Executive Office, as well as with stakeholders from the voluntary and community sector. The Strategy's vision for Northern Ireland aligned with some of the aims of the *End Violence Against Women and Girls Strategic Framework 2024-31*¹⁴ (the Ending Violence Framework).
- 2.2 The significance of tackling domestic abuse offending was reiterated on 27 February 2025 when the Northern Ireland Executive agreed and published the Programme for Government 2024-2027.¹⁵ Two of the nine immediate priorities referenced domestic abuse: 'Safer Communities' and 'Ending Violence Against Women and Girls'. This provided for some alignment between the Strategy and the Ending Violence Framework. There was no hierarchy of strategic approaches offered to the Inspection Team from the DoJ, but the Act was clearly an important factor in meeting the aims of both strategies. It was therefore critical that the delivery mechanisms were effective and that the outcomes recorded were accurate to ensure that strategic aims were achieved.
- 2.3 As stated in the introduction, this Review examined how well children were being protected by the Act. The Strategy was designed around five pillars; partnership, prevention, support and provision, justice, and children and young people. The inclusion of the children and young people pillar was a positive step that reinforced the need for a focus on the impact of domestic abuse on children, as was evident within the Act itself (Section 8 and Section 9).

13 DoJ and DoH, *Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024-2031*, September 2024 available at <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/dsa-strategy-09-24.pdf>.

14 Northern Ireland Executive, *End Violence Against Women and Girls, Strategic Framework 2024-31* available at <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/execoffice/strategic-framework-evawg.pdf>.

15 Northern Ireland Executive, *Programme for Government 2024-2027 'Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most'*, February 2025 available at <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/articles/programme-government-2024-2027-our-plan-doing-what-matters-most>.

The need for this standalone pillar was raised with Inspectors during the Year 1 Review of the Act when stakeholders believed that there needed to be a broader focus on the impact of domestic abuse on children reflected in wider strategy and training. Specifically, the aim was to prevent domestic abuse from happening and ensuring children and young people, who were victims, were seen and heard, however, they were not considered victims in their own right¹⁶ with domestic abuse cases considered as 'aggravated' if a child was present or if they were a victim aged 16-17. The remaining Chapters of this Review Report reviewed how well this had been developed.

REPORTING ON PROGRESS

- 2.4 The Strategy was overseen by a cross-Departmental Strategy Oversight Board (the Board), which was accountable to the Northern Ireland Executive. An Expert Reference Group provided advice to the Board from a frontline perspective. A three-year Action Plan outlined actions to be taken during the first three years of the Strategy against each of the five pillars. An action relating to the Act implementation outlined requirements for the publication of an annual training statement; the development of a statement on the operation of Part 1 of the Act covering the first three years of the domestic abuse offence (Section 34); and research on the experience at Court of witnesses (including children). This action also addressed the legislative requirement for independent oversight of the operation of Part 1 of the Act (Section 33), as fulfilled by this and subsequent CJI Reviews.
- 2.5 The DoJ and DoH Action Plan was launched on 25 September 2024. The DoJ sent quarterly updates to the Board.¹⁷ The Section 34, Part 4 report is to include any views of the DoJ and assessment on effectiveness. The DoJ therefore had to ensure that the information that was collated from the criminal justice organisations met the requirements of the Act. The DoJ also published annual data on prosecutions and case processing times for the Act, which was not a requirement of the Act but did provide a bridge between the reporting requirements under Section 34 (every three years). It was a comprehensive overview of all the data but was difficult to follow due to the nature of the various data sets. The October 2025 report covered 21 February 2022 to 31 March 2024. The Inspection Team were able to supplement the data in the report with up-to-date information from the PSNI, the PPS, and the NICTS. The DoJ also reported annually on training which is considered below.

16 There was a narrow exception whereby 16-17-year-old victims of domestic abuse were considered separate offences against children (Section 8). Under 16s were dealt with as Child Cruelty type cases.

17 DoJ, *Report on the Operation of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings (Northern Ireland) Act 2021*, 29 October 2025 available at <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/department-justice-report-operation-domestic-abuse-and-civil-proceedings-northern-ireland-act-2021>.

- 2.6 The Home Office Counting Rules and victim-based nature of PSNI data¹⁸ meant it was a different data set to the suspect/offender-based data that presented how suspects were dealt with throughout the criminal justice process, from first report to prosecution and conviction. Victim-based crime recording did not require evidence of a crime/domestic abuse aggravator to be recorded, while suspect/offender data was based on evidence identified through investigation. The data sets reported did not provide an overall system outcome for victims. Each independent organisation provided data using their own counting methods for their own purposes. This meant that information that was being reported was qualified and may not be representative of how effective the current strategic approach, actions and outcomes were. A more effective reporting mechanism would better inform what was working and not working on a practical level for the criminal justice organisations which in turn reduced the level of accountability for outcomes and the potential to make improvements. The data and reporting methods are considered in more detail in Chapter 7.
- 2.7 Throughout the fieldwork stage, Inspectors were assured that there was a high strategic priority placed on dealing with domestic abuse cases and it was embedded in the daily working considerations of operational Police Officers. Domestic abuse, it was estimated, constituted a significant proportion of Police Officers workload - often cited as 45-60% of all volume crime, and as referred to previously, one in five of all recorded crimes in 2024-25. The actual percentage of Police Officers' time dedicated to dealing with domestic abuse was not quantifiable, but it was clear from this Review that it was significant. Strategic intent was strong, however delivery was hampered by resource and training constraints.
- 2.8 The PSNI published their second *Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Action Plan* in September 2024.¹⁹ At the time of fieldwork there had been no significant progress from the Year Two Review findings that reported 34 of the 42 actions as completed. The key points regarding domestic abuse were:
- **Protective Measures:** *Plans to operationalise Domestic Abuse Protection Orders (DAPOs) and Domestic Abuse Protection Notices (DAPNs) as provided for under Section 27 of the Act. Funding, governance and operational concerns around how these Orders and Notices would operate were significant obstacles that needed to be overcome. The PSNI was engaging with the DoJ to manage the financial and resource implications of these orders.*
 - **Joint Strategy with the PPS:** *A joint SLA [Service Level Agreement] was published in June 2024 with the PPS, aiming to create consistent standards for victims reporting domestic abuse crimes.*
 - **Training and Awareness:** *Specialist trauma-informed domestic abuse training has been delivered to thousands of Officers and staff to improve victim-focused investigations. Domestic abuse awareness is embedded in Public Order and Public Safety training. This is considered in more detail below.*

18 PSNI data refers only to the Police Recorded Crime statistics.

19 PSNI, *Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Action Plan – Years 3-7, September 2024* available at <https://www.psnipolice.uk/sites/default/files/2024-09/VAWG%20Action%20Plan%20Years%203%20-7%20v2.pdf>.

- Victim Support and Engagement:** *The PSNI have a commitment to reduce victim attrition rates and improve criminal justice outcomes through better investigative standards and protective measures. There were plans to introduce dedicated Domestic Abuse Courts in Northern Ireland, starting with a pilot in Belfast Laganside, to provide a more efficient and supportive process for victims. Inspectors visited a number of Courts including the Domestic Abuse Court and met with stakeholders and criminal justice partners. It was universally considered a success and, if rolled out across Northern Ireland, could prove transformative for victims of domestic abuse. This was however, not within the gift of the PSNI, but required the leadership of the DoJ, NICTS and the Lady Chief Justice's Office working with criminal justice partners.*
- Perpetrator Strategy:** *The PSNI will support The Executive Office in developing a repeat perpetrator strategy for domestic abuse, learning from other jurisdictions. The PSNI's Public Protection Branch (PPB) placed an emphasis on addressing repeat perpetrators. In monthly meetings, repeat perpetrators were identified and a review conducted to ensure that the appropriate safeguards were in place. Information about repeat perpetrators was shared within the PSNI to inform District-level priorities and strategies.*
- Monitoring and Data:** *Domestic abuse cases are tracked through the PULSE recording platform, enabling analysis of repeat victims, offenders, and locations. A rape victim survey is planned to gather feedback and improve standards of investigations, which will also inform domestic abuse responses. The Inspection Team considered that although data was available as outlined previously, the recording methods meant that not all domestic abuse crimes were being recorded. For example, if there was a rape case which also had evidence of the Section 1 domestic abuse offence, then the case would be recorded as a rape, with no recording of the Section 1 offence within official statistics. Outcomes and data are considered in more depth in Chapter 7.*

2.9 Domestic Abuse Champions were a specific action point for the PSNI to achieve. The Year One Review noted that there was an almost complete lack of awareness of who these individuals were or their role. The PSNI plans were to further develop the role of Domestic Abuse Champions in 2024. The Year Three Review found that there remained a lack of awareness over the existence of Domestic Abuse Champions. The Inspection Team heard that the role of domestic abuse officers was overwhelming. There was an impression that the role was understaffed with high caseloads which risked the quality of work being undertaken. In interviews, Police Officers (Local Police Teams) were concerned that they were carrying workloads that would have been expected to be dealt with by more experienced Police Officers at PPB level. At the time of this Review there were three categories; low, standard and high.

Only high-risk cases were allocated to PPB, but Inspectors found that there were too many of these cases to deal with and workloads were high. The PPB were therefore considering options to use a matrix approach which created an additional 'lower-high level risk' to differentiate between the high-risk cases PPB would keep and the high-risk ones PPB would return to frontline officers to deal with. This was not well received by those Police Officers in Local Police Teams who already felt overwhelmed by the complexity of cases they had to deal with. The pressures felt from both sides was clearly brought about through resourcing. The Inspection Team's view was that domestic abuse was one of the key strategies and priorities for the service and resourcing and workforce planning should match that strategic priority.

PROSECUTION

2.10 The PPS 'Policy for Prosecuting Cases of Domestic Abuse'²⁰ (the Policy) had been implemented for over a year when this Year Three Review took place. However, there was a concern that resources had not matched the increased workload (see Chapter 4). Staff reported being overloaded with work. CJI reported in the 2025 inspection of 'The Management of Organisational Performance in the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland'²¹ that budget pressures had impacted service delivery and there was an over reliance on temporary and agency staff with ongoing challenges in workforce planning and morale. Domestic Abuse should be a strategic priority aligned with planning and resources as the PPS move to achieve CJI's accepted recommendations for a Strategic Workforce Plan and People Strategy, informed by improved demand modelling developed in partnership with the PSNI.

2.11 The Policy was comprehensive and detailed with continued updates provided to all staff. Awareness of the Policy remained high among those interviewed. However, in interviews Inspectors heard of different approaches taken to domestic abuse cases and how they were dealt with by Prosecutors even within the same teams. How well the PPS was performing is considered in depth in Chapters 3 and 4. Domestic abuse was a strategic priority for the PPS. However, there was a concern that resources had not matched the increased workload, especially following the introduction of new offences such as non-fatal strangulation.

20 PPS, Policy for Prosecuting Cases of Domestic Abuse, February 2022 available at <https://www.ppsni.gov.uk/files/ppsni/2024-02/Policy%20for%20Prosecuting%20Cases%20of%20Domestic%20Abuse.pdf>.

21 CJI, The Management of Organisational Performance in the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland, November 2025, available at <https://www.cjini.org/reports/the-management-of-organisational-performance-in-the-public-prosecution-service-for-northern-ireland/>.

TRAINING

2.12 Under Section 32 of the Act, the DoJ was required to publish an annual training statement setting out information about the level of participation in Domestic Abuse training delivered to criminal justice organisations and other relevant statutory bodies. The third annual training statement²² was for the period 1 August 2024 to 31 July 2025. Section 34, Part 4 of the Act also placed a requirement on the DoJ to produce an annual report to include its views of how the Act was operating and assessment on effectiveness. There was therefore scope to assess whether the information being collated from the criminal justice organisations met the requirements of the Act. The report outlines all the training activities undertaken by the DoJ and criminal justice organisations.

2.13 The DoJ had developed the domestic abuse e-learning training package '*Domestic Abuse - Context and Change*' which was available to all NICS employees and a range of other public sector staff with access to the LInKS IT platform. CJI commented in the Year Two Review of the Act that low uptake had been recognised by the DoJ and there was discussion with other Departments to improve reach.

2.14 The DoJ reported that the PSNI had developed a four-module training plan to reflect:

- Understanding Coercive Control;
- A Legislative Module - which outlines the offence, aggravators and potential charging/bail standards;
- Pathways to Support; and the
- Impact of domestic abuse.

2.15 The training statement reported that this training had been delivered to 5,557 Police Officers and staff members in 2023-24. During the reporting period this had subsequently been built on with a further 4,095 Police Officers and staff benefitting from the training. In addition to the online training workshops in the following areas had been implemented:

- Domestic Violence and Abuse Disclosure Scheme (DVADS) (four sessions, 30 places per session – focused on Single Points of Contact);
- Domestic Abuse, Stalking Harassment and 'Honour' Based Abuse Risk Assessment (DASH) workshops ongoing across all Districts/teams (five/six sessions undertaken); and
- Stand up to domestic abuse workshops (five sessions, 100 places per session).

Another workshop was to be rolled out focusing on the children in domestically abusive homes.

²² DoJ, *Domestic Abuse Offence Training Statement 2024 – 2025, September 2025*, available at <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-11/Domestic%20Abuse%20Offence%20Training%20Statement%202024%202025.pdf>.

2.16 During the fieldwork stage, Inspectors met with Police Officers across the PSNI and received views from the PPS and other stakeholders regarding the quality of training. The case file review detailed in Chapter 3 provided some further evidence of how well the PSNI were performing when dealing with the Section 1 domestic abuse offence. Officers agreed that the initial training provided was good but that this had reduced in the following years. Similar to the Year Two Review findings, Inspectors remained concerned about the lack of meaningful progress in the delivery and evaluation of domestic abuse related training across the PSNI. Training was delivered through a mix of in-person lessons, online modules, and practical exercises. Inspectors had significant concerns about:

- **Consistency:** Training varied across policing Districts, with local training teams operating in silos and resource pressures limiting opportunities for reflective learning. Inspectors were aware that some Districts had asked PPB Officers with specialised skills in dealing with serious domestic abuse cases, to assist with local training needs. This reflected a desire for training stemming from an evident training gap for frontline Officers however, this relied on localised senior policing District leaders being aware of the training need and proactively seeking it out. The reliance on PPB Officers, who were not trainers, meant that they were being taken away from their core duties, and delivering training based on their own knowledge, best practice and materials rather than on agreed, standardised training materials.
- **Effectiveness:** E-learning was seen as less effective for complex legislative topics. Officers often reported that most learning happens on the job, and there was a lack of formal mechanisms for sharing best practices.
- **Supervisory Training:** There was a recognised need for targeted training for new and temporary Sergeants, who often lacked the experience and confidence to provide effective guidance on domestic abuse cases.
- **DASH and Aggravators:** There were notable gaps in understanding and applying risk assessment tools (DASH) and legislative aggravators (especially child aggravators under Sections 8 and 9). Inspectors heard that some Districts had been proactive in seeking specific DASH training from PPB specialist Officers, however this was sporadic and required a service-wide approach.
- **Foundation Training:** Officers were receiving half a day domestic abuse specific training, including the Act and its provisions. Given that those Police Officers interviewed felt that up to 60% of their time was dedicated to dealing with domestic abuse case, and that this aligned with the Policing and wider Northern Ireland Executive prisonisation of this area, this was inadequate. Senior leaders from the PPB had submitted a paper to the Service Performance Board, requesting an increase in the level of dedicated domestic abuse training within the Foundation Training programme. This report noted that the foundation training requirement for An Garda Síochána Officers had been increased to 36 hours. Inspectors were told that this request had been denied, and while recognising the demands on Student Officers during their six-month training at Police College, Inspectors agreed that half a day of dedicated domestic abuse training was inadequate.

2.17 Considering the complex domestic environment in which the Officers worked, the large proportion of Officers working time responding to and investigating domestic abuse offences, and the issues highlighted during the Year Three Review, the PSNI needed to improve training for offences under the Act. Training needed to ensure that line managers were also empowered to support frontline Officers and that performance levels were monitored.

2.18 The DoJ reported²³ that the PPS had invited all legal staff and members of Panel Counsel to register for a place on the eight stage Domestic Homicide online training package, delivered by Professor Monckton Smith. Around 90 advocates had registered at the time of DoJ reporting. A training video on 'Vulnerable Witnesses, Gillen and Remote Evidence' was made available to all legal staff in October 2024. This was complemented by the publication of detailed guidance on the use of Special Measures which was released in parallel with the video. In addition, the PPS issued a number of Staff Instructions and other policy guidance:

- use of Restraining Orders;
- launch of Gateway Pilot for Domestic Abuse cases;
- application of Aggravators and Use of the Domestic Abuse Offence in Prosecutions Involving Domestic Abuse;
- recording of Reasons for Summary Prosecution Decisions in Cases Involving Domestic Abuse;
- use of Diversionary Disposals in Cases Involving Domestic Abuse;
- Sentencing in Cases Involving Non-Fatal Strangulation; and
- Policy for Prosecuting Cases of Stalking - highlighting the prevalence of (ex) intimate partner stalking and the overlap with domestic abuse.

The Inspection Team met with a range of PPS Prosecutors and support staff in the PPS and considered the outcomes of the case file review to ascertain the current position for training.

2.19 Training was available and sometimes compulsory. Prosecutors felt that the guidance was fragmented, complex, and difficult to keep up with, especially for new or agency staff. Shared learning and communication between regions were limited and there was widespread support from Prosecutors for more in-house, practical training which supported learning from each other on best practices and up-to-date cases. The Inspection Team saw inconsistency in how well domestic abuse cases were handled across regions, Courts, and among staff. The PPS needed to provide an action plan to deliver a more streamlined, condensed guidance with annual refresher training for all Prosecutors and agency staff dealing with domestic abuse cases. Evaluation of training and performance levels should be monitored to ensure continued improvement.

²³ Data supplied by the DoJ.

- 2.20 The 2024-25 DoJ training statement also reported on the NICTS. A power point presentation was created and presented to operational staff in advance of the domestic abuse legislation coming into operation. This was also made available for all staff on the NICTS intranet via Knowledge Bank, alongside written guidance. Staff were also kept apprised of the extension of special measures to civil and family Courts. During 2025, reminders had routinely been issued to staff through quarterly staff bulletins to highlight issues around the treatment of domestic abuse aggravators, and subsequent sentencing Orders.
- 2.21 The Inspection Team met with staff across the NICTS and other criminal justice organisations and stakeholders and considered evidence from the case file review. Court Clerk staff were to record domestic abuse sentence enhanced (DASE) and domestic abuse not aggravated (DANA) in accordance with the requirements of Section 31 of the Act. All staff were aware of the responsibility to accurately record these outcomes of domestic abuse cases at Courts.
- 2.22 CJI recommended in the Year One Review, that NICTS take action to ensure accurate, complete and consistent recording of DASE and DANA outcomes. This was because of the low numbers being recorded compared to the number of domestic abuse cases where it was eligible. By the Year Two Review the NICTS had implemented two technical changes aimed at reducing the potential for human error in overlooking the recording of DASE and DANA. Inspectors were told that an override of a warning flag on ICOS (the NICTS IT System) was necessary to enable Court Clerks to bypass the recording. Concerns were raised over inaccurate recording of data and the changing of guidance. By Year Three, Inspectors found that there was still confusion around the role of staff in recording the data and whether it was the duty of Court Clerk staff to enquire from a Judge if the aggravator had been applied. The Act states that the court must record the aggravation and in imposing sentencing, explain *how the fact that the offence is so aggravated affects the sentence imposed*. Some staff were seeking clarification on the issue where others referred to the guidance that it should not be recorded if it was not clearly outlined in Court. The change of guidance had not helped in this regard and despite the training outlined, the data that was being produced remained inaccurate.
- 2.23 The DoJ annual report on training did not reflect the full parameters of the status of training as required by the Act. The wording of the legislation was ambiguous in terms of the nature and type of training that was to be provided and whether the annual training met the terms of the Act. The need for up-to-date training is discussed throughout this Review however, Inspectors had found gaps in training and a demand from those interviewed for up-to-date training, guidance and support when dealing with domestic abuse. There were also gaps in assessing the outcomes of training and a gap in how well performance relating to application of the Act was being monitored.

The Act requires annual, mandatory training, to relevant personnel who have responsibilities for dealing with cases of domestic abuse *'for the purpose of ensuring the effective discharge of their responsibilities in relation to such cases'*. Inspectors were not confident that this was being effectively discharged, and training was necessary at a very basic level of the Act.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATION 1

Within six months of the publication of this Review Report, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service should undertake a strategic review of Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 (the Act) training to ensure the requirements of the Act, including mandatory training and job skills required to effectively implement the Act, are being fulfilled. Each organisation should ensure training is being applied and where performance issues are identified, take timely and targeted corrective action. The Department of Justice, in producing their annual training statement required by the Act, should analyse the information provided by criminal justice organisations and report on both the quantity and effectiveness of training.

CHAPTER 3: FIRST RESPONSE, INVESTIGATION AND CASE BUILDING

CALL HANDLING AND CONTACT MANAGEMENT

- 3.1 CJI considered how well the PSNI dealt with the initial calls regarding the domestic abuse offences under the Act. As outlined in CJI's 2025-26 Inspection Programme²⁴, CJI intends to carry out an inspection of Contact Management in 2026, and this will deal with the following areas in more detail and provide greater analysis. The Inspection Team did therefore not examine this area in depth in the file review but made some observations from the cases reviewed.
- 3.2 Inspectors reviewed 73 PSNI cases. Most of the domestic abuse incidents in the PSNI case file review were reported by either '101' (non-emergency) or '999' (emergency) calls (66%, 48 of 73). Two (3%) were online reports, eight (11%) were made in person and 15 (21%) were Third Party referrals. This Year Three Review found that 86% of call gradings were deemed appropriate. Almost two thirds of cases (61%, 35 of 57) were graded as requiring a priority response (expected response within one hour) and 16% (nine) an emergency response (expected response within 15 minutes). In 86% of cases (48 of 56) domestic abuse incidents were appropriately graded as requiring a priority, emergency or scheduled response. However, in 14% of cases (eight), Inspectors assessed that the initial grading was inappropriate and believed seven of these cases should have been graded higher. Very few calls were downgraded (5%, three). The PSNI also launched a bespoke domestic abuse online reporting tool²⁵ in April 2024, offering an alternative reporting mechanism for victims of domestic abuse. In considering the safety requirements of victims when reporting, the online portal included a 'leave this site' button which closed the site and automatically opened a Google search engine. There had been an average of 53 online domestic abuse reports made each month between April and October 2024. This had increased to 1,027 between the 1 January to 19 December 2025.
- 3.3 Inspectors found that most incidents were handled promptly, demonstrating an effective operational response. Police Officers attended 90% of relevant cases (52 of 58) within the target response time. In the remaining 10% (six), delays occurred, with four of these (67%) exceeding one hour.

24 CJI, *Business Plan and Inspection Programme 2025-26, June 2025*, available at <https://www.cjini.org/about-us/our-corporate-documents/corporate-and-business-plans/>.

25 PSNI, *Bespoke victim-focused Domestic Abuse and Fraud online reporting options, 11 June 2024* available at <https://www.psnipolice.uk/latest-news/bespoke-victim-focused-domestic-abuse-and-fraud-online-reporting-/options>.

- 3.4 In all relevant cases (61) call handlers were checking the PSNI NICHE™ Records Management System and other systems to identify repeat victims, warning markers and vulnerabilities. It was not clear however from the caller records how this information was being effectively shared with the attending Officers.
- 3.5 There was evidence in all relevant cases (52) that call handlers applied a structured triage approach such as 'THRIVE'²⁶, which assessed risk and considered caller and victim vulnerabilities. THRIVE was judged by Inspectors as meaningful and effective in 98% of relevant cases (52 of 53), representing an improvement from Year One when only 13% (eight of 64) met this standard. Operational Recommendation 1 from the Year One Review Report recommended training for contact management staff on THRIVE, however no meaningful progress was recorded in Year Two. During Year Three fieldwork, Inspectors were provided with evidence of the introduction of mandatory annual THRIVE training for all contact management staff with an 83% completion rate at the time of Review fieldwork. Together with the improved case file review outcomes, this indicated an organisational commitment to addressing the issue identified in Year One. However, achieving full compliance should be maintained as a priority for senior leaders in contact management going forward.
- 3.6 Children were identified as being present in 40% of cases at the time the report was made (22 of 55) and in most cases (90%), their details were recorded on the call log. However, in three cases (10%), no details were recorded, creating uncertainty about whether attending Officers were aware of children at the address, potentially impacting their safeguarding responsibilities. Where children were identified at the point of reporting (whether present or not), there was evidence that call handlers provided appropriate safeguarding advice in 89% of cases (41) and evidence of a welfare check in 68% of cases (19).
- 3.7 The Year One Review Report highlighted poor recording practices on call logs, making it unclear whether Supervisors had any input or oversight of domestic abuse related calls. The Year One Review Report Operational Recommendation 3 proposed training for relevant contact management staff to improve documentation of supervisory reviews. In Year Three, the proportion of calls showing effective and appropriate supervision rose from 6% (4 cases) to 81% (43 of 53 cases). This was good progress.
- 3.8 This Review was not a full examination of call handling given the forthcoming inspection in 2026. There were signs of good progress in aspects of call handling and contact management however, the Inspection Team had continued concerns around the identification and actions taken around the presence of children at domestic abuse incidents. Getting clear information about the presence of children when allocating responding Police Officers was essential. Some Police Officers interviewed were unsure in how best to deal with children as witnesses and victims and obtaining evidence. The following sections of this Review provide some further evidence on the missing voices of children.

26 Calls are assessed through a process called THRIVE which allows the police to consider six key factors on every call - Threat, Harm, Risk, Investigation, Vulnerability and Engagement.

RESPONSE AND DEPLOYMENT, RISK ASSESSMENT AND EARLY EVIDENCE GATHERING

- 3.9 The Inspection Team were made aware throughout this Review by stakeholders, Police Officers and from the cases examined, that responding to and attending domestic abuse calls were some of the most difficult and complex cases that the police had to deal with on a regular basis. There was a consensus among those interviewed that domestic abuse cases were significantly more labour-intensive than other volume crimes and required extensive file builds and review of body-worn videos (BWVs). Inspectors heard some evidence of scepticism toward victims and allegations, with some Officers expressing doubts about the reliability of complainants and frustration at the perceived pendulum swing toward victim-led approaches. This can risk victim-blaming and may result in less empathetic or supportive responses. There was a perception that male victims were not given equal consideration and that the system focused on female victims which raised concerns over fairness and balance. The overall reported crime statistics over the three years of CJI Reviews has shown consistently that the balance is two thirds to one third female/male reports of domestic abuse incidents to the PSNI.
- 3.10 In almost all domestic abuse incidents (92%, 67 cases), the initial police response was allocated to Local Policing Team Officers. In 85% of cases (62), the investigation remained with the Local Policing Team after attendance. The remaining 11 cases were investigated by a Case Processing or Volume Crime Support Team or a specialist team such as PPB. Inspectors assessed the allocation as appropriate in 90% of cases (65) and not appropriate in 10% (seven cases). This had increased from 5% of cases in the Year One review. Inspectors heard concerns from Local Policing Team Officers that some high-risk domestic abuse cases that they had referred to the PPB were being rejected and returned to Local Policing Team Officers to investigate. The perception within the PPB was that there were insufficient staff resources to deal with these cases. This was disputed by some Officers in the PPB who reported that they made decisions based on a risk matrix and assessment. However, it was acknowledged by senior Police Officers that resource pressures meant that new ways of dealing with the large numbers of complex referred cases was needed. As an example of numbers being downgraded, the PSNI provided data from 1 July to 27 November 2025 which showed that 283 cases had been sent back to Local Policing Teams from the PPB. Whether or not the referrals were rejected appropriately, Local Policing Teams felt overwhelmed and at times under-skilled to deal with the level of complex domestic abuse cases they were placed in charge of. This was not only evidence of the significant pressures the scale of domestic abuse offending was placing on the PSNI, but also of a gap between the strategic priority and the practical application of the domestic abuse operational response.

- 3.11 A suspect was identified in all cases reviewed (100%, 72), and was arrested or interviewed, as appropriate, in 80% of relevant cases (51), however this did not occur in 20% of cases (13). Where arrests were made, Inspectors judged that in 75% of relevant cases (40) this took place within an appropriate timeframe, while 23% (12) did not meet this standard. This marked a decline from Year One where suspects were arrested or interviewed in 100% of cases (70) and timely arrests occurred in 97% of cases (67). Some Police Officers interviewed emphasised the importance of positive action at domestic abuse incidents, but some of those Police Officers interviewed expressed concern about a perceived 'pro-arrest' policy within the PSNI. They felt this had led to arrests in cases that did not warrant it and cited pressure from senior management to achieve results, creating what they described as a "*preconceived bias*" that undermined Officer discretion. The Inspection Team recognised these pressures, which emphasised the need for ongoing support, effective supervision, regular training and resource planning.
- 3.12 Evidence of effective supervision that provided direction and advice to the investigator and oversight of investigative actions, was found in 63% of relevant cases (44), down from 81% (56) in Year One. Consequently, Inspectors assessed only 59% of investigations (42) as effective, compared to 90% in Year One. This was disappointing and echoed Inspectors concerns around an apparent level of fatigue among Police Officers evidenced during fieldwork and changing/worrying attitudes about domestic abuse among some Officers.
- 3.13 When attending a domestic abuse incident, Officers were required to submit a Public Protection Notification Report to highlight vulnerability and enable referrals to support agencies, such as the relevant Health and Social Care Trust. These reports were submitted in almost all cases where it was appropriate to do so (91%, 64 of 70). While this was encouraging, both file reviews and fieldwork indicated that the quality of information could be improved, with greater detail recorded on cases to inform anyone accessing these files (police or prosecution) about risk and needs.
- 3.14 Police Officers were also required to complete the DASH Risk Assessment checklist. This tool helped to identify complainants at high risk of harm and determined which cases should be referred to a MARAC for risk management. In almost all relevant cases (93%, 66 of 71 relevant cases) the DASH checklist was completed as required, however some assessments lacked sufficient content and detail (7%, five of 67 relevant cases).
- 3.15 CJI's 2019 *No Excuse* report²⁷ on the handling of domestic violence and abuse cases by the criminal justice system considered the issue of DASH Risk Assessments and highlighted issues with their quality. Strategic Recommendation 2 required the PSNI to develop an action plan, to further develop their approach to domestic violence and abuse cases, including issues with risk assessment practices.

27 CJI, *No Excuse: A thematic inspection of the handling of domestic violence and abuse cases by the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland, June 2019* available at [No Excuse: A thematic inspection of the handling of domestic violence and abuse cases by the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland - CJI NI](#)

The findings from this Review highlight that continued improvement to address and better focus on risks and the quality of information obtained for safeguarding purposes, including on the DASH Risk Assessment Form and the Public Protection Notification Report is needed. As previously noted, Inspectors were aware of gaps in knowledge and understanding of DASH among Police Officers which should be addressed as part of Strategic Recommendation 1. There had been concerns raised more generally around the use of DASH which was reviewed by the College of Policing with the creation of Domestic Abuse Risk Assessment (DARA).²⁸ DARA used open questions which have been shown to better get to the root of what is happening, particularly in higher risk cases involving coercive and controlling behaviour. DARA remained the recommended tool for frontline Officers in England and Wales conducting primary risk assessments, and many Services used this tool, sometimes in conjunction with DASH as a secondary risk assessment tool.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE SECTION 1 DOMESTIC ABUSE OFFENCE AND DOMESTIC ABUSE AGGRAVATORS

3.16 Section 1 of the Act defined the offence of domestic abuse as a course of behaviour by a perpetrator, likely to cause physical or psychological harm to a victim, to whom they were personally connected. The Police Officers, Prosecutors and NICTS staff spoken to during fieldwork were all well aware of this offence and how each organisation had made it a strategic priority. The Inspection Team considered that the use of Section 1 of the Act was normal practice. However, the cultural shift identified in the Year Two Review had not been replicated across the PSNI. The Inspection Team found examples of recommendations for prosecution of stand-alone offences such as harassment or separate incidents of abuse instead of the Section 1 offence, which was also found in the Year One Review. There were concerns from some of those interviewed around how and when to gather the correct evidence to prove the offence. This was a similar finding from Year One which suggested that this offence remained a complex area which required continued support through training, supervision and quality assurance which would be welcomed by all those interviewed.

3.17 The Year One Review considered cases that were reported to police within 18 months of the Act's commencement. At that time, Inspectors acknowledged that the Section 1 domestic abuse offence was still new and required time to embed. By Year Three, Inspectors expected demonstrable progress in the understanding, identification and application of the Section 1 offence by Police Officers. However, Inspectors were disappointed to find no discernible improvement in identification rates during this period. Despite an identifiable cultural change, the same issues remained over the three years of Review. Police Officers and their supervisors continued to fall short in consistently identifying the Section 1 offence at the earliest opportunity.

28 College of Policing, *Domestic Abuse Risk Assessment (DARA)*, September 2022 available at <https://library.college.police.uk/docs/college-of-policing/Domestic-Abuse-Risk-Assessment-Rationale-2022.pdf>.

In the police case file review, Inspectors found that the Section 1 domestic abuse offence was correctly identified in 61% of relevant cases (33 of 54), mirroring the Year One outcome (61%, 27 of 44), as shown in Table 1. More than three years after the Act's introduction, over one third of cases (37%) still lacked identification of the Section 1 offence by the attending Officer. In one case (2%), it was not possible to determine whether the offence had been correctly identified.

Table 1: PSNI identification of the Section 1 domestic abuse offence, PSNI case files Year 1 and Year 3

Did the attending Officer correctly identify the case as a Section 1 offence?	Year 1	Year 3
Yes	61% (27)	61% (33)
No – missed Section 1	39% (17)	37% (20)
Not known	0% (-)	2% (1)
TOTAL	100% (44)	100% (54)

3.18 The rate of identification of the Section 1 domestic abuse offence by Police Officers was higher within the prosecution case files reviewed. Inspectors assessed that the offence was correctly identified by Police Officers in 85% of relevant cases (40 of 47), however 13% (six) were missed and in one instance (2%) the offence was incorrectly recorded as a Section 1 offence. There were a number of factors that may account for this difference. The police had a Gateway Team whose role was to ensure that agreed PPS/PSNI file standards were being met. The introduction of 'no file decisions' also meant that those cases with no evidence were no longer being sent to the PPS which potentially freed up some time to focus on those that required prosecution decisions. The ongoing work between the PPS and PSNI under the *Working Together* project could also have assisted in ensuring that certain file quality standards were being met before cases could be accepted by the PPS. The Inspection Team were firmly of the view that continued and enhanced working between the PPS and the PSNI, with reciprocal support where and when needed, was critical to improve the quality of police files and assist in reducing any delay on both sides.

CASE EXAMPLE 1

In a report of a non-fatal strangulation and assault by one family member on another, there were numerous references made by the victim to other offending behaviour by the suspect that was recorded on the DASH form. The victim also stated that this offending was happening more often, there is an incident with 'a poker' and she sits in her room afraid of her family member.

In this case the Inspection Team could find no evidence that the Police Officers involved had made any considerations of a Section 1 offence. Instead, the case was forwarded to the PPS as separate criminal offences. The case did not consider the wider circumstances and pattern of offending.

This was a typical example of the complex nature of cases that Police Officers often had to deal with. Officers dealt with the immediate case and evidence that was presented to them on first attendance, often in difficult and traumatic circumstances. However, there were also good examples of Police Officers work when dealing with difficult cases.

CASE EXAMPLE 2

Police attended a call to a property following an anonymous report. A female answered the door with a black and swollen eye. She stated that she had tripped over her dog and that her partner was not there. Despite having the door closed on them, the Officer did not leave and persisted by knocking again. This time the female victim told them her male partner had caused her injuries, and he was upstairs. The male was subsequently arrested and following this the victim disclosed a history of controlling and abusive incidents including - throwing food on walls, threats in the street, threats to smash her face, controlling money and he had taken her phone off her. She explained that he punched her twice to the face causing the current injuries. He would not let her seek medical assistance.

This case is an excellent example of looking beyond the case that was initially presented. The perseverance of this Officer who refused to leave without assisting meant that this victim was protected from long-term domestic abuse.

FOCUS ON CHILDREN – IDENTIFICATION OF THE SECTION 8 AND 9 AGGRAVATORS

- 3.19 Once the domestic abuse offence (Section 1) was identified, there was an obligation under the Act to identify any children who were either direct victims (Section 8) or where a child was present or heard the abuse or was also a victim of the abuse or was used to direct abuse at the victim (a 'relevant child') (Section 9). These Sections were considered as aggravators to the Section 1 offending but not offences in their own right. Inspectors agreed with stakeholders that children should be considered victims in their own right however, in the absence of such, this then emphasised the importance of applying the aggravators appropriately to ensure that the voices of children are heard and the Act's powers used as intended.
- 3.20 Throughout most interviews there was an acceptance that children's voices were not being heard and this concerned Inspectors. Some Police Officers interviewed agreed that there was a reticence to deal with children during responses for assistance. The Police Officers were responding to urgent calls for safety, and they were ensuring that the initial victim (as identified in the call) was protected and that a suspect was arrested. During interviews, some Officers expressed concerns that they were unsure of the best way of dealing with children and how best to obtain evidence from them.

PSNI case file review of Sections 8 and 9

3.21 The police case file review examined how well Section 8 and 9 were being identified. The impact of domestic abuse on children was still not being sufficiently recognised by Police Officers. In Year One this was largely due to missed Section 1 domestic abuse offences. As shown in Table 2 of the police case files reviewed, two should have qualified for a Section 8 (child victim) aggravator, and of these Police Officers correctly identified one and in the other, poor recording meant Inspectors were unable to state if the Section 8 aggravator had been appropriately considered. Although very low numbers, this was an improvement from Year 1 when none of the four qualifying cases were identified by Police Officers.

Table 2: PSNI identification of the Section 8 (child victim) aggravator, PSNI case files Year 1 and Year 3

Did the attending officer correctly identify the Section 1 offence as aggravated by Section 8 (victim under 18)?	Year 1	Year 3
Yes	0% (-)	50% (1)
No – missed Section 1	25% (1)	% ()
No – missed Section 8	75% (3)	% ()
Not known	0% (-)	50% (1)
TOTAL	100% (4)	100% (2)

These were very low numbers from which to draw any distinct conclusions. There was an acceptance from all those interviewed that there should be more cases involving child aggravators and the Inspection Team were concerned that the perceived reticence to deal with children in domestic abuse cases may be impacting the numbers of cases that were being sent for prosecution.

3.22 There were more cases for the Section 9 offences. Fourteen cases should have qualified for a Section 9 aggravator (a 'relevant child') and as shown in Table 3, of these:

- Police Officers correctly identified the Section 9 aggravator in 57% (eight cases);
- did not record the Section 9 aggravator in 36% (five cases). In one of these, police had not identified the Section 1 domestic abuse offence; and
- in the one remaining case, Inspectors could not specify if the Section 9 aggravator had been appropriately considered due to poor record keeping.

Table 3: PSNI identification of the Section 9 (a 'relevant child') aggravator, PSNI case files, Year 1 and Year 3

Did the attending officer correctly identify the Section 1 offence as aggravated by Section 9 (relevant child involved)?	Year 1	Year 3
Yes	42% (5)	57% (8)
No – missed Section 1	50% (6)	7% (1)
No – missed Section 9	8% (1)	29% (4)
No – wrongly applied Section 9	0% (-)	0% (-)
Not known	0% (-)	7% (1)
TOTAL	100% (12)	100% (14)

This was an improvement from Year One when Police Officers correctly identified 42% (five of 12) of the Section 9 aggravators and missed 58% (seven). The sample size was small which made it difficult to derive a discernible improvement over the three-year period.

PPS case file review of Sections 8 and 9

3.23 Within the PPS case file review, Inspectors identified four cases that should have had a Section 8 aggravator and of these:

- Police Officers correctly identified the aggravator in three (75%); and
- in one case missed the Section 8 aggravator, despite correctly identifying the Section 1 domestic abuse offence.

The low numbers of these types of cases mirrored the PSNI cases examined. No significant conclusions could be drawn from this sample. In Year One, the Police Officers did not identify any of the four relevant cases that should have had a Section 8 aggravator attached.

3.24 Twenty-one cases should have qualified for a Section 9 aggravator. Of these:

- Police Officers correctly identified 52% (11 cases) as aggravated by Section 9;
- in one case (5%) the police did not identify the Section 1 domestic abuse offence, meaning they could not have identified the Section 9 aggravator; and
- in the remaining nine cases (43%), Police Officers correctly identified the Section 1 offence but missed the Section 9 aggravator.

This was an improvement from Year One when the police correctly identified just 27% (three of 11 cases) of the relevant Section 9 aggravators, missed 27% (three) due to missed Section 1 offence and missed a further 45% (five) of Section 9 aggravators despite correctly identifying the Section 1 offence.

Children – unheard, unseen?

- 3.25 CJI recommended in the Year One Review that the PSNI, the Education Authority and education providers worked to develop a protocol for information sharing. They should hold discussions with the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland about how *Operation Encompass* can support, and be supported by, wider child safeguarding practices. CJI found that there had been reasonable progress on this recommendation in the Year Two Review. This Review found that there were 16,025 referrals made through *Operation Encompass* in 2024-2025. None of those who were interviewed could explain the significant attrition rates between these referrals and criminal case outcomes where the child aggravators were used.
- 3.26 In the PSNI file review, Inspectors found that *Operation Encompass* referrals were considered in 74% of relevant cases involving school-aged children (20 of 27). In four cases (15%), a referral was not made when it should have been, and in three cases (11%) it was unclear whether a referral occurred. This represented a decline in performance from the Year One Review Report where 82% (27 of 33) of referrals were made, 9% (three) were missed and 9% (three) were undetermined. This was a disappointing downward trend. The referral process itself was generally viewed positively for supporting child victims, however issues remained around timeliness, the quality of information supplied, and regional disparities in effectiveness.
- 3.27 External stakeholders also raised issues with the referral system, including the delay in making referrals to provide teaching staff with the information in an appropriate timeframe and not days after an incident occurred in the child's life. There were reports of performance variances between police Districts which caused problems in certain areas. Initiatives were being undertaken to address these concerns. An email-based pilot had been in development and had been reported to Inspectors as part of the Year Two Review. It was hoped that this would eradicate delay issues with direct contact as soon as incidents were dealt with. Issues had arisen including PSNI access to the relevant Education Authority email system and this had continued to cause significant delays in starting the pilot. The Inspection Team expected all issues to be resolved given this is now the third year of review but were disappointed that at the time of fieldwork, there were still problems setting up the appropriate IT systems and protocols. This issue around information sharing should be prioritised and resolved by the Year Four Review.
- 3.28 The Act is clear about the legislative requirements to see and hear children who are victims of domestic abuse. There was an acceptance by those Police Officers interviewed, that how the PSNI dealt with children required significant improvement. The case file reviews, interviews with Police Officers and interviews with external partners and stakeholders all noted significant failings in identifying the Section 8 and 9 aggravators. This was particularly disappointing for the Inspection Team as the legislation had fallen short of recognising children only domestic abuse offences as was suggested by stakeholders as a better way of protecting children from domestic abuse.

After three years, the PSNI had failed to recognise when aggravators applied and adequately hear the voices of children in domestic abuse cases. It is unknown how many children were being missed in all reported cases as the file review could only examine a limited number of cases in a restricted timeframe. However, by way of further context, Inspectors looked at how many children were being referred through *Operation Encompass* as an indicator of how many children the PSNI were aware of being impacted by reported domestic abuse incidents.

- 3.29 Inspectors found no evidence on the Public Protection Notification Report that Officers considered the child's demeanour, behaviour or living conditions in 42% of relevant cases (10 of 24). Evidence of this was present in 50% of cases (12), while in two cases (8%) it was unclear. This reflected an improvement from Year One where 71% of relevant cases (17 of 24), lacked evidence of capturing the child's voice, compared to 25% (six cases) where it was evident. Inspectors only saw evidence of children having been spoken to alone when it was age appropriate and in the best interests of the child to do so in 22% of relevant cases (six), but this did not occur in 70% (19) of cases. Although this marks progress from Year One, where only 8% of relevant cases showed evidence of children being spoken to alone, these figures remain too low to indicate meaningful improvement in addressing children's needs during domestic abuse incidents.
- 3.30 The CJI Year One Review also made an operational recommendation²⁹ that the PSNI assess how well training has improved the services' response to children in domestic abuse cases. By Year Two Inspectors found that there was insufficient progress.

CASE EXAMPLE 3

This incident was reported online to the PSNI. The victim attended the police station to report ongoing domestic abuse. She was receiving unwanted sexual images from her ex-partner. A DASH form was completed and identified that she was a high-risk domestic abuse victim. The victim's ex-partner had harassed her constantly on the phone, used social media to abuse her and threaten to tell her friends about her 'secrets' in an attempt to keep her isolated from them. He threatened to go to her employer and make false allegations.

When providing the police with a statement, the suspect sent a sexual image of himself and mocked her. She reported that she was also in fear for her daughter's safety. An *Operation Encompass* referral was later made. The ex-partner was arrested and interviewed.

29 Within six months of the publication of this report the Police Service of Northern Ireland should assess how effectively the Year Two training has improved the response to children in domestic abuse cases and take action to address any further learning needs identified. Quality assurance processes to reinforce the training should include a focus on the quality of information recorded by Police Staff, Officers and Supervisors.

There were numerous reports of domestic incidents over a five-year period of varying degree of seriousness. A MARAC referral was required and made, however the PPB in the PSNI reviewed the case and downgraded the risk to medium-risk case; a decision the Inspection Team disagreed with. This meant that the case had to be handled by the Local Policing Team and recognising the gravity and complexity of this offence, the supervisor re-referred this case back to the PPB stating that it was high risk. Again, they refused it. A case file was then prepared but failed to get past the PSNI Gatekeeper who indicated that the file was deficient. The file proceeded with harassment and a Section 1 domestic abuse offence.

The PSNI failed to identify that there was a child in this. This was a poor outcome for this child which had been witness to significant domestic abuse over a period of years.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE SECTION 15 DOMESTIC ABUSE AGGRAVATOR

- 3.31 Section 15 refers to those cases in which there was no or insufficient evidence of a Section 1 domestic abuse offence (coercive and controlling behaviour over a period of time) but there was another offence occurring in a domestic context. For example, a single incident of assault on a partner, ex-partner or family member. These cases should all be aggravated by Section 15 in that the offence was committed in a domestic setting.
- 3.32 As shown in Table 4, of the police case files reviewed where the Section 15 aggravator was relevant, Police Officers correctly recorded it in 71% of cases (27 of 38), failed to identify it in 26% (10) and in one case (3%) this could not be determined due to poor record keeping. This was similar to the results from Year One, where 74% were correctly identified (39 of 53), 25% were missed (13) and in one case (2%) it was not known.

Table 4: PSNI identification of the Section 15 domestic abuse aggravator, PSNI case files Year 1 and Year 3

Did the attending officer correctly identify the case as being aggravated under Section 15?	Year 1	Year 3
Yes	74% (39)	71% (27)
No – missed Section 15	25% (13)	26% (10)
Not known	2% (1)	3% (1)
TOTAL	100% (53)	100% (38)

- 3.33 In the prosecution case files reviewed, the Section 15 aggravator was correctly identified by the PSNI in 94% of relevant cases (58 of 62). As shown in Table 11, this marks a statistically significant increase from Year 1, when only 49% (40 of 81) were identified.
- 3.34 The Year One Review Report made an operational recommendation³⁰ to the PSNI and PPS to ensure that the Section 15 aggravators were applied in every case. The Year Two Review showed good progress in this area and this Review showed that police files had remained at a similar level of compliance and the PPS cases had improved. There was room for further improvement as both organisations moved to provide technical solutions to ensure full compliance.
- 3.35 After the initial police response, the Inspection Team reviewed how well cases were progressed by the police.

INVESTIGATION EFFECTIVENESS AND SUPERVISION

- 3.36 Investigations in the police case file sample were generally timely, with minimal delays and no evidence of missed forensic opportunities in 95% of relevant cases (55 of 58). Appropriate use of bail conditions as a protective measure was evident in 83% of relevant cases (34 of 41). However, with nearly one-third of relevant cases (32%, 22 of 69) lacking an investigative plan suited to the crime type, and with ongoing issues with the correct identification of the Section 1 domestic abuse offence and associated aggravators, just 59% of investigations (42 of 71) were assessed as effective and of a good standard - a decline from Year One, when 90% (63 of 70) met this benchmark. Having a documented and updated investigation plan was essential to ensure that all investigative opportunities are explored.
- 3.37 Supervisors were expected to offer investigative support and guidance for those Officers tasked with investigating domestic abuse cases. The police case files reviewed highlighted ongoing issues with levels of supervision. The Inspection Team found that:
- there was no effective supervision of an Officer's response or deployment in 26% of cases (19 of 72); and
 - in 36% of relevant cases (25 of 70) there was no evidence of supervisory direction or oversight of investigative actions at the outset or during the investigation.

³⁰ Action should be taken by the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland, within six months of the publication of this report, to ensure that the Section 15 domestic abuse aggravator is applied to every relevant charge, with IT and quality assurance systems that reinforce this approach.

- 3.38 Frontline Police Officers expressed concerns over the complex and difficult nature of domestic abuse cases. They needed support through more time to do the work they had to do and when cases were complex, they should have the ability to send these cases to specialist teams. Case example 3 in part, demonstrated that the resource pressures in the PPB were impacting the Local Policing Teams' ability to deliver the appropriate policing response to domestic abuse. This case file review and evidence from Police Officers and Supervisors pointed towards a requirement for better workforce planning to match the PSNI's stated domestic abuse strategic intent.
- 3.39 It was notable that when cases were allocated to specialist teams with specific skills to deal with these complex cases such as the Rape Crime Unit or Domestic Abuse Officers, there were better standards of file quality, stronger oversight and clearer case direction.

PROTECTION OF VICTIMS

- 3.40 DVADS had been in operation since June 2016 and helped reduce the risk posed to a person who had entered into a relationship with someone who was a serial perpetrator of domestic abuse.³¹ Members of the public have a 'Right to Ask', and make enquiries about an individual who they are in a relationship with, or who is in a relationship with someone they know, where there is a concern that the individual may be abusive towards their partner. It also gives the PSNI the 'Power to Tell' those who are potentially at risk of abuse from their partner about that partner's past where a proactive decision is made to consider disclosing the information to protect a potential victim.
- 3.41 The Year Two Review Report noted that PSNI training was made available and as outlined in Chapter 2, DVADS training was available for Police Officers and staff. However, as previously discussed, annual training on domestic abuse was not mandatory and while provided, was not always available to frontline Officers due to the demands on their time and a lack of an appropriate training plan. Inspectors heard repeated requests from Police Officers for up-to-date training.
- 3.42 In the Year One Review, Inspectors noted that DVADS were considered in only 23% of relevant cases (three of 13). By Year Three, this had fallen further to just 14% (three of 22 cases) raising concerns about missed opportunities to share critical information and to protect those at risk. This decline undermined a key safeguarding mechanism designed to prevent harm and ensure timely intervention. These results were disappointing bearing in mind the Year Two Review findings which found gaps in safeguarding practice and a failure to deliver anticipated protections for potentially vulnerable individuals. This area should be a clear focus of future training plans.

³¹ PSNI, *Domestic Violence and Abuse Disclosure Scheme (DVADS)* available at <https://www.psni.police.uk/safety-and-support/keeping-safe/protecting-yourself/domestic-abuse/domestic-violence-and-abuse>.

- 3.43 DAPOs and DAPNs legislated for in the Act had still not advanced beyond planning and funding stages since CJI highlighted the lack of progress in the Year One Review. CJI heard the same concerns from the PSNI about the resources required to implement DAPNs in Northern Ireland. The costs of the applications would have to be borne by the PSNI and was estimated to be significant.
- 3.44 At the time of writing the process was based around an onus for action by the PSNI whereby Police Officers attend an incident and issue the DAPN that enabled the removal of the alleged perpetrator from the house. Police then apply to a Court for the DAPO. Inspectors were advised by the DoJ that policy was being developed. The Inspection Team were of the strong opinion that victims should be protected at the earliest opportunity, and DAPOs and DAPNs place the onus on the PSNI and away from the victim to take action.
- 3.45 A DAPO/DAPN pilot was planned during the financial year 2026-2027. A geographic location had not been decided and there were still unknowns around the scale of this area with no idea of potential numbers. At the time of fieldwork for this Review, the DoJ were awaiting the outcome of a request for additional funding from the Department of Finance for an estimated £11 million per year. The pilot was dependent on this.

CHAPTER 4: PROSECUTION DECISION-MAKING

- 4.1 The PPS case file review involved two Inspectors from His Majesty’s Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPsi) and two Inspectors from CJI. All the Inspectors had significant experience in defending and prosecuting criminal cases including domestic abuse offences and carried out inspections of this area within the UK. The Inspection Team examined 76 cases that were submitted by the PSNI to the PPS. These cases were randomly selected from all those cases provided by the PPS as being a domestic abuse case. The Inspection Team considered all the cases together to ensure continuity and agreement with the judgements being made.
- 4.2 The case file review should be considered through the lens of domestic abuse offences. It was not intended to reflect patterns across other areas of the criminal justice system. The case file review findings were considered alongside evidence from Police Officers, Prosecutors, the DoJ and all stakeholders. The question set being used was the same one used in the Year One Review. Some of the questions have very low numbers of relevant cases and care was taken not to overstate the relevance of those findings by themselves. The statistics used provide evidence of how well domestic abuse cases were being dealt with particularly between the Year One and Year Three Reviews.
- 4.3 In the PPS case file review across all types of offences, the initial decision by the Prosecutor was to prosecute the suspect in 62% of cases (47 of 76). In 33% of cases (25) a no prosecution decision was reached while the remaining 5% of cases (four) were directed for a diversionary outcome, such as the suspect being cautioned or receiving a PPS-directed youth conference.
- 4.4 Overall, 49% of files (37 of 76) had a PPS decision within 30 days of file receipt from the PSNI; 13% (10) were decided within 31 to 60 days and a further 5% (four cases) within 61 to 90 days. Timeliness of decision-making was therefore good in just over two thirds of cases with a decision reached within 90 days.
- 4.5 When making a decision about whether to initiate or continue with a prosecution, the Prosecutor applies a two-stage test, known as the Test for Prosecution, as set out in the PPS *Code for Prosecutors*.³² Each stage of the test must be considered separately and passed before a decision to prosecute can be taken.

32 PPSNI, *Code for Prosecutors*, May 2023, available at <https://www.ppsni.gov.uk/publications/code-prosecutors>.

'The Test for Prosecution is met if:

- (i). The evidence which can be presented in Court is sufficient to provide a reasonable prospect of conviction; the Evidential Test; and*
- (ii). Prosecution is required in the public interest - the Public Interest Test.'*

In considering the decisions made by Prosecutors in the case file review, Inspectors assessed whether the Code for Prosecutors was applied correctly.

- 4.6 In this Review Inspectors assessed that the Evidential Test in the PPS Code was applied correctly in 91% of cases (69 of 76). The Public Interest Test was applied correctly in 92% of relevant cases (60 of 65). The quality of decision-making by Prosecutors in this case file review was lower than the PPS reported in their 2024-25 Annual Report³³ (98%), and lower than that found in CJI's Year One Review Report³⁴, where the Evidential Test was applied correctly in 98% of cases (96 of 98) and the Public Interest Test in 99% of relevant cases (75 of 76). However, 91% correct remains a high standard although the file review was limited in size, some Prosecutors interviewed said they would welcome further and regular training in this area. This would further improve consistency of approach.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE SECTION 1 DOMESTIC ABUSE OFFENCE

- 4.7 The Year One Review Report recommended further development of a Prosecution Team approach for cases involving domestic abuse and the Year Two Review Report noted that reasonable progress had been made in this area. Inspectors therefore sought evidence from the Year Three case file reviews of better collaborative efforts in the application of the Act, including improved identification of the Section 1 domestic abuse offence, the Section 8 and Section 9 child aggravators and the Section 15 domestic abuse aggravator.
- 4.8 In the prosecution file sample, police correctly identified the Section 1 domestic abuse offence in 85% of cases (40 of 47) where there was a single charge of the domestic abuse offence or combination with one or more other offences. As shown in Table 5, this was a slight improvement from 81% (46 of 57 cases) in Year One. The number of cases where the Section 1 domestic abuse offence was missed by police had decreased to 13% (six cases) from 18% in Year One. In both years, Inspectors found one case (2%) incorrectly classified as the Section 1 domestic abuse offence where the evidence did not support it. While these findings reflect moderate progress in the identification of the Section 1 domestic abuse offence, both organisations had room to improve.

33 This was based on a dip sample of 339 files that included all case types and decisions/outcomes and not specifically to domestic abuse cases. PPS, Annual Report & Accounts, 2024-25, November 2025, available at <https://www.ppsni.gov.uk/files/ppsni/2025-11/PPS%20Annual%20Report%20and%20Accounts%202024-25.pdf>.

34 CJI, Review of the effectiveness of Part 1 of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021, April 2024, available at <https://www.cjini.org/reports/review-of-the-effectiveness-of-the-domestic-abuse-and-civil-proceedings-act-northern-ireland-2021/>.

Table 5: PPS case file review: PSNI identification of the Section 1 domestic abuse offence, PPS case files Year 1 and Year 3

The police correctly identified the case as a Section 1 offence	Year 1	Year 3
Yes	81% (46)	85% (40)
No – missed Section 1	18% (10)	13% (6)
No – wrongly applied Section 1	2% (1)	2% (1)
TOTAL	100% (57)	100% (47)

4.9 As shown in Table 6, the identification of the Section 1 domestic abuse offence by Prosecutors remained broadly consistent between Year One and Year Three. In Year Three, the domestic abuse offence was correctly identified by Prosecutors in 78% of relevant cases (35 of 45), this was in keeping with 76% in Year One (38 of 50.) Prosecutors missed the Section 1 offence in nine cases (20%), up from 16% of cases in Year One. However, the proportion of cases where the Section 1 offence was wrongly applied by Prosecutors decreased from 8% (four cases) to 2% (one case), indicating some improvement in avoiding misclassification.

Table 6: PPS identification of the Section 1 domestic abuse offence, PPS case files Year 1 and Year 3

The PPS correctly identified the case as a Section 1 offence	Year 1	Year 3
Yes	76% (38)	78% (35)
No – missed Section 1	16% (8)	20% (9)
No – wrongly applied Section 1	8% (4)	2% (1)
TOTAL	100% (50)	100% (45)

4.10 The results from the case file review therefore indicated marginal overall improvement in the identification of the Section 1 domestic abuse offence by Prosecutors. There was acknowledgment from Police Officers and Prosecutors that more support, clearer guidance and better training would help in their roles of identifying and prosecution of Section 1 cases. Both organisations should consider what elements of training can be shared to ensure uniformity of practice and policy leads should equally ensure alignment of approaches.

4.11 Out of the six cases where the police failed to identify the Section 1 domestic abuse offence, the Prosecutor also missed the offence in three cases (50%), limiting opportunities for corrective feedback. However, in the remaining three cases (50%) the Prosecutor successfully identified the omission by the police and on all three occasions (100%), feedback was provided. This was positive and indicated improved collaboration between the PPS and the PSNI.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE SECTION 8 AND 9 AGGRAVATORS

4.12 In the 76 prosecution case files reviewed by Inspectors where the Section 1 domestic abuse offence was applicable, there were four cases where a child under 18 years of age was the victim or one of the victims, where Section 8 of the Act should have been applied. As shown in Table 7, the police correctly identified the Section 8 aggravator in three of these cases (75%) but missed the aggravator in one case (25%). This reflected an encouraging shift in the identification of the Section 8 aggravator compared to Year One when none of the relevant cases were correctly identified by police, including one case (25%) that was missed due to the omission of the Section 1 domestic abuse offence.

Table 7: PSNI identification of the Section 8 (child victim) aggravator, PPS case files Year 1 and Year 3

The police correctly identified the case as aggravated by Section 8	Year 1	Year 3
Yes	0% (0)	75% (3)
No – missed Section 1	25% (1)	0% (0)
No – missed Section 8	75% (3)	25% (1)
No – wrongly applied Section 8	0% (0)	0% (0)
TOTAL	100% (4)	100% (4)

4.13 Table 8 shows a similar pattern of improvement among Prosecutors in the identification of the Section 8 aggravator. In Year One, Prosecutors did not identify any of the relevant cases as aggravated by Section 8, whereas in Year Three two of the four relevant cases (50%) were correctly identified. The two remaining cases were missed by Prosecutors (50%), including one case where the police had correctly identified the Section 8 aggravator, but this was not subsequently identified by the Prosecutor. There were no opportunities for Prosecutors to provide feedback to police on the use of the Section 8 aggravator, as the one case missed by police was also missed by the Prosecutor.

Table 8: PPS identification of the Section 8 (child victim) aggravator, PPS case files Year 1 and Year 3

The PPS correctly identified the case as aggravated by Section 8	Year 1	Year 3
Yes	0% (0)	50% (2)
No – missed Section 1	25% (1)	0% (0)
No – missed Section 8	75% (3)	50% (2)
No – wrongly applied Section 8	0% (0)	0% (0)
TOTAL	100% (4)	100% (4)

- 4.14 While these changes suggest progress by both the PSNI and the PPS in applying the Section 8 aggravator, the small dataset limited the ability to draw definitive conclusions about overall performance trends. The identification of children as victims and witnesses was a recurring issue. There were no explanations provided to the Inspection Team as to why there continued to be very low numbers. The Inspection Team were concerned if offences against children (aged 16 or 17) were occurring or whether they were not being identified. The evidence from Police Officers and stakeholders interviewed suggested that there needed to be better methods of recording the voice of children as victims under Section 8.
- 4.15 There were 21 cases in the prosecution case file review sample where Inspectors assessed that a Section 9 (a 'relevant child') aggravator should have been applied. The PSNI's identification of this aggravator had improved between Year One and Year Three, rising from 27% (three of 11 cases) to 52% (11 of 21 cases), as shown in Table 9. While this was positive and suggested greater awareness and understanding of the aggravator over time, the continued omission of almost a half (48%) of Section 9 aggravators by police remained much too high. Of the 10 cases where the Section 9 aggravator was not identified by the police, one (5%) was attributed to the omission of the Section 1 domestic abuse offence, however the impact of this on the application of the Section 9 aggravator had reduced from 27% in Year One. The remaining nine missed cases (43%) were because the Section 9 aggravator had not been correctly identified and this had remained high, with only a slight reduction from 45% in Year One, highlighting an ongoing challenge in consistently identifying this important provision.

Table 9: PSNI identification of the Section 9 (relevant child) aggravator, PPS case files Year 1 and Year 3

The police correctly identified the case as aggravated by Section 9	Year 1	Year 3
Yes	27% (3)	52% (11)
No – missed Section 1	27% (3)	5% (1)
No – missed Section 9	45% (5)	43% (9)
No – wrongly applied Section 9	0% (0)	0% (0)
TOTAL	100% (11)	100% (21)

- 4.16 The overall identification of the Section 9 aggravator by Prosecutors had also improved, increasing from 18% (two of 11 cases) in Year One to 43% (nine of 21 cases) in Year Three, as shown in Table 10. While this was also a positive trend, it did mean that Prosecutors had not correctly identified the Section 9 aggravator in 57% of cases (12 of 21). The impact of the missed Section 1 domestic abuse offence on the application of the Section 9 aggravator had decreased from 27% (three of 11 cases) to 14% (three of 21 cases), and missed Section 9 offences fell from 55% (six of 11 cases) to 43% (nine of 21 cases). As with the PSNI, there were no cases where Inspectors assessed the Section 9 aggravator had been applied where the evidence did not support it, suggesting that when the aggravator was applied, it was applied correctly.

Table 10: PPS identification of the Section 9 (relevant child) aggravator, PPS case files Year 1 and Year 3

The PPS correctly identified the case as aggravated by Section 9	Year 1	Year 3
Yes	18% (2)	43% (9)
No – missed Section 1	27% (3)	14% (3)
No – missed Section 9	55% (6)	43% (9)
No – wrongly applied Section 9	0% (0)	0% (0)
TOTAL	100% (11)	100% (21)

4.17 In the cases where the Prosecutor did not correctly identify the Section 1 domestic abuse offence or the Section 9 aggravator, they were not in a position to notify the PSNI of these omissions. However, in two instances where the Prosecutor identified the Section 9 aggravator that the Police had missed, feedback was provided to the PSNI on both occasions.

4.18 Overall, the results from the review of prosecution case files demonstrated improvement for both organisations, however as noted in Chapter 3, significant gaps in identifying the Section 9 aggravator were still evident in Year Three. The following case examples focused on the theme of this Year Three review around children and how they were being dealt with in the cases reviewed.

CASE EXAMPLE 4

This case involved a domestic dispute between two adults, a male suspect aged 39 and a female victim aged 32. The reported argument between the parties was in the presence of an eight-year-old boy. The victim reported another incident where she was threatened. She disclosed to the police there had been a historical assault on the child with a belt. There had been no evidence that any child had been considered appropriately in this case.

CASE EXAMPLE 5

A victim called 101 (the police non-emergency contact number) indicating she had been subjected to long-standing domestic abuse. She reported that on one occasion when handing their seven-month-old baby over for a contact visit, the child's father shouted in her face. She was afraid of the suspect to the extent that she thought that he would make up lies and he would get her baby taken away. A number of serious allegations were made including non-fatal strangulation. There was an obvious and ongoing risk to the victim and her child. The police stated that she was safe despite the perpetrator living nearby. The victim eventually withdrew her support for an investigation and the suspect was never spoken to. It was not clear whether any referrals to outside agencies were made in this case. The risk posed to this mother and her child was handled poorly in this case.

CASE EXAMPLE 6

A woman called the police and stated that her partner had returned and was verbally abusive to her following an argument from the day before. She told police that he calls her a bad mother at least once a week, prevented her from seeing certain friends and was controlling. She also disclosed that her partner had slapped one of their children.

The police case had little or no assessment of risk to the injured party or the children. There was no evidence that a Section 1 domestic abuse case was considered. The decision on the case file noted there was no public interest to summon the victim to Court given she had returned home and was moving on with her life. This was not in keeping with PPS policy. The voice of the child was missing entirely.

CASE EXAMPLE 7

A woman called the police regarding long-term domestic abuse offending against her by her partner. Her children had been witnesses to this behaviour over a period of years. She left the house for refuge, but her partner would only allow one child to go with her. There was no evidence that the PSNI made appropriate enquiries around the welfare of children, nor was a Section 9 aggravator considered in the case. Similarly, the PPS did not raise any queries around the welfare of the children or whether police spoke to the children or considered a specialised interview with them to capture the voice of the child.

Not hearing the voice of children or recognising the impact that domestic abuse has in these settings is causing an unknown amount of harm. Both the PSNI and PPS needed to improve how children were acknowledged and responded to in domestic abuse cases and establish a better way to capture and report on cases involving children. The apparent under-reporting of the extent of domestic abuse cases involving children should also be considered by the DoJ as current reporting mechanisms were insufficient to provide evidence that children were being seen and heard as intended by the Act.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATION 2

Within six months of the publication of this Review Report, the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland should work together to deliver a child-centred approach to investigations and prosecutions and ensure that the voices of children are heard and considered as intended by the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021. This must include the identification, application, adequate file records and reporting of the Section 8 and Section 9 child aggravators in investigations and prosecutions.

USE OF THE SECTION 15 DOMESTIC ABUSE AGGRAVATOR

- 4.19 The Year One Review Report highlighted concerns about the correct identification and application of the Section 15 domestic abuse aggravator by both Police Officers and Prosecutors. Operational Recommendation 5 recommended the PSNI and the PPS took action *'to ensure that the Section 15 aggravator is applied to every relevant charge, with IT and quality assurance systems that reinforce this approach.'* The Year Two Review Report noted reasonable progress, citing development of a PPS IT solution within the PPS to *'prompt Prosecutors to consider the application of a Section 15 aggravator in cases that had a proven personal connection or were flagged as a domestic incident'*. However, progress within the PSNI had been slower at the time of the Review Report. At the time of Year Three Review fieldwork, Inspectors were advised that the PPS IT solution had not been implemented and remained under development. This was disappointing and should continue to be addressed as a priority.
- 4.20 Inspectors identified 62 cases in the PPS case file sample where a Section 15 aggravator should have been applied to an offence other than the Section 1 domestic abuse offence, either at charging or report stage by the police or direction stage by the PPS. As shown in Table 11, the PSNI's identification of the Section 15 aggravator had improved substantially since Year One. Correct identification increased from 49% (40 of 81 cases) to 94% (58 of 62 cases). This result provided evidence that there was better knowledge of the aggravator and measures implemented in the intervening years, such as training and guidance, had been effective. This was supported by evidence from those Police Officers spoken to during interviews.

Table 11: PSNI identification of the Section 15 domestic abuse aggravator, PPS case files Year 1 and Year 3

The police correctly identified the case as aggravated by Section 15	Year 1	Year 3
Yes	49% (40)	94% (58)
No – missed Section 15	51% (41)	6% (4)
TOTAL	100% (81)	100% (62)

- 4.21 As shown in Table 12, of the 42 cases where the PPS directed a prosecution and Inspectors assessed that a Section 15 aggravator was appropriate, this was applied in 94% of cases (40), rising from 75% (39 of 52 cases) in Year 1. This was a statistical improvement. Missed aggravators decreased from 25% to just 6%, reflecting stronger consistency in application. The PPS provided feedback to the police that they had missed the Section 15 aggravator in both cases where they had directed a prosecution.

Table 12: The PPS identification of the Section 15 domestic abuse aggravator, PPS case files, Year 1 and Year 3

The PPS correctly identified the case as aggravated by S15	Year 1	Year 3
Yes	75% (39)	94% (40)
No – missed Section 15	25% (13)	6% (2)
TOTAL	100% (52)	100% (42)

4.22 This progress was positive, however, the PPS Policy and Information Unit completed a quality assurance check on 100 summary prosecution decisions from the total of 477 identified as having a PSNI domestic violence flag but no section 15 aggravator or domestic abuse offence for the period between 1 January 2025 and 14 August 2025. Tables 13 and 14 highlight some of the results of the PPS internal quality assurance review.

Table 13: PPS Internal Quality Assurance Review of Section 15 Aggravators

Correct action taken	Number
Yes	23
No	68
Error	9 cases that did not contain a domestic offence and were therefore captured in the data collection in error.

Correct action referred to those cases that should have had a domestic aggravator applied. In the 68 cases that did not have the aggravator applied, most had a domestic indicator was selected as 'Yes' and the relationship dropdown was complete but the third step of clicking the domestic abuse box was not completed.

This is broken down is as follows:

- 44 cases had the Domestic Indicator completed; the relationship dropdown completed but did not have the Domestic Abuse box selected.
- nine cases had the Domestic Indicator completed but did not have the relationship dropdown completed or the Domestic Abuse box.
- 15 cases did not have the Domestic Indicator, relationship dropdown or Domestic Abuse box completed.

The PPS acknowledged that this reflected poorly on how well the PPS were applying Section 15 aggravators when making decisions on Magistrates' Court cases. Table 14 shows the results of PPS review of 19 indictable decisions identified as having a domestic abuse flag but no Section 15 aggravator or domestic abuse offence for the same timeframe.

Table 14: PPS Internal Quality Assurance Review Indictable cases with Aggravators

Correct action taken	Number
Yes	4
No	12
Error	3

Out of the 12 where the correct action had not been taken:

- nine cases had the Domestic Indicator completed; the relationship dropdown was completed but did not have the Domestic Abuse box selected.
- three cases had the Domestic Indicator completed but did not have the relationship dropdown completed or the Domestic Abuse box selected.

4.23 This was a poor indicator for how well the PPS were dealing with Section 15 in indictable cases. The identification of Section 15 and appropriate reporting on the use of Section 15 was critical to ensure that perpetrators of domestic abuse are being appropriately identified, and their victims are recognised and protected. The quality assurance provided by the PPS was a positive development despite the negative findings and demonstrated a strong desire to improve how the PPS dealt with domestic abuse cases. However, CJI's recommendation for an IT solution to ensure full compliance with Section 15 cases in the Year One Review had not been achieved by Year Three. This must be implemented urgently and will be reviewed again in CJI's Year Four Review.

NOTICE OF PERSONAL CONNECTION

4.24 Section 5 of the Act (relating to the Section 1 domestic abuse offence) and Section 18 (relating to the Section 15 domestic abuse aggravator) define 'personal connection' and specify when two individuals are considered personally connected. Sections 6 and 19 address the establishment of a 'notice of personal connection', while Sections 7 and 20 detail how such notices can be served on the defendant or their legal representatives. Under the Act, a personal connection is presumed to exist unless formally challenged through the prescribed process.

4.25 The Year One Review Report identified a technical issue in the automated PPS process for generating the Notice of Personal Connection. Despite automation, the process continued to require manual input of victim details and a signature, creating resource implications for the PPS. At the time of Year Three Review fieldwork only two challenges to the Notice had occurred since the Act came into effect in February 2022, and Inspectors found no instances in the case files of defence challenges to Section 6 or Section 19 notices.

The Year One Review Report recommended that the DoJ review these provisions with a view to introducing a presumption of a personal connection, allowing the defence to challenge this where appropriate. The Year Two Review Report noted reasonable progress against this recommendation, including support from the DoJ and the PPS for the proposed change and engagement with the Law Society of Northern Ireland and the Bar of Northern Ireland. However, no material change had occurred by Year Three, although the DoJ reiterated its intention to introduce the amendment during the next Northern Ireland Assembly mandate. Inspectors remained of the view that preparatory work should begin to ensure the legislative change is progressed at the earliest opportunity.

VICTIM RISK ASSESSMENTS

- 4.26 The PSNI supplied the PPS with an adequate risk assessment relating to the complainant in 72% of relevant cases (51 of 71). The material supplied was not adequate in the remaining 27% (19 cases). In one case (1%) it was unclear if the risk assessment had been provided. This was an improvement from Year One when just 46% of relevant cases (40 of 88) included an adequate risk assessment and 55% did not. Police routinely did not provide the DASH risk assessment form or its content, although the overall assessment of risk as high, medium or standard was usually included. Similar to Year One, the information could sometimes be found in a Domestic History Report or other background information, with details of previous criminal history of the suspect and complainant always available. Having all victim information available in one area between the police and prosecution would go some way to ensuring that as a Prosecution Team, both agencies could be assured that risk factors were being appropriately addressed.
- 4.27 Of the 19 cases with inadequate material supplied, the PPS only requested additional information from the police in one case (5%). No such request was made in the other 95% (18 cases). In the one case where the PPS did make a request, the police responded. There was evidence that the PPS decision at direction stage was fully informed by the risk assessment in 55% of cases (42).

RECORD KEEPING ON DECISION RATIONALE

- 4.28 The direction clearly set out the Prosecutor's reasoning for the decision in 53% of cases (40). The reasoning was not clearly set out in the other 47% (36 cases). This was similar to the results from the Year One Review that found clear reasoning by Prosecutors in 54% of cases (53 of 98).

4.29 This was also reflected in the police files where an investigation plan and actions were not always clear. The prescribed forms on the police computer system were formulaic and lacked detail. If investigative plans and actions along with prosecution rationales for decision-making or information requests were available in one place it would greatly assist in the decision-making process and help inform both sides. This would create a living investigative and decision-making document that would provide trackable evidence of how well both organisations were performing. This is the approach used in England and Wales and was reported to be a very useful tool in providing accuracy, transparency and consistency when dealing with all cases. The IT requirements from both organisations may be difficult to implement but preliminary enquiries around feasibility would be beneficial.

WITHDRAWAL AND EVIDENCE-LED PROSECUTIONS

4.30 Following the initial report of a domestic abuse incident, victims can choose to disengage with the criminal justice process. This occurred in 44% of the PSNI investigations reviewed (24 cases) and in 41% of the 69 relevant prosecution cases. These figures were broadly consistent with the Year One Review (39% and 48% respectively). Within the 69 PPS case files examined, the victim withdrew support for the prosecution in 22% (15 cases) and did not support prosecution from the outset in a further 19% (13 cases).

4.31 In almost half of the PSNI case files (46%, 11 cases) there was no retraction statement explaining why the victim withdrew support, mirroring the Year One findings (46%, 11 of 24). In the PPS sample, police attempts to re-engage victims were recorded in 36% (nine cases), while in 64% (16 cases) there was no evidence of such attempts, or the record was unclear. This was similar to Year One findings (40% and 60% respectively). These findings indicate that the PSNI continues to miss opportunities to establish reasons for attrition including whether victims were intimidated into retracting their statements and, where necessary, to take appropriate action.

4.32 In 24 PPS cases, an evidence-led approach was an option because the complainant had either withdrawn or had never supported the prosecution. The PPS pursued this approach in nine cases (38%). In one case, the PPS Court records did not clearly indicate whether a decision was made to continue without the complainant's evidence. It was encouraging that over one third of potential evidence-led cases were authorised to proceed, an increase from 23% in Year One.

4.33 Body-Worn Video (BWV) was deployed in most of the domestic abuse incidents reviewed (81%, 57 cases). It was used to capture initial accounts from complainants and document injuries in 100% of relevant cases (57). This was positive as these recordings provide strong evidence that can support evidence-led prosecutions if a victim later withdraws their statement. The issue with this type of evidence was that Prosecutors often had to review hours of unnecessary footage.

- 4.34 The PPS and PSNI had developed Gateway teams to ensure that video footage was focused and redacted but this was not always done appropriately. The PPS Gateway Team had only just been introduced, and it hoped that it would resolve most issues. Both the PPS and PSNI should continue to closely monitor the standard and quality of BWV evidence to better streamline the prosecution process and help reduce delay. This was an area being worked on as part of the joint PSNI/PPS Service Level Agreement on domestic abuse and Inspectors expect to see progress in future Reviews to ensure only the relevant footage was being sent to the PPS or highlighted for prosecution purposes.
- 4.35 When cases proceeded to Court, among those cases reviewed, two (6%) involved a PPS decision to Offer No Evidence on at least one charge. In two further cases (6%), the outcome could not be determined due to incomplete prosecution Court records. In one additional case, no evidence was offered following the refusal of a hearsay application. Of the three cases where no evidence was offered, the PPS Evidential and Public Interest Tests were correctly applied in one and in the remaining two, poor record keeping prevented Inspectors from confirming whether the Tests had been applied appropriately.
- 4.36 In the case files reviewed there were five cases which resulted in an out of Court disposal. The PPS *Policy for Prosecuting Cases of Domestic Abuse*³⁵ provides that if the Evidential Test is met, the Prosecutor may decide that it is in the public interest to dispose of the case by an alternative to prosecution at Court, known as a diversionary disposal. All offences involving domestic abuse must be regarded as serious matters, but there are circumstances in which the PPS consider that a Court-based outcome is not in the public interest. Prosecutors should consider the appropriateness of proceeding by way of a diversionary disposal, particularly where the defendant is a young person.
- 4.37 In May 2024, the PPS updated their approach to dealing with out of Court disposals and generally issuing alternative disposals at any stage through a new Staff Instruction. It clarified that it will rarely be appropriate to deal with a domestic abuse offence by an adult offender by way of a caution. However, the revised guidance recognised that there will be certain cases, particularly those involving young defendants, where a diversion may be the appropriate disposal in light of all the circumstances. The fact that the offending involves domestic abuse will generally be a factor that increases its seriousness and weighs in favour of a prosecution.
- 4.38 Inspectors highlighted serious concerns around the use of cautions in domestic abuse cases in Year One. This led to the May 2024 review and CJI's Year Two Review found good progress in ensuring that cautions and out of Court disposals would be by exception and rarely used. The PPS internal quality assurance review to ensure that Prosecutors were complying with the Staff Instruction identified many concerning areas of poor practice. Updated guidance to the guidance was issued in April 2025 and shared with Prosecutors.

35 PPS, *Policy for Prosecuting Cases of Domestic Abuse (2024)*, February 2024 available at <https://www.ppsni.gov.uk/publications/policy-prosecuting-cases-domestic-abuse-2024>.

The PPS Policy Unit agreed with the Inspection Team that domestic abuse offences under the Act were inherently not one-off offences or minor and subjected victims to long-term abuse and harm.

CASE EXAMPLE 8

A male victim reported an assault by his female partner. The perpetrator pulled his hair to the extent some hair came out of his scalp, punched him to the back of the head numerous times and kicked him in the back. His account was provided on BWV but he did not make a statement. The female defendant made full admissions. Police spoke with a Prosecutor who agreed a Caution for common assault. Inspectors were very concerned with this decision. Police noted previous reports of domestic incidents between both parties but there was no DASH or other information provided to inform the decision. This case was referred back to the PPS for review. The PPS agreed that this case was not suitable for a Caution and that the original decision was wrong.

The PPS internal review highlighted ongoing issues regarding the use of out of Court disposals. This was disappointing that the same issues were appearing in cases sampled after three years. The PPS Policy did not reflect the most recent Staff Instruction and needed to be updated. Strategic Recommendation 1 on training should also address this particular issue.

OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATION 1

Within three months from the date of publication of this Review Report, the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland's Policy for Prosecuting Cases of Domestic Abuse should be amended to reflect their internal guidance on the use of cautions for domestic abuse offences in exceptional circumstances only.

4.39 CJI made a recommendation³⁶ in the Year One Review Report to develop the *Prosecution Team* approach for cases involving domestic abuse. The Year Two Review found that this had been reasonably progressed however, Inspectors continued to hear issues from both the police and prosecution around the lack of consistency of approach for example, what level of evidence was required for a case to be presented at Court. Prosecutors also sometimes felt that they were reviewing cases and directing Police Officers' investigations to a degree which was outside of their remit. The case file review findings for both organisations showed some improvement but still not at the levels that the Inspection Team expected to find after three annual Reviews.

³⁶ *The Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland should further develop and embed the Prosecution Team approach for cases involving domestic abuse, focusing on the issues highlighted in this Review, within six months of the publication of this report. This should include re-visiting the concept of specialist domestic abuse Prosecutors.*

There was an expectation that the new PPS Gateway Teams would resolve a lot of the issues that have been identified in this and previous Reviews however, the PPS and PSNI should refocus their efforts in ensuring significant progress on the Year One recommendation to improve the domestic abuse Prosecution Team approach. Strategic Recommendation 1 within this Review Report should also address the area of improving the Prosecution Team when considering domestic abuse cases. The work of the Gateway Teams both in the PPS and PSNI should be reviewed and evaluated as part of each organisation’s annual progress reports to CJI and the DoJ.

CHAPTER 5: POST DECISION: TRIAL AND COURT

COURT

- 5.1 Of the 61 prosecution case files that proceeded to Court, 84% (51 cases) were heard in the Magistrates' Court, 15% (nine) in the Crown Court and 2% (one) in the Youth Court. Conditional bail and custody applications were relevant in 49 cases. Where evidence was available, applications were made appropriately in 88% (43 cases), while one case (2%) was not made appropriately and five cases (10%) were unclear. This reflected a positive approach to victim protection.
- 5.2 Section 24 of the Act amended the Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 to prevent defendants from cross-examining complainants in domestic abuse and stalking cases. Inspectors were advised that this issue was a rare occurrence, with no recorded instances in Year One. However, following an attempt by a defendant to represent themselves at Court in a domestic abuse case, the PPS issued guidance to their staff in 2024 reminding them of the statutory protections. The guidance states: *'Where the prosecutor becomes aware that a defendant is self-represented, the court should be reminded of the relevant protection. The court must then invite the defendant to instruct a legal representative for the purposes of the cross-examination. If the defendant fails to do so, then the court may appoint a legal representative on their behalf.'*³⁷ Although infrequent, it was essential that the PPS remained proactive in ensuring Prosecutors were alert to this issue and their responsibilities in safeguarding victims. The PPS should continue to keep this issue under review.
- 5.3 There was an overall lack of information or recorded notes outlining what had happened in Court. Some cases had excellent notes which set out the strengths and weaknesses of the evidence and provided some trial strategy. These were the exception whereas most cases, particularly in the Magistrates' Court had no case notes at all. A lack of PPS managerial oversight of its work in the Courts was reported in the CJI 2025 inspection of *'The Management of Organisational Performance in the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland'*,³⁸ CJI recommended the PPS design and implement a new framework to measure, assess and quality assure its work and performance in Court. This included better recording in decision-making before and during Court sittings.

37 PPS, Staff Instruction No. 1 of 2024, Protection of Complainants from Cross-Examination in Person in Cases involving Domestic Abuse and Stalking, unpublished.

38 CJI, *The Management of Organisational Performance in the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland*, 20 November 2025, available at <https://www.cjini.org/reports/the-management-of-organisational-performance-in-the-public-prosecution-service-for-northern-ireland/>.

This makes the decision-making process more transparent and accountable and provides a basis for quality assurance. Having a live document and record between the PPS and PSNI could assist both organisations in this regard. Better recording could also provide an insight on why too many victims are withdrawing when cases get to Court.

SENTENCING AGGRAVATION

- 5.4 The low number of cases sampled that resulted in a prosecution where the Section 8 and Section 9 aggravators were relevant did not enable any meaningful assessment of the PPS approach at Court. The data available on outcomes at Court is discussed further in Chapter 7.
- 5.5 There were 25 cases in the PPS file sample prosecuted in Court in which there was a Section 15 domestic abuse aggravator. The PPS advised that it was not that the Act does not require the Prosecutor to draw the aggravator to the Courts attention however, the Court must state and record on conviction that an offence is aggravated by reason of involving domestic abuse, and that any sentence has been impacted by domestic abuse. The Section 15 aggravator was recorded by the PPS in 52% of cases (13). In the remaining 12 cases (48%) the lack of Prosecutor Court records made it impossible to assess.
- 5.6 DASE/DANA are Court recorded outcomes for domestic abuse offences which were designed by the NICTS to give effect to the Act requirement
- '...the court must - state on conviction that the offence is aggravated by reason of (input S8, S9 or S15 descriptor); record the conviction in a way that shows that the offence is so aggravated; in determining the appropriate sentence, treat the fact that the offence is so aggravated as a factor that increases the seriousness of the offence, and; in imposing sentence, explain how the fact that the offence is so aggravated affects the sentence imposed'.*
- 5.7 There have been various changes to the NICTS staff guidance on how and when to record DASE and DANA outcomes. The most recent being 8 July 2025 which came about following CJI's serious concerns about the implications of their amendments to the guidance in the Year Two Review. This was causing difficulties for NICTS staff who had different interpretations of the guidance including when and if they should record DANA or DASE at all.
- 5.8 The recent case of *R v Haughey*³⁹ provided clear guidance on recording the outcomes of domestic abuse cases. Recording the use of the aggravator was introduced by the Northern Ireland Assembly as part of a multi-pronged attack on the 'scourge of domestic violence in Northern Ireland.'

39 *Judiciary NI, R v Darryl Haughey, 21 February 2025* available at <https://www.judiciaryni.uk/judicial-decisions/summary-judgment-r-v-darryl-haughey>.

It is intended to be used to specifically identify, penalise and deter violent behaviour in a domestic context where its effects and consequences may be materially different from violence and abuse in other contexts. The court considered that these objectives are best achieved by imposing one clearly identified period of time within the sentence and labelling it as the 'extra' time the offender must serve because he was abusive in a domestic setting triggering the statutory aggravator:

The punishment for committing domestic abuse should be whatever is judged necessary on the facts of the individual case, but once it is calculated it should remain intact and not be diluted by plea reductions. This approach will also make it easier for judges to comply with their new recording obligations under Section 15(4) of the Act, especially the obligation in Section 15(4)(d).

- 5.9 Inspectors stated in the Year One Review Report, that an element of sentencing was being overlooked either because the Judiciary were not specifically mentioning it, the PPS were not asking for it or NICTS Court Clerk staff were missing it when recording the sentence. There was insufficient progress in Year Two for the recommendation⁴⁰ to take action to ensure accurate recording. A prompt was added to the relevant forms on the NICTS Single Control Document⁴¹ to act as a check to remind Court Clerks of the need to record it. A warning flag had also been added as another way of ensuring compliance.
- 5.10 In this Year Three Review, Inspectors heard the same issues again that NICTS staff had different attitudes and understanding of when DASE and DANA was to be recorded. Some staff felt it appropriate to ask the Judge for clarification and others referred to the NICTS training and guidance which stated that it was not the role of Court staff to make these enquiries. NICTS training specifies 'it is not the Court Clerks responsibility to prompt the Judge in respect of proven aggravators when considering a sentence'. Seeking clarification is not a prompt. The Act and case law are clear. Clerks must seek clarification post sentencing on what the Judge has said in line with their obligations on sentencing.
- 5.11 There had been some progress on the levels being recorded which was positive and showed a commitment to improving recording standards however, it was disappointing that in three years, the NICTS and Judiciary had not resolved how to deal with the complete and accurate recording of DASE and DANA. This information was essential to ensure that data being reported on by the DoJ was accurate and in keeping with legislative requirements.

Reissuing guidance was not appropriate as it had already been changed and had

40 Operational Recommendation 9: *Within three months of the publication of this report, the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service should, in conjunction with its partners across the Courts, review and take action to ensure accurate, complete and consistent recording of Domestic Abuse - Sentence Enhanced and Domestic Abuse - Sentence Not Enhanced outcomes.*

41 The Single Control Document is a check list of jobs that must be completed by Court Clerks following completion of each Court.

still not achieved the desired outcome of accurate recording. The presiding District Judge (Magistrates Court) agreed with Inspectors that this was an area of concern that should be resolved urgently. The operational recommendation (9) from the Year One Review had not been achieved.

OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATION 2

Within three months of the publication of this Review Report, the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland should consult the Judiciary to ensure agreed arrangements for the accurate, complete and consistent recording of Domestic Abuse - Sentence Enhanced and Domestic Abuse - Sentence Not Enhanced outcomes are reflected in all relevant Court records.

- 5.12 Section 13 of the Act provided that, where the Court is not satisfied that the Section 1 domestic abuse offence has been committed, it can convict the accused of a specified alternative offence of harassment or putting people in fear of violence under the Protection from Harassment (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. There were 15 cases in the prosecution case files where the Court could have dealt with the defendant for specific alternative offences at disposal under Section 13 domestic abuse. This did not occur in any of these cases. Inspectors did note in some instances, harassment aggravated by Section 15 charges were being made where the circumstances clearly met the domestic abuse offence standard. There were insufficient numbers of cases on which to base a recommendation in this area, however training should ensure that a clear distinction is drawn around the alternative finding available under Section 13 of the Act.
- 5.13 Restraining Orders to protect victims from further harassment were appropriate in 28 cases in the sample. An application was made in 54% (15 cases) but not in 18% (five cases). It was not possible to tell whether the Prosecutor had made an application for a Restraining Order in 29% of these cases (eight). This reflects that overall poor recording in cases especially in the Magistrates' Courts. CJI would encourage that Strategic Recommendation 1 should be extended to all those who represent the PPS at Court as happened when the Act was first introduced and was well received and therefore this should be an ongoing area of development for Prosecution Counsel.

CHAPTER 6: VICTIM CARE

BARRIERS TO REPORTING

- 6.1 The Year One Review Report outlined the many and significant barriers to reporting crimes faced by victims from different backgrounds and Section 75 groups.⁴² There was a concern raised by stakeholder groups that the strategic focus on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls in Northern Ireland meant that there was a lack of prominence given to gender-aware approaches. Stakeholders representing the Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Assexual community (LGBTQIA+) outlined concerns in a HEReNI study,⁴³ published in April 2025 and funded by the DoJ on domestic abuse, highlighting a reluctance to report abuse and a lack of specialist services. Transgender and non-binary people faced significant challenges, including a lack of safe spaces. Similar issues were identified by the male victims' sector with concerns about under reporting and that calls to the PSNI from male victims were perceived to be treated differently than domestic abuse calls from female victims. Not recognising abuse, self-blame, and fear of worsening the situation were primary reasons for not reporting. The HEReNI study found 60% of respondents felt that current legal and policy initiatives were ineffective, with calls for significant reform.
- 6.2 There was a concern among stakeholders that not all referrals were being made. There was an automatic referral process in place by the PSNI to Victim Support NI and ASSIST NI however, Victim Support NI only dealt with high-risk cases referred. This meant that low risk cases did not have the same support mechanisms in place although victims were signposted to supports groups such as Women's Aid and the Men's Advisory Project. Some support groups reported that they had raised the under-referrals with District Police management teams and some improvements in referrals were noted (Belfast) with other areas unaffected. Victim Support NI told Inspectors they were not receiving all the referrals they should and of those that had been referred there was insufficient information provided around the domestic abuse offending.

42 Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998) places a duty on public authorities to have due regard for the need to promote equality of opportunity between:

- persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation;
- men and women generally;
- persons with a disability and persons without; and
- persons with dependants and persons without.

43 HEReNI, *A Research Study into Domestic Abuse: The Prevalence of, and Issues Affecting, LGBTQIA+ Victims in Northern Ireland, April 2025* available at <https://hereni.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/DVA-Report.pdf>.

A possible explanation provided to Inspectors was a change in how the police recorded domestic crimes and incidents which meant that under Home Office Counting Rules⁴⁴ only the Principal Offence was recorded and therefore some domestic abuse offences would not be recorded however, the recording of domestic abuse incidents remained the same and was not affected by the rules on recording crime. This is discussed further in the Outcomes section of this Review Report.

- 6.3 Representatives for male victims told Inspectors that most of their cases were self-referrals from males, General Practitioners, Social Services and other statutory health providers and that their overall numbers had remained static over the last three years. Other referral agencies were also concerned that the referral process was limited and the data being received was not comprehensive, citing issues with how cases were being recorded by the PSNI. This represented limited progress in this area from the Year One Review.
- 6.4 The PPS did not specifically record Section 75⁴⁵ details as they were exempt. However, the Inspection Team examined out of Court disposals as an example of whether there was any information on gender variances on decisions taken. The PPS provided data which showed that there were relatively stable numbers of females being given a diversion from prosecution for domestic abuse cases (as flagged by the PSNI) with around 100⁴⁶ for the last three years up to March 2025. In the same timeframe, there were 200 diversions for males in 2022-23, 161 in 2023-24 and 150 in 2024-25. In 2024-25, 1,842 (5.3%) decisions made by the PPS against female offenders were diversions. By comparison, the proportion of males who were given a diversion was just over half that percentage, 2.3% (150 out of 6,605). If 'no prosecution' cases were removed from consideration, only cases in which there was evidence to prosecute a case were left. Of these, 98 of 526 cases or 19% of female defendants received an out of Court disposal. By comparison 150 out of 3,007 or 5% of males received an out of Court disposal.
- 6.5 These statistics on their own do not mean that there is an inequality of outcomes dependent on gender however, the DoJ and the criminal justice organisations bore a responsibility to monitor and understand the impact of the Act across different groups of people to ensure equality. There was a lack of consideration of whether there were any differential impacts as a result of, for example, using out of court disposals or whether the Act is accessible to all groups of people. There was not enough being done to address concerns about whether everyone had an equal opportunity to benefit from the Act. The area of impact and understanding outcomes is considered further in Chapter 7.

44 Home Office, *Home Office Crime Recording Rules for frontline officers, updated December 2025* available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/counting-rules-for-recorded-crime>.

45 Section 75 duties available at <https://www.equalityni.org/S75duties>. The exemption relates to individual prosecutorial decisions and does not preclude the PPS from collecting relevant Section 75 data or from participating in any broader equity monitoring exercise. The PPS have no means to collect the information from suspects or defendants. The information currently shared by police relates to age and gender only. The PPS / NISRA statistical publications include analyses by age and gender.

46 95 in 2022-23, 108 in 2023-24. 98 in 2024-25.

VICTIM FIRST CONTACT AND SUPPORT

- 6.6 The file reviews offered some further insight into under-reporting and how well victims were treated after first contact was made. Inspectors were unable to review BWV during the examination of police and prosecution case files, which limited their ability to observe Police Officer engagement with victims. However, the entries on the Niche™ IT system and the evidence on file was a good source of information to form an overall view of victim contact and support. Inspectors found that Police Officers engaged effectively with domestic abuse complainants in most cases (91%, 61 cases); a slight increase from 88% (59 of 67 cases) in Year One. This was a positive result given the complex and difficult domestic abuse cases and circumstances that Police Officers faced every day.
- 6.7 Where complainants had additional vulnerabilities, such as age or disability, this was recorded in most cases (76%, 25 of 33 cases). The PSNI had referral arrangements with support agencies including Women's Aid, ASSIST NI and the Men's Advisory Project. Evidence of referrals having been offered or made was found in 78% of relevant cases (45 of 58) and where referrals were made, they were timely in most cases (88%, 43). In cases where a referral to MARAC was appropriate, this occurred in just over half (55%, 18 of 33), a decrease from 73% (16 of 22) in Year One.
- 6.8 Getting support from the outset of a reported incident of domestic abuse was essential to provide the support network that victims needed regardless of whether a case proceeded to prosecution at Court. Those that did move to the Court process needed even greater support which is discussed further in this Review Report with the hugely positive impact that Remote Evidence Centres and support mechanisms have had in achieving significant and positive outcomes.

EARLY VICTIM NEEDS ASSESSMENT

- 6.9 CJI's 2020 Inspection Report on *'The care and treatment of victims and witnesses by the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland'*⁴⁷ and the subsequent Follow-Up Review published in October 2023,⁴⁸ highlighted the PSNI's use of risk and needs assessment tools. The Public Protection Notification Report was a positive development but noted that it had not been developed to encompass other areas of risk or needs assessment. This then progressed to a digital application to record and share the Public Protection Notification Report. CJI's Year One Review of the Act found that there was no formal process or template for Police Officers and that a victim needs assessment was recorded in various places throughout the case records.

47 CJI, *The care and treatment of victims and witnesses by the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland, July 2020* available at <https://www.cjini.org/TheInspections/Inspection-Reports/2020/July-September/Victims-Witness>.

48 CJI, *The care and treatment of victims and witnesses by the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland. A Follow-Up Review of recommendation implementation, October 2023* available at <https://www.cjini.org/TheInspections/Action-Plan-Reviews-Inspection-Follow-Up-Review/2023/Oct-Dec/Victims-and-Witnesses-Follow-Up-Review>.

This led to inconsistent addressing of victims' needs and there was a concern that opportunities to engage victims and keep them safe were at best not recorded or at worst, lost. CJI's file review found that Public Protection Notifications were now completed electronically in 91% of cases which was a good result but only if the risks and needs had been addressed as a result.

- 6.10 Inspectors examined the police cases regarding all overall needs and risks that should be assessed and available in one place. There were some good notes on cases, particularly in the case summary and investigative plans in the specialist PPB and on some Local Policing Team case files. However, in only 62% of the case files reviewed could the Inspection Team see that victims needs assessment had been undertaken appropriately. Risk was clearly not being evidenced on the case files as routine consideration in all domestic abuse cases. This is an area for improvement that should be met by better training around the assessment of risk as part of Strategic Recommendation 1.

SPECIAL MEASURES

- 6.11 Section 23 of the Act amended Part 2 of the Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1999, relating to special measures directions. This enabled those subject to the Section 1 domestic abuse offence, or an offence aggravated by domestic abuse, to automatic eligibility for consideration of special measures when giving evidence, which could include the use of a Remote Evidence Centre, live links, screens and other measures.
- 6.12 A CJI inspection of Special Measures was underway at the time of this Review. Despite special measures being an automatic entitlement, the report found that cases involving domestic abuse offences were not handled well⁴⁹. When cases are prosecuted in the Crown Court the committal papers should have special measures applications included for the first hearing. Between 1 January to 31 December 2024, only 36% of domestic abuse cases had these applications which was the lowest for all categories that had automatic entitlement.⁵⁰
- 6.13 In the PPS case file review, 44 cases required consideration of special measures for victims giving evidence in Court. These were handled appropriately in 59% (26 cases), while in 34% (15 cases) they were not, and in 7% (three cases) the position was unclear. This represents a decline from Year One when 68% (32 of 47) were dealt with appropriately, 23% (11) were not, and 9% (four cases) were unclear.

49 CJI, *Special Measures in Northern Ireland's Criminal Courts, March 2026* available at: <https://www.cjini.org/reports/special-measures-in-northern-ireland/>

50 Offences include sexual offences, human trafficking, stalking and domestic abuse.

- 6.14 Special measures consideration in the Magistrates' Court cases was more difficult as the Inspection Team were told by Prosecutors that making applications automatically may be of nugatory value if cases were not going to proceed to be contested. This would be more persuasive to the Inspection Team if there was evidence of overall good considerations being given on the files reviewed and if there was evidence of good communication with victims throughout their engagement with the criminal justice system.
- 6.15 Special measures was a continuing area of concern, and the implementation of Inspection Report recommendations will require training to improve outcomes.

VICTIM COMMUNICATION

- 6.16 Poor communication with victims has been highlighted by CJI in numerous Inspection Reports. Keeping victims informed and aware of what was happening in their case, what and why decisions were being made, and offering support was critical for victims of domestic abuse. One of the three strategic priorities in the PSNI *Policing Plan 2025-30*⁵¹ was to ensure the PSNI was victims focused. The PPS Victims and Witness Policy was last updated in June 2017 and the Victim and Witness Care Unit was the single point of contact when an investigation or charge file was submitted to the PPS, through to and including the outcome of any court proceedings.
- 6.17 In the Year One Review, communication with the victim by the PPS, where it was required, was judged adequate in 67% of cases (44 of 66); it was assessed as insufficient in a further 32% (21) and in one other case (2%), it could not be assessed at all. Communication with victims was highlighted as needing improvement. This Year Three Review found similar issues recurring with some slight improvement noted from the police case files which was tempered by the expression of being overloaded and overwhelmed that some Police Officers voiced during fieldwork.
- 6.18 Section 1.8 of the Northern Ireland *Victim Charter* required the PSNI to keep victims informed about the progress of their case. There was positive progress in PSNI updates during investigations, with evidence of updates in 87% of relevant cases (58 of 67) compared to 67% (47 of 70) in Year One. No evidence of updates was found in 10% of cases (seven), down from 31% (22) in Year One.
- 6.19 Section 1.9 of the Charter states that victims should be informed and have reasons explained regarding charging decisions, bail, or summons proceedings. Evidence of such updates were found in 86% of relevant cases (55 of 64), an increase from 74% (51 of 69) in Year One.

51 PSNI, *PSNI Policing Plan 2025-30 and Annual Performance Plan 2025-26, April 2025*, available at <https://www.nipolicingboard.org.uk/files/nipolicingboard/2025-04/Policing%20Plan%202025-30%20and%20Annual%20Performance%20Plan%2025-26.pdf>

6.20 Overall, PPS communication with victims, where required, was assessed as adequate in 61% cases (33 of 54), insufficient in 32% (17), and unclear in 7% (four). This was broadly similar to Year One findings where 67% of cases (44 of 66) were judged sufficient and 32% (21) were not. It was disappointing that Inspectors continued to find examples of poor communication to victims from the PPS both by comparison to the Year One Review and from previous CJI Inspections.

VICTIMS AT COURT

6.21 Of the 38 relevant cases reviewed, only five files contained a victim personal statement (13%). No statement was available in the remaining 87% (33 cases). Although this reflects an improvement from Year One when 95% of relevant cases (37 of 39) showed no evidence of a victim personal statement, it remained a poor outcome overall.

6.22 When victims were well engaged from the outset of an incident being reported, there was clear evidence of improved outcomes for victims when attending Court. Domestic Abuse Courts were described by stakeholders as being a success. Having specialist teams in place to deal with domestic abuse ensured consistency of approach and showed some evidence of improved outcomes for victims. The most striking example of this was found in the 2026 CJI Inspection Report on Special Measures: From January 2025 to June 2025 across both Belfast and Craigavon Remote Evidence Centres, 85 cases were completed with convictions in 77 cases. This equates to a 91% conviction rate which was outstanding. Thirty seven of the 77 (44%) convictions were by way of guilty plea. There was overwhelming support from stakeholder groups, the PPS and the PSNI for Remote Evidence Centres and was a demonstration of the meeting of strategic priorities and achieving positive outcomes through combined and focused actions. There should be no delay in rolling out domestic abuse courts and Remote Evidence Centres aligned with better victims and witnesses care in every case.

6.23 The Year One Review Strategic Recommendation 2 made reference to the need for a Prosecution Team approach to deal with the many issues identified between the PSNI and PPS when dealing with offences under the Act and highlighted the need for specialist Prosecutors. The Year Two progress update found there had been reasonable progress but no significant changes by this Year Three Review. The Gateway Teams in the PSNI and PPS hoped to improve the quality of cases submitted and the better *team* approach. The Inspection Team will look carefully in the next (Year Four) Review the gauge the impact of the new Gateway Team in the PPS and the Quality Assurance provided for those cases that are not being sent to the PPS. As discussed previously, the PPS workforce planning should ensure that domestic abuse cases are sufficiently resourced to match the strategic priority that has been placed in this area.

CIVIL LEGAL AID

- 6.24 Section 28 of the Act granted victims of domestic abuse access to civil legal aid by waiving financial eligibility rules. This enabled victims to obtain representation as respondents in proceedings under Article 8 of the Child (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, which covered contact, residence, specific issues and prohibited steps orders concerning child cases by those with parental responsibility. The waiver applied where the applicant was a victim and the opposing party was their abuser, recognising that perpetrators may use Court proceedings to continue the abuse and impose financial burdens through repeated legal costs.
- 6.25 The Year One Review Report found limited awareness of the waiver among legal professionals and the public, despite engagement and publicity efforts by the DoJ and the Legal Services Agency. Uptake was further hindered by a high evidential threshold requiring convictions, Court Orders or Police reports. While the DoJ sought to broaden the acceptable evidence through collaboration with statutory and voluntary organisations, progress was mixed.
- 6.26 Data for the Year Three Review showed little improvement in the number of applications to the civil legal aid waiver scheme, increasing by just 21 additional applications in the year to December 2024. This brought the total number of applications to 44 in almost three years. It was clear to Inspectors that the scheme was not working as intended and was therefore failing to deliver the expected benefits for victims.
- 6.27 Inspectors were told that awareness of the waiver was no longer considered a primary barrier to uptake. Instead, the complex process that required applicants to provide extensive financial evidence and to often still make a financial contribution, discouraged both applicants and solicitors. Inspectors were told that solicitors found the process too burdensome for the remuneration offered, while clients questioned whether the benefit outweighed the cost and administrative effort. Reform proposals were in development and Inspectors were told that these included efforts to simplify eligibility, such as removing financial contributions and focusing on evidence of domestic abuse to improve accessibility for victims. This was promising, however CJI would encourage the DoJ and their justice partners to continue their efforts to reduce barriers to victims of domestic abuse applying for civil legal aid and ensure that Section 28 of the Act achieves its intended purpose. This is an area CJI will revisit in the Year Four Review.

CHAPTER 7: **OUTCOMES**

GATHERING AND REPORTING DATA ON DOMESTIC ABUSE

- 7.1 As outlined earlier in this report, the DoJ gathered information and data annually about domestic abuse offences from the NICTS, the PPS and the PSNI. They also received up-to-date information regarding the annual training statement that was required under Section 32 of the Act. Concerns were raised by stakeholders about the data accuracy and completeness in how it was recorded and how representative it was of the level of domestic abuse in Northern Ireland. This affects the visibility of offences, support provision, and the ability to monitor and report on the effectiveness of Part 1 of the Act.
- 7.2 A 2024 His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) report⁵² on crime data integrity within the PSNI found issues with crime data recording including in domestic abuse cases. In most cases where the PSNI didn't record reported crimes, this was because Police Officers and staff didn't always recognise a crime had been committed. For example, following some incidents of domestic abuse and online abuse, some Officers did not understand what crimes should be recorded. Of the 408 reports of crime audited, 94 were related to domestic abuse. Of these, the PSNI recorded 87 (93%) cases appropriately. When considering evidence-led prosecutions when a victim withdrew support or never supported, of the nine cases reviewed, only one had a record showing that Officers had considered progressing the case without the victim's support. It was recommended that the PSNI should make sure that Officers consistently recorded whether evidence-led prosecutions have been considered in all cases where the victim had withdrawn support. A Service Direction to ensure that victims in domestic abuse cases are asked questions about why they don't support an investigation was sent to Police Officers.
- 7.3 The Inspection Team also found that the PSNI were not recording all domestic abuse cases. A change in Home Office recording practices in May 2023 saw a change to Counting Rules that meant only the most serious offending was being recorded for reporting purposes. For example, Inspectors examined a domestic abuse case file in which an alleged serious sexual offence was also reported. Home Office Counting Rules would have dictated that the sexual offence was recorded as it would have been considered the primary offence, while the domestic abuse offence would not have been recorded.

52 HMICFRS, *The Police Service of Northern Ireland: An inspection of crime data integrity, May 2024* available at <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/publication-html/psni-inspection-of-crime-data-integrity/>.

This inevitably had a direct impact on the levels of domestic abuse being reported by the PSNI, and as a result of their reporting requirements under the Act, to the DoJ. The overall level of domestic related offending would be higher if all domestic abuse cases were recorded. Similarly, the PPS prosecuted cases at their height (the most serious offence) which mirrored the PSNI approach⁵³. This meant that 'lower' level offending in serious sexual assault cases may not be prosecuted. Ultimately, Inspectors were concerned that the totality of reported levels of domestic abuse offences under the Act were not being accurately reflected in published statistics.

7.4 The Domestic Abuse Commissioner in England and Wales (the Commissioner) had raised serious concerns about the change to⁵⁴ the Home Office Counting Rules and the potential impact on domestic abuse reporting. The Commissioner noted that the change meant that the police would now only count one crime each time a victim made a report of domestic abuse and that the change enabled police to count fewer crimes of threatening or abusive messages. The Commissioner feared these changes downplayed the number of domestic abuse reports, which she noted as particularly concerning as the very nature of domestic abuse meant that victims typically reported multiple crimes to the police, as domestic abuse was very rarely a one-off offence. Calling for the changes to the Counting Rules to be reversed until a robust evaluation of the impact on domestic abuse had been undertaken, the Commissioner stated that:

'...these counting rule changes fly in the face of the Home Office's own commitment to "increase reporting to the police of domestic abuse-related incidents and recorded crimes," stated in the Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan 2022.'

7.5 Recording domestic abuse crimes under the current Counting Rules created a risk to how effectively alleged offences were being reflected as the change would inevitably make it harder to understand the extent and types of abuse reported to the police by domestic abuse victims. Inspectors found this change particularly troubling given the focus on a 'course of behaviour' within the Act under Section 1. This approach also downplayed the hard work of Police Officers and staff. The computer systems used by the PSNI and other police forces were unable to easily add additional crime classifications below the principal crime recorded, nor do they automatically link separate crime records. Moreover, once a crime has been reported by a victim, there is no digital method to track the victims' journey across the criminal justice system to identify the Court outcome or point of attrition.

53 All PPS cases with a relevant domestic abuse flag were included in PPS statistical reporting.

54 Domestic Abuse Commissioner, Distorted police statistics, January 2024 available at <https://domesticabusecommissioner.uk/distorted-police-statistics-downplay-domestic-abuse-reports-says-commissioner/>.

DOMESTIC ABUSE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

All domestic abuse motivated cases

7.6 The number of domestic abuse incidents and crimes recorded by the PSNI⁵⁵ in Northern Ireland has decreased since 2022-23.

Table 15: Domestic abuse motivations: incidents and crimes 2022-23 to 2024-25

Year	Domestic Abuse Motivation Incidents	Domestic Abuse Motivation Crimes
2022-23	32,876	22,310
2023-24	32,763	19,940
2024-25	29,751	18,393

7.7 The data in Table 15 refers to all cases that have a domestic abuse motivation which includes offences of coercive and controlling behaviour and the aggravators that is the subject of this Review. The PSNI Recorded Crime statistics showed that there were 18,393 domestic abuse motivated crimes recorded in 2024-25; the lowest since 2019-20. This suggested that either there were fewer domestic crimes being committed, fewer domestic abuse crimes being reported or that there were other factors in this reduction, such as issues with the way that the data was being recorded as stated in paragraph 7.5. The data available did provide some insight:

- the 29,751 domestic abuse motivated incidents recorded in 2024-25 was the eighth highest level since first recording began in 2004-05 (a 42% increase);
- there were 15 domestic abuse incidents and 10 domestic abuse crimes per 1,000 of the population in 2024-25;
- violence against the person offences accounted for 79% of all domestic abuse crimes in 2024-25, with sexual offences representing 6%;
- one third of domestic abuse crime victims were male in 2024-25, the highest proportion in the data series. Females represented two thirds of victims; and
- the sanction outcome rate for domestic abuse crimes was 28% in 2024-25. Sanction outcome rates for domestic abuse crimes have been consistently lower than those for all crimes recorded by the PSNI since 2017-18.

Domestic Abuse Offences under the Act

7.8 The DoJ were obligated under Section 34 of the Act to compile a report 'not less than two years and not more than three years' from the implementation of the Act. Then 'each subsequent reporting period is the period of three years coming after the previous reporting period.' The DoJ did produce data annually on prosecutions and case processing times, but this was not a requirement of the Act. Section 32 of the Act required the DoJ to report annually on training which suggested training should be updated annually for all those working with offences committed under the Act.

55 PSNI, Domestic Abuse Statistics, 27 November 2025 available at

<https://www.psnipolice.uk/about-us/our-publications-and-reports/official-statistics/domestic-abuse-statistics>.

7.9 In October 2025, the DoJ produced their first report⁵⁶ on the operation of Part 1 of the Act for the reporting period 21 February 2022 to March 2024. This included data on the Section 1 domestic abuse offence, the Section 8 and Section 9 child aggravators and the Section 15 domestic abuse aggravator. This report included statistics, training, Court arrangements, witness experience, public awareness, and Departmental activities. It acknowledged that the data presented was from a series of fundamentally different data sets, with victim-based crime data provided by the PSNI and suspect/offender-based data from the PPS. Suspect/offender-based data shows how suspects are dealt with from file submission and case progression through to prosecution and conviction. Victim-based crime recording does not require evidence for a crime/domestic abuse aggravator to be recorded, while suspect/offender data will be based on evidence identified through investigation. Victim-based crime recording and the suspect/offender-based data sets do not join together, meaning that caution must be exercised when using the data. When considered alongside the Home Office Rules for counting cases, Inspectors believe the true levels of domestic abuse cases are not being reported.

PSNI outcome rates

7.10 Inspectors examined the data that was available from each part of the system in sequence from initial call to outcome either at Court or other disposal. In the PSNI annual report on domestic abuse trends,⁵⁷ the sanction outcome rates⁵⁸ showed that:

- in 2024-25 the charge/summons outcome rate for all crimes with a domestic abuse motivation was 24%, compared with 26% in both 2023-24 and 2022-23; nearly nine in 10 domestic abuse sanction outcomes were charge/summons - 85% in 2024-25;
- 3% of cases were out-of-Court informal disposals in 2024-25 the same as 2023-24 and 0.3% more than 2022-23;
- 1% were formal out-of-Court disposals – same as the previous two years; and
- 24% of cases were charges or summonses compared to 26% in 2023-24 and in 2022-23.

This was overall a positive outcome for the PSNI. When Section 1 cases were identified there is a high sanction outcome rate.

56 DoJ, *Report on the Operation of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act 2021, October 2025*, available at <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/department-justice-report-operation-domestic-abuse-and-civil-proceedings-northern-ireland-act-2021>.

57 PSNI, *Trends in Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the PSNI, November 2025* available at <https://www.psnipolice.uk/system/files/2025-11/1359050981/Domestic%20Abuse%20Incidents%20and%20Crimes%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%202004-05%20to%202024-25.pdf>.

58 Sanction outcomes are applied where a person is formally dealt with by police by means of a charge, summons, offence taken into consideration, formal out-of-court disposal or informal out-of-court disposal. Non-sanction outcomes are applied where no formal action is taken by police against a suspect.

Police recorded crime statistics

- 7.11 The annual PSNI report on overall recorded crime outcomes statistics⁵⁹ was due at the end of November 2025 but was postponed indefinitely to allow investigation into a change in level of completeness of the data for 2024-25. The 2023-24⁶⁰ data showed that around one in four (same as in 2022-23) cases with a domestic abuse motivation were resolved by a charge or summons – compared to one in five of all crimes.
- 7.12 The PSNI published data on the Section 1 domestic abuse offence and Section 8 and Section 9 child aggravators from 2022 to March 2025. Table 16 shows the numbers of recorded cases reported before any investigation.

Table 16: PSNI recorded crime statistics – domestic abuse statistics, victim-based crime. Recorded at point of report, prior to any investigation

	February 2022 -March 2023	2023-24	2024-25
Section 1 domestic abuse offence	1,013	741	747
Section 8 – child victim	16 (2%)	14 (2%)	18 (2%)
Section 9 – relevant child	362 (36%)	250 (34%)	258 (34%)

- 7.13 The number of Section 8 aggravators had remained consistent over the first three years of the Act; approximately 2% of all Section 1 domestic abuse offences. However, these were very low numbers which hindered statistical scrutiny. This data was based on victim allegations but with so few numbers being recorded and the impact on children and their views insufficiently heard, as recommended in this Review, this information was at best inaccurate and at worst misleading. As cases progressed through to custody at police stations Table 17 provides further insight into how many of the reported cases resulted in arrests. It does not provide a complete picture but does give a more accurate insight into how the aggravators are actually being used.

Table 17: PSNI Custody records where a person has been arrested for at least one Section 1 offence

	February 2022 -March 2023	2023-24	2024-25
Section 1 domestic abuse offence	824	995	1,028
Section 8 – child victim	8 (1%)	5 (1%)	12 (1%)
Section 9 – relevant child	4 (1%)	2 (1%)	10 (1%)

59 PSNI, *Recorded Crime Statistics, November 2024* available at <https://www.psnipolice.uk/about-us/our-publications-and-reports/official-statistics/police-recorded-crime-statistics>.

60 PSNI, *Recorded Crime Statistics, November 2024* available at <https://www.psnipolice.uk/system/files/2024-11/1192449790/Police%20Crime%20Outcomes%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%202015-16%20to%202023-24.pdf>.

7.14 There had been an increase in 3% of Section 1 arrests between the Year Two and Year Three Review. Inspectors were very concerned about the significant 'drop off' in cases involving children and the low numbers being prosecuted in Court. The recommendation on hearing the voices of children in this Review should provide better data and analysis as to why there are so many cases involving children that do not end up in a charge or prosecution. This point is further emphasised in Table 18 which shows how many people were subsequently charged with at least one Section 1 offence and the further decline in the presence of the Section 8 and Section 9 child aggravators.

Table 18: Number of custody records where a person has been arrested for at least one Section 1 domestic abuse offence and subsequently charged

	February 2022 -March 2023	2023-24	2024-25
Section 1 domestic abuse offence	392	464	482
Section 8 – child victim	4 (1%)	1 (0.2%)	3 (0.6%)
Section 9 – relevant child	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

7.15 The data suggests that although there is a slight increase in the numbers of defendants charged with Section 1, there were very low numbers of those cases with Section 8 or 9 aggravators which was concerning.

7.16 Following police investigation, those cases that required a decision were then sent to the PPS. The PPS provided the Inspection Team with updated data, as shown in Table 19.

Table 19: Files received by the PPS from the PSNI with a Section 1 domestic abuse offence

	February 2022 -March 2023	2023-24	2024-25
Section 1 domestic abuse offence	802	1,109	1,099
Section 8 – child victim	7 (0.9%)	3 (0.3%)	6 (0.5%)
Section 9 – relevant child	19 (2.4%)	35 (3.2%)	41 (3.7%)

7.17 The numbers of cases have remained relatively static between Years 2 and 3 however, similar to the PSNI data, there were very low numbers of aggravated cases relating to children. Section 5 of the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 relates to 'aggravation in relation to a child'.⁶¹ This is broadly similar to the Section 9 relevant child aggravator in Northern Ireland.

61 See [https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2018/5/section/5#:~:text=5Aggravation%20in%20relation%20to%20a%20child&text=\(b\)A%20makes%20use%20of,of%20the%20course%20of%20behaviour.](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2018/5/section/5#:~:text=5Aggravation%20in%20relation%20to%20a%20child&text=(b)A%20makes%20use%20of,of%20the%20course%20of%20behaviour.)

The Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service reported that, in Scotland, in 2023-24 a statutory child aggravation under Section 5 was recorded against 350 (20%) of the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 charges reported. The 2024-25 update in Scotland showed⁶² that this figure had risen to 501 cases or 25%. The expected outcomes for children in Northern Ireland were similar to those in Scotland, yet in 2024-25 there was a 21% (negative) difference for children in this jurisdiction.

7.18 The data shows that reporting numbers have levelled after the initial implementation of the Act. However, the child aggravators were in stark contrast. The Section 8 aggravator (child victim) numbers are very low, appearing in fewer than 50 cases across three years; between 1-2% of all recorded offences. In contrast, the Section 9 aggravator (relevant child) is flagged in approximately one-third of cases at the recording stage, supporting the view that children are frequently present in the context of domestic abuse incidents. The findings in this Review, 16,025 *Operation Encompass* referrals, identified the unheard voice of child and the ultimately very poor levels of child victims/relevant child cases being recorded provided clear evidence that there was a significant issue around the accurate recording of information required for the Act and the intent of the Act to reflect the impact of domestic abuse on children as a deterrent and consequence for offenders.

7.19 The DoJ published data, as shown in Table 20, on numbers of prosecutions that were dealt with at Court each year. These figures were not always commensurate with PSNI investigations and PPS prosecutions as they often overlap financial years and some cases took longer than others.

Table 20: Cases with a Section 1 domestic abuse offence dealt with at Court, convictions, child aggravators prosecuted, convicted and proven

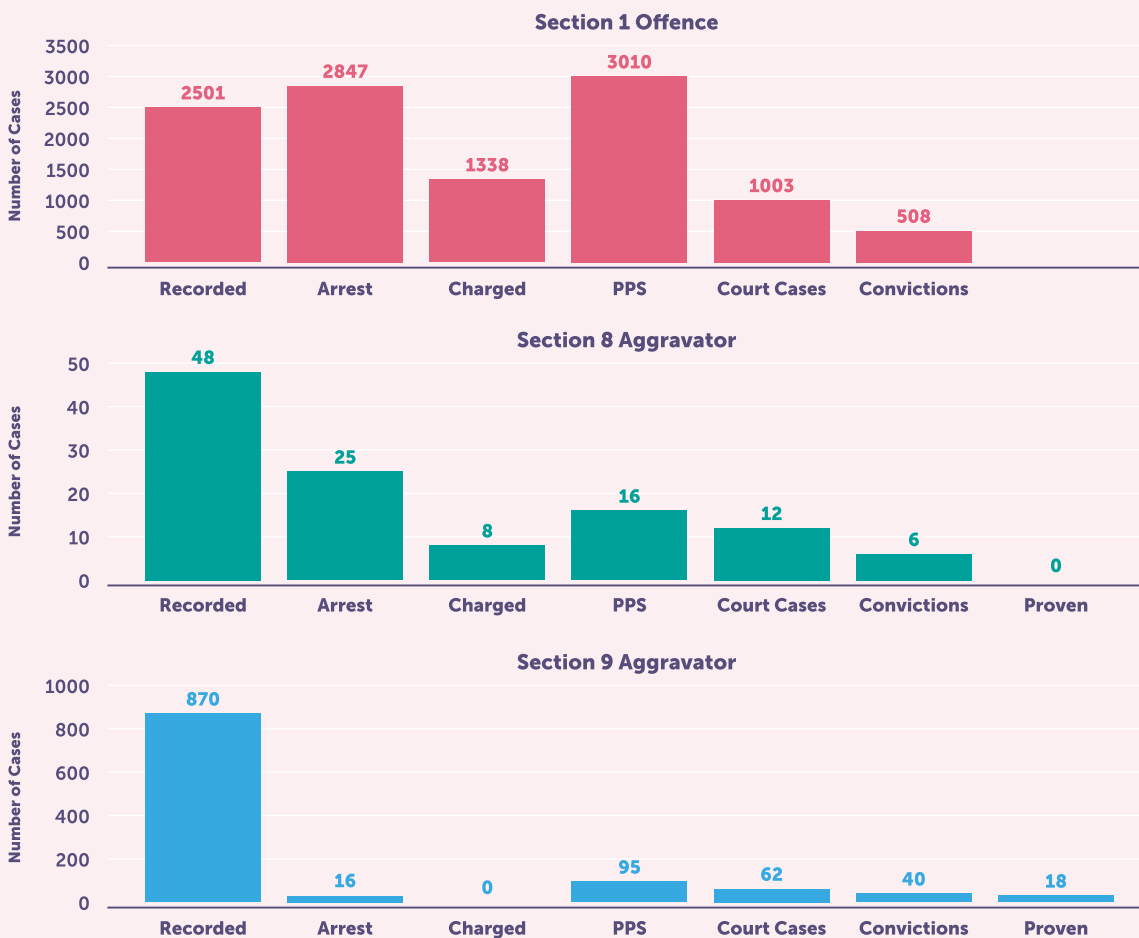
	February 2022 - March 2023	2023-24	2024-25
Section 1 - domestic abuse offence	169	396	438
Section 1 - conviction	87 (51.5%)	210 (53%)	211 (48.2%)
Section 8 - child victim	5 (3%)	3 (0.8%)	4 (0.9%)
Section 8 - convictions	3 (60%)	0 (0%)	3 (75%)
Section 8 - aggravator proven	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Section 9 - relevant child	6 (3.6%)	24 (6.1%)	32 (7.3%)
Section 9 - convictions	5 (83.3%)	17 (71%)	18 (56.3%)
Section 9 - aggravator proven	4 (80%)	8 (47.1%)	6 (33.3%)

62 Crown Office & Procurator Fiscal Service, *Domestic abuse and stalking charges in Scotland 2024 - 2025, September 2025* available at <https://www.copfs.gov.uk/publications/domestic-abuse-and-stalking-charges-in-scotland-2024-2025/html/#:~:text=A%20statutory%20child%20aggravation%20under%20section%205,charges%20reported%20were%20in%20cases%20where%20the>.

7.20 The overall conviction rate for the Section 1 domestic abuse offence had remained at around 50% falling to 48% by 2025. It was unsurprising that the low numbers of Section 8 cases as shown in Tables 17, 18 and 19 were reflected in very low numbers of Section 8 prosecutions, however the complete lack of any Section 8 aggravators proven at Court since the commencement of the Act was extremely concerning. This pattern was also replicated with the Section 9 aggravator, however more success at Court was recorded. Of the 32 cases that had reached Court and that had a Section 9 aggravator, only six were proven in 2024-25, equating to 33.3% of all the cases with a conviction of a Section 9 aggravator.

7.21 Overall, the data reveals a cascade effect: (Chart 1)⁶³ for the attrition rate of the loss of voices of children. Inspectors were concerned that there was a fundamental issue around the recording, identifying and evidencing children impacted by domestic abuse under the Act. Until these issues are addressed, the legislative intent behind Sections 8 and 9 will remain largely unrealised.

Chart 1: The Cascading Loss of Child Aggravated Cases



63 The DoJ cautioned that these statistics were from a range of data sets. The victim-based nature of PSNI data makes it a fundamentally different data set to the suspect/offender-based data that presents how suspects are dealt with throughout the criminal justice process, such as from file submission and case progression through to prosecution and conviction. Victim-based crime recording does not require evidence for a crime/domestic abuse aggravator to be recorded, while suspect/offender data will be based on evidence identified through investigation. Victim-based crime recording and the suspect/offender-based data sets do not join together, meaning that caution must be exercised when interpreting these statistics.

Other Court Outcomes

- 7.22 The DoJ Annual Report⁶⁴ also provided further important information. In 2024-25:
- the average time taken to complete cases with offences under the Act was 152 days. This was an increase of 9.4% from 139 days in 2023-24. For all criminal cases dealt with at all courts, it was 189 days;
 - of the 2,404 cases with offences with the statutory aggravator (Section 15), 1,366 resulted in a conviction, however the aggravator was only proven in 1,106 of them;
 - in cases with the Section 15 aggravator, violence against the person was the main offence category in most cases 62% (829 cases). Cases where the main offence was criminal damage and arson made up 18% (239 cases);
 - 95% of all domestic abuse related cases (2,386) were dealt with in the Magistrates' Courts, down from 97% (2,635) in 2023-24. A total of 91% (1,278 out of 1,408) of those convicted were male;
 - sentences were enhanced in 455 cases following convictions in cases with offences under the Act. In 2023-24, this was recorded in 170 cases however, not all cases were being recorded; and
 - special measures were implemented in 229 cases in 2024-25, compared to 206 cases in 2023-24.
- 7.23 A custodial sentence was the outcome in 32% of convictions for cases with offences under the Act in 2024-25; a slight increase from 31% in 2023-24. In all courts other types of disposals in 2024-25 included:
- suspended sentences in 29% (402) of cases, up from 26% (393) the previous year;
 - community sentences in 18% (252) of cases, compared to 20% (300) in 2023-24;
 - monetary penalties in 16% (225) of cases, compared to 17% (254) in 2023-24; and
 - other penalties, such as discharges, in 6% (83) of cases. In 2023-24, these made up 7% (105) of cases of disposals across all Courts.
- 7.24 A custodial sentence was more likely in the Crown Court - 71% (66) of cases in 2024-25. This was similar to 2023-24, 72% (59 cases). In 2024-25, at Crown Court, 18% (17) of cases resulted in a community sentence, while 10% (9) received a suspended sentence.

64 DoJ, *The Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings (Northern Ireland) Act 2021 - prosecutions at courts and case processing times for domestic abuse related cases dealt with in 2024-25, September 2025* available at https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/system/files/2025-09/Domestic_Abuse_2024_25_publication_WEB_VERSION.pdf.

7.25 In the Magistrates' Courts in 2024-25, where there was a conviction of an offence under the Act:

- most disposals were a suspended sentence 30%, 393 cases (27%, 381 cases in 2023-24);
- 29% (380) of cases, resulted in a custodial sentence (28%, 404 cases 2023-24);
- 18% (235) of cases (20%, 291 cases in 2023-24) resulted in a community sentence;
- a monetary penalty was the main disposal in 17% (225) of cases in 2024-25 (18%, 254 cases in 2023-24); and
- other penalties, such as a discharge, were the main disposal in 6% (82) of cases in 2024-25 (7%, 103 cases in 2023-24).

7.26 The purpose of accurate recording of offences under the Act is to demonstrate to victims, perpetrators and the public that offences committed in a domestic context are being dealt with appropriately. The Northern Ireland Executive stated that Safer Communities, EVAWG and the criminal justice organisations and the DoJ had domestic abuse as a strategic priority. This Year Three Review found that this strategic prioritisation had not been put into operation effectively and significant progress was needed. The DoJ used the data from the PSNI, the PPS and NICTS. However, the PSNI data was limited due to the reliance on victim-based crime recording and the changed Home Office Counting Rules, the PPS prosecuted cases at their highest and the NICTS were not recording all DASE and DANA cases. Therefore, the data being provided to the public was inaccurate. The data was not analysed by the organisations or the DoJ and did not demonstrate how the Act was improving how domestic abuse was being dealt with. The data also did not show whether there was an impact on any Section 75 groups or reasons why victims did not engage with the criminal justice system. **As an Area for Improvement, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service should analyse and assess the domestic abuse related data they collect by routinely analysing it to identify emerging issues and trends, take timely action and support strong evidence-based, decision-making in relation to Act implementation.**

APPENDIX 1: METHODOLOGY

Self-assessment

The DoJ, the PPS, the PSNI and the NICTS were asked to complete a self-assessment against CJI's framework of strategy and governance, delivery and outcomes. This self-assessment covered progress and areas of change over the 12 months since Review fieldwork for the second annual Review. Where appropriate, each organisation supplied documentation as evidence to support their self-assessment. Statistical information, as collected in accordance with the requirement in Section 34 of the Act was also provided by the DoJ and Inspectors requested additional statistics from the PSNI and the PPS.

Document review

A review was undertaken of the documentation collated to cross-reference information against CJI's inspection framework. This was used to inform interview questions during fieldwork and to review the case file methodology.

Fieldwork

One-to-one and focus group interviews were conducted with a range of personnel within each of the relevant criminal justice agencies. Interviews were also conducted with a range of stakeholder organisations from across the domestic abuse sector. Representatives from the following areas were interviewed during the fieldwork:

Department of Justice:

- Civil Legal Aid Reform Branch; and
- Violence Against the Person Branch.

Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service:

- Court Clerks;
- Support Staff;
- Line Management; and
- Training.

Probation Board for Northern Ireland:

- Assistant Director, Public Protection.

Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland:

- Public Prosecutors;
- Senior Public Prosecutors;
- Gateway lead Prosecutor; and
- Head of Policy and Domestic Abuse Policy Leads.

Police Service of Northern Ireland:

- Contact Management Centre Superintendent and Chief Inspector;
- Contact Management Centre Call Handlers and Dispatchers;
- Custody Sergeants;
- Performance Chief Inspectors;
- District Sergeants;
- Local Policing Team Officers;
- Neighbourhood Policing Team Officers;
- Public Protection Branch, Chief Superintendent;
- Public Protection Branch, Superintendent and Chief Inspector;
- Public Protection Branch, Domestic Abuse specialist Officers;
- Belfast Case Progression Team, Sergeants;
- Police College, Police Training leads;
- District Commander, Derry City and Strabane;
- District Commander, Fermanagh and Omagh; and
- Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, Crime Recording staff.

Stakeholders:

- ASSIST NI;
- Bar Council of Northern Ireland;
- Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime for Northern Ireland;
- Education Authority (*Operation Encompass* lead);
- Men's Advisory Project;
- Nexus;
- Northern Ireland Policing Board;
- NSPCC;
- Presiding District Judge (Magistrates' Courts);
- Rainbow Project;
- Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland;
- Victim Support Northern Ireland; and
- Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland.

Case file reviews

A review was conducted of PSNI domestic abuse investigation files with support from HMICFRS Associate Inspectors. The review utilised the question set designed for the first annual Review of the Act. This enabled a comparison of the results from Year One. This question set was developed based on that used by HMICFRS for their inspections which considered vulnerability or domestic abuse. This was used to review 73 investigation files encompassing cases flagged as having a domestic abuse motivation. The files related to reports to police received between 1 June 2025 and 31 August 2025. A random sample was identified with the assistance of *Microsoft Copilot, an Artificial Intelligence (AI) powered tool, guided and reviewed by CJI Inspectors, in line with UK Government AI policy and CJI's interim AI policy.*

A review was also undertaken of prosecution files with support from Inspectors from HMCPST. This review utilised the question set designed as part of the first annual Review of the Act, and was based on HMCPST inspections in England and Wales. This was used to review 76 prosecution files encompassing cases flagged as being in a domestic context submitted to the PPS by the PSNI between 1 June 2025 and 31 August 2025. A random sample of these cases was identified with the assistance of AI.

Non-valid/applicable cases have been excluded from analysis. Where possible, statistical significance was assessed through standard statistical methods (p-values shown where applicable), which indicate the probability that the observed differences between Year One and Year Three occurred by chance. In this case, p-values greater than 0.05 suggest that differences are not statistically significant, meaning the variation observed cannot be confidently attributed to a real effect rather than random variation.

APPENDIX 2: **TERMS OF REFERENCE**

A REVIEW OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PART 1 OF THE DOMESTIC ABUSE AND CIVIL PROCEEDINGS ACT (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2021

TERMS OF REFERENCE – YEAR THREE

Introduction

Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJI) is undertaking the annual independent oversight required under Section 33 of Part 1 of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 (the Act) and provisions relating to civil legal aid requested by the Minister of Justice.

This third Review will focus on the three main elements of the CJI inspection framework as they apply to the effectiveness of the Act; these are strategy and governance, delivery and outcomes.

The main agencies and organisations to be reviewed will be the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland (PPS), the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI). The Department of Justice's (DoJ's) role will be considered where relevant, including its role in issuing Part 1 guidance.

Where possible, this Review will draw on recent and current relevant CJI Inspections and Reviews to avoid duplication.

CJI will work in partnership with His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) and His Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPIS) Inspectors during the fieldwork stages, in particular case file reviews, evidence gathering and assessment.

Context

The Terms of Reference for the first Review (available on CJI's website⁶⁵) established the background to CJI's work in this area and are applicable for each annual Review.

The Act created the domestic abuse offence and covers behaviour that is controlling or coercive or that amounts to psychological, emotional or financial abuse of another person. The Act also provided the potential for increased sentencing in other offences up to the maximum available, where there was a single incident rather than a pattern of abuse behaviour.

65 CJI reports available at <https://www.cjini.org/reports/>.

Part 1 of the Act includes Chapter 1 that details the domestic abuse offence, Chapter 2 details the aggravation as to domestic abuse and Chapter 3 contains miscellaneous provisions including civil legal aid for domestic abuse victims.

This third Review will have a specific focus on child safeguarding and protection.

Aims of the Review

This Review aims to:

- provide an assessment of the effectiveness of Part 1 of the Act and operational delivery of it with a particular focus on child safeguarding and protection including the effectiveness of *Operation Encompass* and the use of Part 1 child aggravators in relevant offences;
- provide an update on the implementation of Year One Review Report recommendations and Year Two assessment of progress;
- review how the domestic abuse offence or an offence aggravated by domestic abuse was investigated and prosecuted across a sample of case files;
- review the accuracy, completeness and consistency of Court records relating to enhanced and not enhanced sentences; and
- make any required recommendations.

Methodology

The Review will be based on the CJI Inspection Framework and the three main elements:

- Strategy and governance;
- Delivery; and
- Outcomes.

Constants in each of the three Inspection Framework elements and throughout each Inspection and Review are equality and fairness, together with standards and best practice. The CJI inspection methodology can be found at <https://www.cjini.org/our-approach/the-inspection-process/>

Design and Planning

Preliminary research

Data, information and previous Review Reports have been reviewed in order to inform the scope of this Review.

Benchmarking, research and data collection

Collection of benchmarking information and data, where available, from other jurisdictions and sectors in Northern Ireland and a review of inspection and research reports will be undertaken. Data, which is being collated and provided to the DoJ in accordance with Section 34 of the Act (for the purposes of the DoJ producing a report on its operation), will be requested and reviewed.

Contact with agencies/organisations

These Terms of Reference will be shared with the DoJ, PSNI, PPS, Lady Chief Justice's Office, NICTS and the PBNI prior to the initiation of the Review. A self-assessment with supporting documentation or material will be requested from each relevant agency/organisation and Liaison Officers should be nominated for this Review.

Policies and procedures, management information, minutes of meetings and related documentation from the reviewed agencies/organisations will be requested and reviewed.

Delivery

Stakeholder engagement

The following individuals/stakeholder organisations will be invited to engage with this Review:

- ASSIST NI Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Advocacy Service;
- Women's Aid Federation and representatives from local groups;
- Northern Ireland Policing Board;
- Men's Action Network;
- Men's Advisory Project;
- NSPCC;
- Victim Support NI;
- Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime for Northern Ireland;
- Nexus (including the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline);
- District Judges (Magistrates' Court);
- Law Society Criminal Law Committee;
- Bar Council Criminal Law Committee;
- Belfast Solicitors' Association;
- Cithrâh Foundation;
- Disability Action;
- Hourglass; and
- Rainbow Project.

CJI will seek assistance from relevant stakeholders to gather the views of victims.

Development of fieldwork plan

CJI will liaise with the Liaison Officers in each organisation to arrange a series of meetings and focus groups with relevant individuals within the DoJ, PSNI, PPS, NICTS and PBNI.

As stated above, case file reviews of police and prosecution files will be undertaken during the fieldwork with support from HMICFRS and HMCPSI respectively. A case file review methodology will be developed and shared with the PSNI and PPS.

Initial feedback to agencies/organisations

On conclusion of the fieldwork the evidence will be collated, triangulated and analysed and emerging recommendations will be developed. CJI will then present the findings to appropriate organisations.

Report drafting

Following completion of the fieldwork and analysis of data, a draft Review Report will be shared with the reviewed bodies for factual accuracy check. The Chief Inspector will invite the reviewed agencies to complete an action plan within six weeks to address any recommendations and, if available, it will be published as part of the final Review Report. The Review Report will be shared, under embargo, in advance of the publication date with the reviewed agencies.

Publication and Closure

The Review Report will be sent to the Minister of Justice for permission to publish and when permission is received it will be finalised for publication. A press release will be drafted and shared with the reviewed agencies prior to publication and release. A publication date will be agreed and the Review Report will be issued.

Indicative Timetable	
Scoping/Research and Self-assessment returns:	July 2025.
Stakeholder consultation:	July – August 2025.
Agency fieldwork and file review:	September – October 2025.
Draft Report to agencies:	January 2026.
Factual accuracy feedback received and Review Report submitted to the DoJ:	February 2026.

The above timetable may be impacted by factors outside CJI's control. The reviewed organisations will be kept advised of any significant changes to the indicative timetable.

APPENDIX 3: CASE FILE REVIEW DATA

This Appendix provides a summary of the cases that were reviewed by Inspectors. Case data was collated from the information available on the PSNI NICHE Records Management System and the PPS Case Management System, as appropriate. Assigned outcomes were determined by case file reviewers based on information available within the case file.

Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number for clarity, which may result in minor discrepancies when compared to raw counts. These differences do not affect the interpretation of results. Due to sampling error, any sample is unlikely to reflect precisely the characteristics of the population; differences in estimates may therefore occur by chance.

PSNI CASE FILES

Victim-suspect relationship

	Percentage	Number
Current partners	23%	17
Ex-partners	45%	33
(Adult) child and father (including stepfather)	12%	9
(Adult) child and mother (including stepmother)	14%	10
(Adult) child and grandfather	1%	1
(Adult) child and grandmother	-	0
Under 18 child and other family member	1%	1
Siblings (child or adult)	3%	2
Other	-	0
TOTAL	100%	73

Victim gender

	Percentage	Number
Male	27%	20
Female	73%	53
TOTAL	100%	73

Victim age

	Percentage	Number
0-18	15%	11
19-25	19%	14
26-29	10%	7
30-39	25%	18
40-49	11%	8
50-59	8%	6
60-69	7%	5
70+	5%	4
TOTAL	100%	73

Suspect gender

	Percentage	Number
Male	74%	54
Female	26%	19
TOTAL	100%	73

Suspect age

	Percentage	Number
0-18	4%	3
19-25	19%	14
26-29	4%	3
30-39	33%	24
40-49	29%	21
50-59	5%	4
60-69	1%	1
70+	4%	3
TOTAL	100%	73

PPS CASE FILES

Victim-suspect relationship

	Percentage	Number
Current partners	29%	22
Ex-partners	50%	38
(Adult) child and father (including stepfather)	3%	2
(Adult) child and mother (including stepmother)	11%	8
(Adult) child and grandfather	-	0
(Adult) child and grandmother	-	0
Under 18 child and other family member	7%	5
Siblings (child or adult)	1%	1
Other	-	0
TOTAL	100%	76

Victim gender

	Percentage	Number
Male	17%	13
Female	83%	63
TOTAL	100%	76

Victim age

	Percentage	Number
0-18	13%	10
19-25	11%	8
26-29	8%	6
30-39	28%	21
40-49	28%	21
50-59	11%	8
60-69	-	0
70+	3%	2
TOTAL	100%	76

Suspect gender

	Percentage	Number
Male	79%	60
Female	21%	16
TOTAL	100%	76

Suspect age

	Percentage	Number
0-18	9%	7
19-25	14%	11
26-29	4%	3
30-39	30%	23
40-49	29%	22
50-59	11%	8
60-69	3%	2
70+	-	0
TOTAL	100%	76

APPENDIX 4: YEAR ONE REVIEW REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS AND YEAR TWO REVIEW REPORT STATUS

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATION 1

The Police Service of Northern Ireland should work with the Education Authority and education providers to develop an information sharing protocol within nine months of the publication of this report. They should hold discussions with the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland about how Operation Encompass can support, and be supported by, wider child safeguarding practices.

Year Two Review Report status: Reasonable progress

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATION 2

The Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland should further develop and embed the Prosecution Team approach for cases involving domestic abuse, focusing on the issues highlighted in this review, within six months of the publication of this report. This should include re-visiting the concept of specialist domestic abuse Prosecutors.

Year Two Review Report status: Reasonable progress

OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATION 1

Within three months of the publication of this report, the Department of Justice should take steps to raise awareness of the statutory guidance across statutory and non-statutory sectors.

Year Two Review Report status: Reasonable progress

OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATION 2

Within three months of the publication of this report the Department of Justice should take steps to further promote participation in the 'Domestic Abuse - Context and Change' e-learning package.

Year Two Review Report status: Reasonable progress

OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATION 3

The Police Service of Northern Ireland should deliver further training to those working in contact management roles, within six months of the publication of this report, to improve:

- the quality of THRIVE assessments;
- the focus on children in domestic abuse cases; and
- the records of supervisory reviews of domestic abuse cases.

Year Two Review Report status: No meaningful progress

OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATION 4

Within six months of the publication of this report the Police Service of Northern Ireland should assess how effectively the Year Two training has improved the response to children in domestic abuse cases and take action to address any further learning needs identified. Quality assurance processes to reinforce the training should include a focus on the quality of information recorded by Police Staff, Officers and Supervisors.

Year Two Review Report status: Insufficient progress

OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATION 5

Action should be taken by the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland, within six months of the publication of this report, to ensure that the Section 15 domestic abuse aggravator is applied to every relevant charge, with information technology and quality assurance systems that reinforce this approach.

Year Two Review Report status: Reasonable progress

OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATION 6

Within six months of the publication of this report, the Department of Justice should review the relevant sections of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 with a view to introducing a presumption of a personal connection, allowing for this be challenged by the defence in appropriate circumstances.

Year Two Review Report status: Reasonable progress

OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATION 7

Within three months of the publication of this report the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland policy and guidance should clarify and direct the use of cautions in domestic abuse cases in rare circumstances only, with a requirement for a detailed record of reasoning and rationale if they are used. Quality assurance processes for domestic abuse cases should include an analysis of the quantity and quality of cautions directed by Prosecutors, particularly where a Section 1 domestic abuse offence has been directed in the first instance.

Year Two Review Report status: Good progress

OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATION 8

As required by Section 34 of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021, the Police Service of Northern Ireland should produce data on offences alleged to be aggravated by domestic abuse as referred to in Section 15. Within six months of the publication of this report plans should be developed as to how this data can be published at regular time intervals.

Year Two Review Report status: Good progress

OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATION 9

Within three months of the publication of this report, the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service should, in conjunction with its partners across the Courts, review and take action to ensure accurate, complete and consistent recording of Domestic Abuse - Sentence Enhanced and Domestic Abuse - Sentence Not Enhanced outcomes.

Year Two Review Report status: Insufficient progress



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