



**Submission to the NI Assembly
Committee for Health, Social Services & Public Safety
On the Proposed Safeguarding Board NI**

The Northern Ireland Association of Social Workers is part of the British Association of Social Workers, which is the largest professional association for social workers in the UK. The Association has over 12,500 members employed in frontline; management, academic and research positions in all social care settings.

Northern Ireland Association of Social Workers
Douglas House
397 Ormeau Road
Belfast BT7 3GP
Tel: 028 90648873
Fax: 028 90648874
Email: n.ireland@basw.co.uk

February 2010

Introduction

The Northern Ireland Association of Social Workers (NIASW) is the professional association for social workers in Northern Ireland and is part of the UK wide British Association for Social Workers. The Association has over 12,500 members employed in frontline; management, academic and research positions in all social care settings.

NIASW are grateful to the Committee for providing this opportunity to comment on the policy proposal for the establishment of the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) in advance of the legislation being brought before the Assembly.

Overall the NIASW are supportive of the proposals which have been brought forward by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and welcome the intent to strengthen the strategic leadership and inter-agency co-ordination that are at the heart of an effective system for promoting children's welfare and protecting them from all forms of abuse and neglect.

- **What are the essential elements that you would like to see to ensure a fully integrated and coordinated response to safeguarding of children?**

Parents and extended family have the primary responsibility for providing children with the care they need and in ensuring their protection from harm. Where parents and family members are either unable to unwilling to do this then the state needs to intervene.

Over the past forty years in Northern Ireland a very effective system for supporting and protecting children has been developed. This has been based on personal social services having the lead responsibility for protecting children from harm due to abuse and neglect. However, social workers can only meet children's needs in conjunction with other professionals, such as health visitors and paediatricians, and colleagues from other agencies, such as those in education, the police and the voluntary and community sectors.

As such, NIASW welcome the proposal that the new SBNI will build upon the success of the Area Child Protection Committees (ACPCs) which it will replace in providing a forum for developing and implementing a strategic vision for safeguarding children on an interagency and multidisciplinary basis.

This will need to be underpinned by:

- individual agency representatives having a clear mandate for both contributing to the work of the SBNI, and in ensuring that their own agency adopts the work of the SBNI into their own business planning cycle and priorities
- a clear role for the SBNI in holding members agencies of the Board to account for their actions

- a clear focus on the outcomes to be achieved for children and their families

The proposals to strengthen these areas in comparison to the ACPCs are welcomed.

- **Are the functions of the SBNI as outlined at Chapter 3 of the Policy Document adequate?**

The core functions as outlined in Chapter 3 are appropriate for the proposed SBNI, but the NIASW would welcome the SBNI developing a strategic vision for the safeguarding of children in Northern Ireland. The policy document refers to the ten year strategy for children and young people developed by OFMDFM, and other structural factors such as children's services planning. Whilst the focus on the interconnection between complementary fora is welcomed, the SBNI provides Northern Ireland, uniquely within these isles, of having a clear overarching strategy for keeping children safe that crosses the traditional government and agency parameters.

- **Given that one of the roles of the SBNI is to secure accountability, how can one panel member hold another to account?**

The NIASW recognise that accountability is a challenge when agencies will operate under separate governance and legislative provisions.

Governance is built into the proposals in a number of ways:

- a duty to make arrangements to safeguard and promote the welfare of children is to be imposed on core members – and those with whom they have arrangements. This does not alter their legislative requirements on their own agency, rather to carry those out in way that safeguard and protects children;
- lines of accountability through Local Safeguarding Panels to SBNI and through this to the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety on behalf of the NI Executive;
- provision for the independent chairing of SBNI and Panels;
- provision for lay members;
- provision for senior representation from key agencies;
- structural involvement for other stakeholders through the provision of a Safeguarding Forum, Patient Client involvement and the development of measures to involve young people. The operation of a sub group structure should also help ensure that a wide range of stakeholders have the opportunity to be represented in the work of the SBNI; and
- proposed mechanisms to ensure that agencies on SBNI audit and report on their safeguarding practice.

It may be helpful to ensure that in the proposed legislation every agency represented on the SBNI has a legal duty to publish a statement once per year detailing their contribution to the work of the SBNI and their actions in promoting the safeguarding of children within their work.

- **How representative is the proposed membership; are all aspects of child protection covered i.e. what about the Courts and judiciary? Does the essential wide representation come at the cost of unwieldiness? What level of seniority of staff should be represented?**

In order for any forum to operate effectively it is important to have the right people in attendance whilst also being mindful of the need to maintain overall effectiveness. The NIASW welcome the proposal to have a core membership on the SBNI that reflects those agencies with statutory responsibilities towards children and families. The NIASW would propose that a senior doctor is a core member of the SBNI given the very valuable contribution that medical practitioners can make, and the association would have no objection to a member of the legal profession being a member. The proposal for a Safeguarding Forum is welcomed.

- **How should the chairperson of the local safeguarding panels will be appointed and should these will be paid posts**

The NIASW support the proposals outlined in the policy document, and agree that these posts should be remunerated.

- **How clear is the interaction between the DHSSPS, the Health and Social Care Board and the Trusts and the SBNI regarding who will have primacy on issues / policy areas and who does what.**

This is a very important issue, as highlighted in the inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the death of David Briggs in 2000¹. Whilst delineating lines of responsibility is not always straightforward, there is a need to ensure that these issues are clarified at an early stage, and that this also included the potential for overlap with regulatory and inspectorial bodies such as RQIA and CJINI.

- **Should there be a legal duty on relevant agencies to cooperate as well as safeguard?**

Whilst placing a legal duty on relevant agencies to co-operate with one another may appear desirable, in practice it is likely that this would be difficult to enforce. The extensive research into those factors which promote inter-agency co-operation in the protection of children highlight that the key factors are clarity of roles and responsibilities; agreement as

to the strategic direction of travel; agreed policies and procedures; and an agreed process for addressing issues of concern about joint working.

- **Any opinions that your organisation may have on serious case reviews and the single database?**

The opportunity to review cases where the outcomes are adverse is an important aspect of the work of the SBNI. Local research² indicates that the current case management review system commands wide spread confidence and support amongst senior professionals from a range of agencies and disciplines involved in child protection, but that refinements to the system would be appropriate to ensure that it operates as effectively as envisaged. The establishment of the SBNI provides the first opportunity in Northern Ireland to effectively ensure that the key lessons learnt from these reviews are translated into policy and embedded in practice. This should also allow the SBNI to put in place a system for auditing the implementation of recommendations from reviews, in order to bolster public confidence.

The NIASW are fully supportive of the proposal to integrate the child protection registers within the five HSC Trusts. However, the association would not be supportive of any move to introduce a version of the English integrated children's system into Northern Ireland, as its worth has not been proven based on the research conducted to date.

- **Where should the SBNI be based? Is the Public Health Agency appropriate?**

The NIASW are supportive of any arrangements that ensure that funding for the operation of the SBNI is used as efficiently as possible. It therefore makes financial sense that the SBNI is located within an existing organisation in order to benefit from common services. This though raises an issue of whether the SBNI may not be wholly independent. The NIASW would suggest that this matter is reviewed by the SBNI after the first two years, and that the location of the Board within the Public Health Agency is an appropriate initial arrangement.

- **How can potential gaps or slippage between the current Regional Area Child Protection Committee and the newly formed SBNI be avoided?**

The amalgamation of the four ACPCs into a single Regional Child Protection Committee in November 2009 provides the first step in the transition arrangements towards the establishment of the SBNI. The NIASW would support the establishment of the SBNI in shadow form for a short period before it becomes fully operational to allow for the setting up of systems in advance of the cessation of the Regional Child Protection Committee.

- **Is the funding for the SBNI clearly defined? The Department have indicated that the £750,000 of funding is supplemented with existing funding? Does this kind of arrangement work?**

This is a very important issue and one that the Committee should explore further. For example, historically ACPCs provided other agencies with access to a very extensive training programme at nil cost. It is unlikely that this arrangement could continue under the auspices of the SBNI, and certainly not within the budget proposed. Similarly, it is unclear how the Local Safeguarding Panels will be financed.

It is likely that the main costs for the SBNI will be core staff, media and public awareness campaigns, training events and research. The policy document lacks specificity about the staffing complement, and this issue should be resolved or else the priorities of the Board may be diluted for lack of resources.

It is unclear where additional funds from member agencies will come from during a period of financial retrenchment.

- **Any other issues that you feel may be of interest to the Committee.**

The policy document makes reference to the inclusion of arrangements for child death reviews. This is to be welcomed, although proposals for such arrangements are now overdue.

¹ Lewis, R.J., Cole, D., Williamson, A. (2003) *Review of Health & Social Services in the Case of David and Samuel Briggs*. Belfast, DHSSPS.

² Lazenbatt, A., Devaney, J. and Bunting, L. (2009) *An evaluation of the Case Management Review process in Northern Ireland and a scoping exercise of adverse incident reporting and alternative investigative systems*. Belfast, DHSSPS.