

**Submission by the Southern H&SC Trust to NI Assembly Committee
for Health, Social Services & Public Safety**

On the Safeguarding Board Northern Ireland (SBNI)

The Southern Trust welcomes this opportunity to provide evidence to the Committee on the proposed legislation that will establish the Safeguarding Board in NI.

Overall the Trust welcomes the proposals as a means to copper-fasten and further strengthen multi-disciplinary and multi-agency co-operation and co-ordination in relation to addressing not only child protection, but also the wider safeguarding agenda.

Potential Key Issues:

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

The Trust is of the view that in the transition to SBNI and SPNI, we must ensure a continued focus on core child protection functions. The move to a wider safeguarding agenda will need to be done in a phased, planned, measured way. This requires strong leadership and commitment across all the partner agencies, with a more strategic focus on prevention.

To this end the Trust feels that the SBNI will need to establish clear outcomes for children and young people, linked to the OFMDFM 10 Year Strategy "Our Children & Young People – Our Pledge" and the work of the Childrens Services Planning.

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

The Trust is of the view that the functions, as outlined in the policy document, are appropriate, but will need to be kept under review to ensure they remain "fit for purpose" and continue to address the key safeguarding issues for Northern Ireland.

The Trust welcomes the proposal to develop a regional Safeguarding Forum, which will allow a diverse range of groups/organisations to have some input into the work of the SBNI.

3) Given that one of the roles of the SBNI is to secure accountability, how one panel member hold another to account?

Given that individual agencies operate under separate legislation and policies it is a challenge to establish accountability arrangements within an interagency working environment.

However, it is the view of the Trust that the policy proposal has endeavoured to address this on a number of levels:

- The proposal in the legislation to place a duty on core members to make arrangements to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.
- Delegated statutory functions are not affected.
- Clear lines of accountability from the Safeguarding Panels to the SBNI.
- Senior representatives from key agencies on the SBNI.
- Proposal to have independent chairs for both the SBNI and the SPNI.
- Building in auditing and monitoring processes that will hold agencies to account on their safeguarding activities/practice.
- Establishing a Safeguarding Forum, and the involvement of the Patient and Client Council, to challenge individual agencies on the SBNI.

4) 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?

We must ensure that the SBNI does not become so large, that it is ineffective, unwieldy and unworkable. The Trust is of the view that the proposed membership outlined in the SBNI policy document provides a broad representation that takes account of the wider safeguarding agenda, whilst ensuring the SBNI fulfils its core responsibilities.

In addition we feel there should be a medical representative on the Board.

Given the strategic focus of the SBNI, members need to be senior personnel who have the delegated authority, to commit/hold to account, their respective organisations, with regard to safeguarding issues.

The SBNI policy refers to the development of a "partnership agreement" which will clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of members. This is to be commended. The Trust also supports the proposed review of membership of the SBNI after 12 months.

The Trust feels there is a need for further discussions on how the interests of "other key stakeholders" including the Courts and judiciary could be accommodated through other strands of the proposed structure, namely, Safeguarding Forum, the SBNI sub-groups or membership of the Safeguarding Panel.

5) How should the chairperson of the local safeguarding panels will/be appointed and should these will/be paid posts?

The Trust is in agreement with these being public appointed posts which are appropriately remunerated.

As with the SBNI, the Trust would advise that appropriate levels of funding need to be identified to support the Safeguarding Panels.

6) How clear is the interaction between the DHSSPS, the Health & Social Care Board and the Trusts and the SBNI regarding who will have primacy on issues/policy area and who does what?

Within the current arrangements the Trust provides services, the Health & Social Care Board commission services and the DHSSPS leads on policy development. However, as the RPA structures continue to roll out, there is a clear need for some guidance and clarification on the relationships/fit between the various bodies (including the community/voluntary sector; Childrens Services Planning; Public Health Agency) and the SBNI.

7) Should there be a legal duty on relevant agencies to co-operate as well as safeguard?

The policy document places a clear duty on core members to make arrangements to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, similar to section 11 of the Children Act 2004. In addition the SBNI will "have responsibility for improving interagency co-operation".

The need for agencies to collaborate and work together is implicit within the policy document. There should be further consideration given to whether this should be made explicit, as a duty, within the proposed legislation, similar to Section 10 of the Children Act 2004. The Trusts view is that this would further strengthen the function of the SBNI.

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

The responsibilities of ACPC (now replaced by RCPC) to conduct a Case Management Review are outlined in Co-operating to Safeguard. To date there have been over 20 Case Management Reviews carried out in Northern Ireland.

From the Trust's experience the Case Management Review process clearly needs reviewed and we welcome the current evaluation being undertaken by QUB and the NSPCC.

The Trust supports the move towards a single database for child protection, which will facilitate more effective communication across the region to protect and safeguard children.

The Trust has worked alongside ACPC to introduce an electronic child protection register, which allows cross-Trust access to child protection information.

9) Where should the SBNI be based? Is the Public Health Agency appropriate?

The Trust accepts the proposal for the Public Health Agency to act as a "host organisation" for the SBNI. The key issue is to ensure that the SBNI has the authority, autonomy and flexibility to conduct its business effectively.

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

The Trust has worked collaboratively with the ACPC/RCPC to ensure that child protection responsibilities will continue to be discharged during this process of transition.

The Trust has established a single Child Protection Panel in preparation for transition to a Safeguarding Panel in the Southern Trust. In addition, the Trust has 2 representatives on the RCPC, which is taking the regional lead in progressing towards the establishment of the SBNI.

11) 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?

It is important in these times of financial constraints that the funding for the SBNI is ring fenced and protected. Furthermore, to ensure that the funding is fully utilised to best effect, it is essential that all partner agencies work in partnership to meet the wider safeguarding agenda.

The Trust would also propose the establishment of a "funding pool", which all the key agencies would contribute to. This would help to provide a more co-ordinated and integrated approach.

12) Any other issues that you feel may be of interest to the Committee?

- (a) It is critical that we put in place a comprehensive, transparent structure that facilitates co-operation across Departments, Professionals, Agencies and Communities, focused on prevention and keeping children safe.
- (b) The Minister has identified that Social Services for children have been funded at a lower level than in any of the other UK jurisdictions. Per capita funding is approximately 30% lower than in England.
- (c) The challenge of establishing an effective communications strategy that will ensure awareness raising among the general public on key safeguarding issues such as child trafficking, internet safety and child exploitation.
- (d) Account needs to be taken of the workforce issues facing the Trust's in terms of and retaining experienced childcare social workers.
- (e) Child Protection work is complex and demanding. Increased referral rates have placed additional pressures on the system further compounded by financial pressures as a result of the comprehensive spending review and the increased demands associated with the roll out of a number of RIT products.

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