

Written Ministerial Statement

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Health, Social Services and Public Safety

SBNI THEMATIC REVIEW — PUBLICATION OF REVIEW REPORT

Published at noon on Thursday 10 December 2015

Mr Hamilton (Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): The purpose of this statement is to advise Members of the outcome of the thematic review which was commissioned in 2012. The review report will be published today and will be available on the Department's website.

Background

The thematic review was set up following the establishment of a police operation known as Operation Owl in September 2012. Under Operation Owl, the cases of 22 young people were reviewed to determine whether further investigative action was required. All 22 young people were identified following an analysis of data relating to children and young people from Northern Ireland who had been reported missing to police over a 20 month period in 2011/12. All 22 young people identified had been reported missing repeatedly from care by social services who were also concerned about the risk that some of them may have been victims of sexual exploitation.

The thematic review was carried out under the auspices of the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI). It was conducted by a team led by Professor John Pinkerton of Queen's University, Belfast and was subject to independent scrutiny by an external panel of experts from child protection, law enforcement and academic backgrounds from other parts of the UK. I place on record today my thanks to those who participated in the review and contributed to the production of the report.

The work was carried out in the context of growing public awareness and concern about the extent of both historical child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation across the UK. In response to concerns about child sexual exploitation, former Minister Poots, with the support of the Justice and Education Ministers, commissioned an independent expert-led inquiry into its prevalence in Northern Ireland. The report of that inquiry, the Marshall report, was published in November 2014. It confirmed that child sexual exploitation is happening here but there was no definitive evidence that it was as organised or on the same scale as elsewhere in the UK. The fact that it is happening, regardless of scale, means that there is no room for complacency and it is vital we do all within our power to stop its spread in Northern Ireland.

Consent and participation

Consent was sought from all 22 young people for their cases to be included in the thematic review. Ten young people gave consent for their cases to be reviewed and I thank those young people for their willingness and courage to help us learn from their experiences and involvement with services. I also thank those parents who participated in the review.

In 12 cases consent was not, or could not, be given. One HSC Trust had specific concerns about one young person's wellbeing. In a number of others, the PSNI and Public Prosecution Service were concerned about compromising the integrity of ongoing investigations. Consent was withheld by a

number of young people, some of whom are now adults and it was deemed not to be in their interests to release their files against their will.

I would ask that members of the House are respectful of all the young people whose cases have been the subject of this review, given the difficulties and trauma they have endured in their young lives. It is important that in learning the lessons about how services engaged with them that we do not inadvertently add to their trauma, or indeed to the trauma of other young people who may be experiencing, or have had, similar experiences. As required, and with agreement of the young people, there is on-going contact and supports in place from the HSC Trusts.

It is also important that we do not over-generalise from the 10 cases reviewed. They represent a very small percentage (0.35%) of the total population of children in care. This is not intended, in any way, to minimise their experiences or the importance of looking after and protecting them. Rather, it is out of respect for young people in care who have told us that generalisations about life in care are often negative and usually misrepresentative of the majority, many of whose experiences are positive. This can be upsetting and stigmatising for some.

Terms of Reference and overview of report

The terms of reference of the Thematic Review were to assess:

- the extent to which the relevant persons or bodies acted in accordance with established policy procedure and guidance governing the welfare and safeguarding of children;
- the effectiveness of any action taken by the relevant persons or bodies to safeguard the young people and promote their welfare during their time in care;
- the effectiveness of communication and co-operation between the relevant persons or bodies; and
- the effectiveness of engagement with and nature of relationships of relevant staff with young people.

Drawing on the file reviews as well as research and evidence, the report provides contextual background about the importance of good quality parent-child relationships and the impact of inadequate parenting and/or adversity in childhood on a child's development and future life. There is specific consideration of the backgrounds and difficulties experienced by each of the 10 young people before they came into care and while in care and the challenges for both their parents and staff in keeping them safe. The factors that increase children's vulnerability to abuse, including child sexual exploitation, are highlighted in the report. It also highlights the importance of supporting families during children's formative years and intervening early when difficulties are first identified to minimise the negative impact on a child's development and future wellbeing.

The learning from the file review is presented under 4 practice themes as follows:

- i. Assessing need and identifying risk of child sexual exploitation;
- ii. Strategic mobilising of services;
- iii. Enhancing relationship based practice with young people; and
- iv. Continuous learning and development.

Good practice and areas for improvement are identified under each theme. There is one overarching recommendation.

It is not my intention to take Members through each of the themes, rather I will highlight key learning points, the things that I believe we need to focus on and stay focussed on to strengthen the protection of any child or young person who is vulnerable to any form of abuse, as well as those things that we need to focus on to better protect young people in care from child sexual exploitation.

Key Learning Points

Family Support and Early Intervention

Evidence confirms that young people from any background can be sexually exploited, however the majority of young people who are sexually exploited are more likely to have experienced adversities in childhood. This was the case for all of the young people whose files were reviewed.

All of the families and young people were known to social services prior to coming into care, some for many years, and a variety of services were offered by a range of statutory and voluntary agencies. While some families and children were helped with some of their problems at some points in time, overall support proved insufficient and was not effective in averting these 10 young people from harm or risk of harm.

There has been a growing evidence base about the effectiveness of early intervention in preventing harm to children which is reflected in my Department's ongoing commitment to family support, prevention and early intervention since 2009 as set out in the Families Matter Strategy. Family Support Hubs, a comprehensive Family Support Database and a Regional Parenting Helpline have all been developed under Families Matter. We now have a network of 25 Hubs providing early help to families across all of Northern Ireland.

Building on the work undertaken under the Families Matter Strategy, in 2013 assisted by private philanthropy, we (and by that I mean a number of government departments working collectively) established a £30m Early Intervention Transformation Programme (EITP), which will run until 2018/19. There are three key strands of work under the EITP: firstly, re-focussing universal services such as midwifery, health visiting and early years to engage proactively and purposefully with all families; secondly, establishing a range of services to assist families showing early signs of difficulty; and, lastly, specific and sustained targeting of children and families already known to statutory services to prevent escalation and minimise the negative impact of problems within families on children's wellbeing. A pioneering intensive family support service, again supported by 5 government departments, has also been established in Belfast. Early indications are that the service is having positive outcomes for families with very complex needs.

The outworking of this focus on family support and early intervention on the future outcomes for children and young people will not be known for several years. However, the research and evidence of the effectiveness of this approach are compelling. I believe this is why Professor Marshall made a recommendation to this House to re-affirm its commitment to strategic, long-term and sustained funding for services for prevention and early intervention. This approach not only makes economic sense, but is possibly the best opportunity we have to improve outcomes for children and reduce the impact of factors that are harmful to their development. This includes reducing the impact of neglect which affects more children in Northern Ireland than any other form of abuse. By reducing the impact of factors that are harmful to a child, we can reduce their vulnerability to abuse and child sexual exploitation. This is in the interests of our society as a whole and I believe will make Northern Ireland a better and safer place for all children and young people.

Understanding child sexual exploitation

Child sexual exploitation is not a new phenomenon but our understanding of it is growing and developing all the time. The growing understanding that child sexual exploitation was a major concern in individual children's lives was reflected in the 10 case files, in some cases from 2006. The review found improvements in assessments of the risk of child sexual exploitation and in communication and information exchange between agencies. An agreed working definition of child sexual exploitation from 2014 has added to our shared understanding and way of thinking about it as a form of sexual abuse. The collection, analysis and sharing of data and intelligence is crucial to keep on building our understanding of child sexual exploitation and to ensure services are continuously improved and adapted to more effectively protect children and young people. Much improvement has been made within the HSC in this regard.

While our understanding about the nature of child sexual exploitation and those who are exploited has improved, the report identifies a significant gap in our knowledge about the profile of perpetrators of child sexual exploitation. It highlights the importance of developing our understanding about who they are, where they are, how they operate and having a robust focus on the investigation, disruption and prosecution of those who exploit. One of the overriding messages in this report is that we need to stop the perpetrators - if we do not stop the perpetrators, we cannot stop child sexual exploitation.

A strategic, interagency approach to tackling child sexual exploitation

The police and social services in Northern Ireland have long established protocols for working together to protect children and young people and significant efforts by both to care for and protect the 10 young people are highlighted in the report. Police officers were largely responsive and effective in locating and returning many of the young people to care, often repeatedly. In some cases where young people engaged in self harming, including suicidal behaviour, the efforts of residential care staff saved their lives.

While the report identifies improvement in agency responses from 2011 onwards, it also highlights a number of factors that hampered the effectiveness of efforts to keep these young people safe, including reactive crisis-driven responses and the reluctance and fear of young people to share information about the identities of who they were with or their whereabouts.

With the setting up of Operation Owl, a more strategic approach to case management became more evident, marked by more effective interagency working, improved information sharing and co-ordinated responses largely assisted by the co-location of police officers and social workers. We need to learn from and build on this experience to further improve our effectiveness in tackling child sexual exploitation. I welcome the decision by the PSNI to make Public Protection Units (PPUs) co-terminous with HSC Trust areas. This will enable us to more easily replicate what was achieved under Operation Owl for child protection purposes, building on the existing public protection arrangements, under which social workers and police officers have been co-located for a considerable time. I also welcome the creation of a Central Referral Unit (CRU) by the PSNI, the aim of which is to produce greater consistency in police decision-making about child protection cases. We have agreed to scope what is required from social services to ensure appropriate social work input to the CRU.

These arrangements will strengthen interagency working between the PSNI and social services and support more proactive and strategic approaches to both protect and support young people at risk and to identify, disrupt and secure the prosecution of suspected perpetrators.

Creating safety, security and belonging in care

For some periods in the lives of these 10 young people, neither their parents nor their 'Corporate Parents' (HSC Trusts) were able to provide the physical safety, emotional security or relational belonging they needed. The report describes the young people as beyond the care and control of their parents and beyond the reach of what staff could offer. Our ability to help young people at the time they need it most, but are least open to being helped, is one of the biggest challenges we face in keeping young people in care safe.

Having dependable and trusted adults is key to providing a sense of safety, security and belonging for all children and young people, including those in care. The report acknowledges the efforts of residential care staff to do this but also identifies the challenges of maintaining stability and consistency of relationships with young people in care.

The 10 young people experienced frequent placement changes while in care, including periods in secure accommodation and juvenile justice. The report acknowledges that, on occasion, secure care is the right response to ensure a young person's physical safety. However, it is also clear that locking up victims of child sexual exploitation routinely is not an acceptable long-term response. The report urges for a greater focus on getting the perpetrators locked up at the same time as developing services that can more effectively provide a secure base from which young people at risk can reach out and use the supports that are available.

This is similar to the recommendation in the Marshall report about 'safe spaces' and work has already commenced in this regard. That work will be further informed by the findings from this review and, as recommended by both authors, children and young people will be central to the creation and design of these 'safe spaces'.

A number of areas for improvement are identified in the report focussed on strengthening the effectiveness of current practices in residential care to support and protect young people at risk of child sexual exploitation. These include: dealing with physically aggressive behaviour; responses to

going missing; use of residential therapeutic approaches to care; and building and maintaining positive relationships with family, friends and staff. These will be the focus for improvement alongside the creation of 'safe spaces'. The reconfiguration of residential care provision is intended to improve choice of placements and effectiveness of residential care provision in providing a secure base for young people in care. The implementation of the Department's Improving and Safeguarding Social Wellbeing Strategy aims to strengthen the capacity and capability of the workforce to provide more effective interventions across all settings, including residential care. This work is ongoing.

The HSC Children's Services Improvement Board is also leading a number of initiatives to improve and strengthen child protection services, looked after children services and professional practice with a focus on more effective early authoritative interventions and enhancing relationship-based practice with families and young people, including those in care.

Learning and Continuous Improvement

It is important to recognise that the nature of child sexual exploitation evolves and changes. Today legal highs, technology and social media are posing new threats. We don't know what tomorrow's threats will be. This is why I welcome the emphasis on learning and continuous improvement in practice and service provision in this report. I am committed to building the capacity of staff in the HSC in quality improvement methodologies and evidence-informed practice so that frontline staff can contribute to the development of more effective practice and services, based on evidence of what works as well as on their practice experiences and informed by the experience of young people themselves and their families.

Through the Commissioning Direction for Learning and Development to the HSCB, I am also ensuring that there is a sustained focus on building the capacity and capability of managers and staff in residential care. Member organisations of the SBNI, established by my Department in 2012, will also have an important role to play, individually and collectively, in ensuring learning and continuous improvement within and across agencies in respect of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children.

Areas for Improvement and Recommendations

Twenty three areas for improvement in practice and service provision are identified against the 4 themes. These are mapped against relevant recommendations in the Marshall report. I am totally committed to making these improvements. To avoid duplication and make the best use of expertise and resources I propose to use the structures established to take forward the Marshall recommendations to implement the improvements from this review.

The review report makes one over-arching recommendation, which is for a regional benchmarking audit to be undertaken 12 months from now to determine the effectiveness of responses to children in care at risk of child sexual exploitation and to report within 3 months of the commencement of the audit. Essentially, we are being asked to demonstrate that the actions, improvements and the momentum for change to support and protect young people in care identified by the reviewers are having the desired effect and are maintained.

I accept this recommendation on behalf of the HSC and have already instructed the HSCB to co-ordinate a regional audit, working in collaboration with HSC Trusts. I have asked for the report to me on the outcome of that audit within fifteen months.

I have also written to Minister Ford recommending that he asks relevant justice agencies, including the PSNI, to undertake a similar audit within broadly similar timescales in line with Professor Pinkerton's recommendation.

Professor Pinkerton had recommended that this audit is undertaken under the leadership of the SBNI. To that end, I have instructed the HSCB and Trusts to share the outcomes of their audit with partner member organisations in the SBNI and I have asked Minister Ford to advise relevant justice agencies in similar terms. I have asked the interim Chair of the SBNI to have oversight of the process of audit to ensure, among other things, that it is undertaken consistently across health, social care and justice agencies. Where individual audits produce inter-agency learning or require resolution on an inter-agency basis, the SBNI will be the vehicle for member organisations to agree

what requires to be done. While the areas for improvement identified by the review report relate in the main to police and social services, other member organisations of the SBNI may, within 12 months, wish to carry out an audit of their own responses to young people in care at risk of child sexual exploitation to provide a composite regional overview.

In addition to accepting this recommendation, I have also taken steps for RQIA to follow up its independent review of child protection services in 2011 to ensure they continue to operate to agreed standards. This will be carried out in 2016/17.

Final Reflections

This review, along with the Marshall report, highlights the adversities, injustices and abuses that some young people experience. It is intolerable that any child, in so-called civilised society, is treated as a sexual commodity and his/her young life blighted, often for a lifetime.

I am greatly disturbed by the level of child sexual abuse and exploitation that is happening in Northern Ireland. However, I am also heartened that the responses and efforts of staff working with these vulnerable young people have shown a level of care and commitment to do their best for them, and have not been dismissive or judgemental about the circumstances of their lives.

I want to formally record my thanks for the dedication of staff, particularly residential staff, for the considerable efforts they made to provide stability and safety for these young people in the most difficult of circumstances. I also want to acknowledge the ongoing efforts that staff made over long periods of time to help the young people in their care. As acknowledged by Professor Pinkerton, in some instances, that commitment saved lives.

Improvements in protecting young people in care from the risk of child sexual exploitation have been made. We now need to ensure that this focus on improvement in what is a complex and challenging area of practice is supported and maintained. I am committed that the HSC will continue to make every effort to meet the needs of young people in care and keep them safer from all risks to their wellbeing, including child sexual exploitation.

But the HSC cannot do this alone. Tackling child sexual exploitation, and indeed any form of sexual violence or abuse, requires a sustained government-wide approach which is why I call on members of this House to make the same commitment as my Department to protect all our children and young people from sexual exploitation and, crucially, to bring to account the perpetrators, those who exploit.

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