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‘Child Protection Register and Referral’ Statistics

1 Introduction

This briefing paper provides a synopsis of data in relation to ‘Children Order Child Protection’ and ‘Referral Statistics’ in Northern Ireland.¹ The information collected is aggregated by the Trusts and data is published by the Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) on a quarterly basis.² In order to illustrate trends over time, readers are provided with a snapshot of the results from **2011**, together with statistical data from previous years. This information will be updated for Members on an annual basis.

1.1 Child protection legislation and guidance

The main categories of child abuse that are reported include: neglect, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse.³ The obligation to provide child protection services are set out in *The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995*.⁴

¹ The Children (Northern Ireland) Order (1995) deals with the care, upbringing and protection of children, including disabled children.

² The full report can be obtained online at: http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/microsoft_word_-_2_tab-a_children_order_child_protection_and_referral_statistics_quarter_ending_30_september_2011manny.pdf

³ Barnardo’s NI & NSPCC (2009) NSPCC and Barnardo’s NI - Briefing Paper on Neglect for a Debate in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Page 2 Available online at:

http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/policyandpublicaffairs/northernireland/briefings/neglect_wdf69986.pdf

⁴ The Children (NI) Order 1995. Available online at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1995/755/contents/made>

Following this, overarching guidance on safeguarding children entitled *Co-operating to Safeguard Children* was developed by the DHSSPS in 2003.⁵ In 2005, Area Child Protection Committees published *Regional Child Protection Policies and Procedures*. This provides details of the key elements of the child protection process and a number of standards for agencies and those working with children.⁶

The Children Order places a statutory duty on key agencies to deliver child protection services, and impacts on those who work with and care for children. Each Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust has a statutory responsibility for safeguarding children and conducting any necessary investigations into child abuse or neglect.

Significant work has been undertaken by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and the DHSSPS to strengthen levels of support and protection for vulnerable children in Northern Ireland. The importance of this issue as a priority for the Executive and the wider Government Departments was emphasised in '*Safeguarding Children – A cross-departmental statement on the protection of children and young people*' (2009). It outlines a number of policy developments and initiatives (such as regional child protection standards and Gateway teams) that have been put in place to strengthen safeguarding arrangements. It also seeks to take forward the 'living in safety and with stability' outcome of the *10 Year Strategy for Children and Young People*, in particular, those that relate to the safeguarding of children.⁷

More recently, the *Safeguarding Board (Northern Ireland) Act* was introduced in 2011.⁸ New safeguarding structures, including a Safeguarding Board (which will replace the Regional Child Protection Committee), will be established in 2012, and a Chair (Designate) of the Board has recently been appointed. The Board's purpose is to monitor how agencies are co-operating and performing against the statutory duty to make arrangements to safeguard and promote children's welfare. Board members will include the Health and Social Care Board, the Public Health Agency, five HSC trusts, the PSNI, the Probation Board, the Youth Justice Agency, the NSPCC and district councils.⁹ The Board will be supported by five Safeguarding Panels located in each HSC Trust.

1.2 Child abuse data

Child abuse is usually hidden from view. Part of the difficulty is that the children involved may be too young to realise they are being abused, or too afraid or ashamed to tell anyone. Also, adults who act as confidantes may not pass relevant information

⁵ DHSSPS (2003) *Co-operating to Safeguard Children*. Available online at:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/show_publications?txtid=14022 Website accessed 20.2.12

⁶ Area Child Protection Committees *Regional Child Protection Policies and Procedures* (2005). Available online at <http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/acpcregionalstrategy.pdf>

⁷ OFMDFM (2006) *Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge – A Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland 2006-2016*, OFMDFM.

⁸ *Safeguarding Board (Northern Ireland) Act* (2011) Available online at:

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ni/2011/7/contents> Website accessed 21.2.12

⁹ Agenda NI: Care Services: Safeguarding children <http://www.agendani.com/safeguarding-children>

on to local authorities. **Research indicates that levels of abuse and/or neglect are often under-reported; therefore not all cases will be known.**¹⁰

Crime data is perhaps one of the best indicators of child abuse. Between 2008 and 2010, there were 11,927 violent crimes against children recorded by the PSNI.¹¹ Of these, 82% were physically violent offences¹² and 18% were sexual offences.¹³ Although crime data provides a valuable insight into the nature of crimes committed against children, it does not provide the complete picture of abuse, and in addition many cases remain undetected.

2 Child Protection Register

Trusts are required to maintain a register listing “*every child in the Trust area who has been abused or who is considered to be **at risk** of abuse, and who is currently the subject of a child protection plan*”.¹⁴ The DHSSPS has advised that the child protection register is **not a list of children who have been abused**, but of children who have unresolved child protection issues and who are currently the subject of an interagency child protection plan.¹⁵ Child protection registration is determined through a Case Conference; a meeting where professionals, parents and those who know the child, and the child (if appropriate), meet to discuss concerns.¹⁶

It should be noted that the Child Protection Register mainly reports abuse that has - or could happen within the family context. Information about the number of children on the register is collected using Children Order returns (CPR3¹⁷ and CPR4¹⁸ forms) on a quarterly basis. The register records the category of abuse, the child’s age, gender and so forth. Any statistics regarding the register are therefore only a snapshot sample of children at a particular point in time. Many children on the register remain living with their families, while professionals from various agencies work with the family to ensure the child is safe. According to the NSPCC, a child will stay on the register for as long as they are assessed to be still ‘at risk’.¹⁹

¹⁰NSPCC Child Protection Register Statistics. Available online at:

http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/statistics/child_protection_register_statistics_wda48723.html

¹¹ Bunting, L (2011) Sexual and physical violence against children in Northern Ireland. A statistical overview of recorded crime. NSPCC, p5.

¹² Violent offences include for example murder, attempted murder, manslaughter, threat or conspiracy to commit murder, GBH, wounding with intent, neglect, and cruelty.

¹³ Sexual offences include for example rape, attempted rape, sexual activity with a child, indecent exposure.

¹⁴ DHSSPS: Children Order Child Protection and Referral Statistics for Quarter ending 31 December 2011 http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/microsoft_word_-_2_tab-a_children_order_child_protection_and_referral_statistics_quarter_ending_30_september_2011manny.pdf page 5. Website accessed 23.2.12

¹⁵ Personal correspondence from DHSSPS to the author. Response dated 16.3.12.

¹⁶ This is attended by a range of different agencies who together draw up the Child Protection Plan if this is deemed necessary. A regional Child Protection Committee monitors the number of children on the register.

¹⁷ CPR3 relates to Child Protection Referrals. This includes the total number of referrals during the quarter by source of referral. It documents the number of referrals during the relevant quarter by source of original referral which identified the child as ‘potential at risk’.

¹⁸ CPR4 concerns the legal status of children on the Child Protection Register by age.

¹⁹ NSPCC ‘How to find, understand and use statistics about child abuse’. Available online at:

http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/statistics/introduction_to_child_abuse_statistics_wda68935.html

2.1 Child Protection Register Statistics

On 31 December 2011, **2,137** children were listed on the Northern Ireland Child Protection Register.²⁰ This represents a **2% decrease** on the previous quarter ending September 2011. Figure 1 illustrates the number of children currently on the register by Trust area. The South Eastern Trust has the highest number of children registered (567), whereas the Western Trust has the least (287).

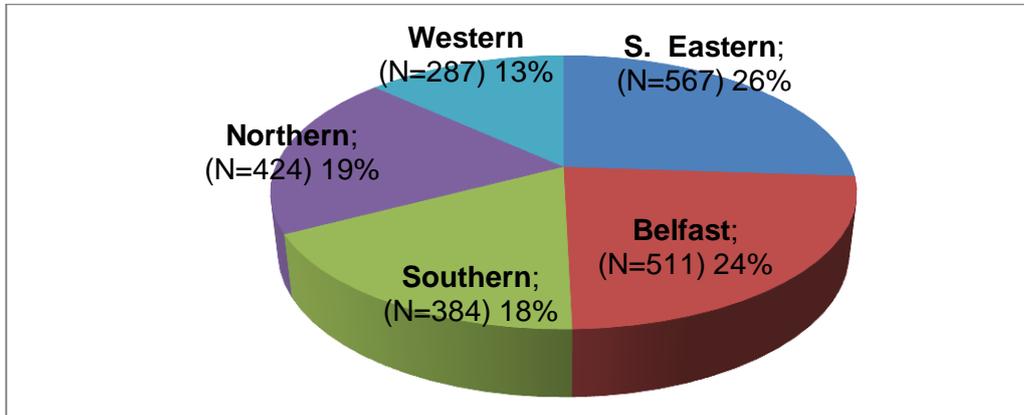


Figure 1 Child Protection Register figures by Trust area on 31 December 2011

Figure 2 below shows quarterly trends of children on the register by Trust area for 2011. Again, the South Eastern Trust recorded the greatest number of children listed on the register during 2011, whereas the Western Trust had the least. It is important to note that children can come off the register and new children can come on the register between one quarter and the next.

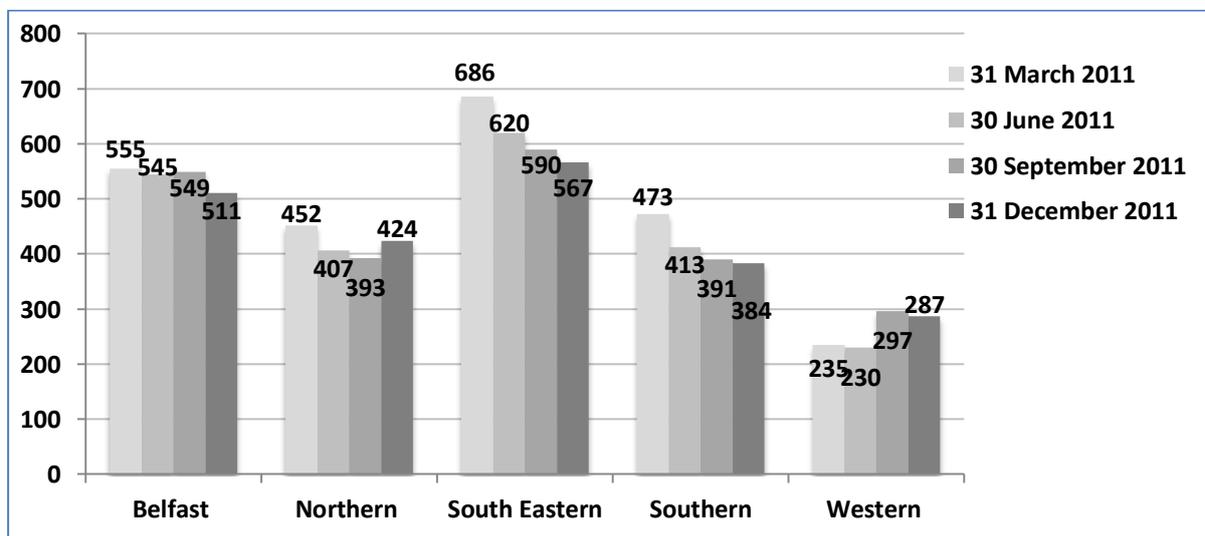


Figure 2 Quarterly trends: Child Protection Register by Trust (March 2011- Dec 2011)²¹

²⁰ DHSSPS: Children Order Child Protection and Referral Statistics for Quarter ending 31 December 2011 http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/microsoft_word_-_2_tab-a_children_order_child_protection_and_referral_statistics_quarter_ending_30_september_2011manny.pdf page 9. Website accessed 21.2.12

²¹ Figures obtained from individual reports from the DHSSPS Website- available online at: www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib-3/statistics_and_research-cib-pub/children_statistics/stats-cib-children_order.htm Website accessed 23.2.12

For three Trusts (namely Belfast, Southern, South Eastern) there was a decrease in the number of children listed on the register from the quarter ending March 2011 to December 2011. The Western Trust experienced an increase in the number of children on the register. Figures for the Northern Trust have risen in the last quarter of 2011 compared to previous quarters that year.

We do not know whether Trusts with higher or lower levels of children on the Child Protection Register is necessarily a good thing or not. The Health and Social Care Board has advised that there have not been any cuts to child protection services, and that there has been '*on-going discussions relating to the variance across Trusts, and a drive to secure greater consistency*'.²² It is difficult to gauge the reason for the trends, for example, it could be because additional support is being provided to families to enable children to come off the register, or that fewer cases are being reported. Alternatively, high child protection registration figures in one Trust area may mean that policies are working well and that more children are being detected.

Children may be listed on the register for long periods of time, or they may become 'deregistered' due to a change in circumstances (for example, a Child Protection Plan being achieved) between one quarter and the next. As the DHSSPS obtain aggregated data from Trusts, child-level data is currently not available. **This means that the DHSSPS cannot cross-tabulate quarterly/annual returns or track children as they move on and off the register.**²³

The Committee may wish to seek if this data may be made available in the future from the HSC Trusts as it would present a clearer picture of the number of new children added to the register each year and help to identify the extent to which children are de-listed and re-registered.

2.2 Child Age

The age of children on the register varies as follows:

Age range	% of all children on the register
Under 1	9%
1-4 yrs	29%
5-11 yrs	35%
12-15 yrs	21%
16+	6%

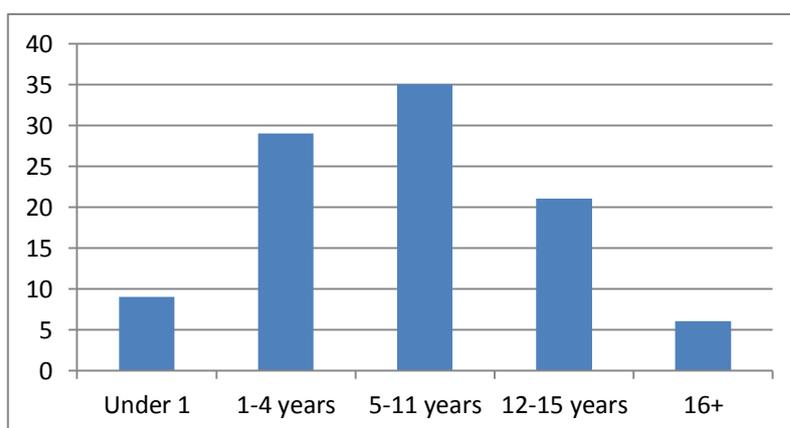


Table 1 Categories of age: Children on Child Protection Register Q4, 2011

²² Personal correspondence from DHSSPS to the author. Response dated 16.3.12.

²³ However the DHSSPS has advised that HSC Trusts are able to obtain this data. Individual records are not part of the DHSSPS Child Order returns at present.

The majority of children (35%) on the register are in the '5-11' age group. The fewest number of children are in the '16+' age group (6%). A similar trend was reported in the previous year (2010). For younger children, the numbers could be related to health visitor checks, or visits from social services. When children reach school age they may be more aware and better able to express what might be happening to them, or there may be other signs of potential abuse detected for example by the medical profession, teachers, or those they meet through other social circumstances.

2.3 Trends over Time

Figure 3 below provides a snapshot of the number of children listed on the Child Protection Register between 31 March 2002 and 31 March 2011. Overall, cases rose between 2004/5 and peaked in 2009. However since then, rates dropped to 2,361 in 2010, and then increased to 2,401 by March 2011.

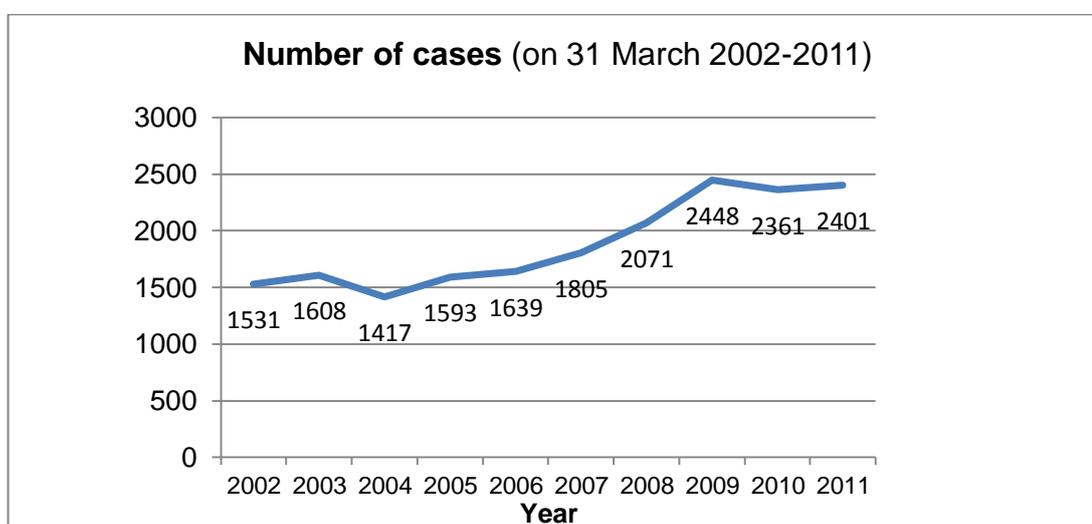


Figure 3: Snapshot number of cases on Child Protection Register (NI) March 2002-11

This slight variance may be linked to factors already mentioned, and also because of the targets set by government in the previous *Programme for Government (PfG, 2008-11)*²⁴ and the Department's *Priorities for Action (2010/11)* publications to reduce the number of children listed on the Child Protection Register.²⁵ It could be debated that setting targets to reduce the number of children on the register may not be wise, as this could mean that in order to meet targets, there could be an under-reporting of children who suffer different forms of abuse. Inevitably this could skew the picture of children affected by abuse who are known to local authorities even more. No such targets have been given in the DHSSPS's current Commissioning Plan Direction.

The average **length of time** children have remained on the Child Protection Register suggests that there has been little change year-on-year. Data from 2011 shows that

²⁴ Programme for Government PfG, 2008-11. Available online at <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/pfgfinal.pdf> page 34 Website accessed 24.2.12

²⁵ DHSSPS (2010) *Priorities for Action*:

"By 2011, reduce by 12% the number of children requiring to be placed on the child protection register". Page 50

around 25% of children had been listed on the register between 6 months to a year, and 20% between 1-2 years. Around 12% of children stayed on the register for 2 years or more.²⁶ The remaining children were listed on the register for less than 6 months.

3 Child Protection Referrals

Child protection referrals are those whereby an *initial assessment* indicates that child protection issues could exist. According to the DHSSPS, the recommended threshold for action should be the 'allegation or suspicion of child abuse'.²⁷ Figures show that there were **1,030** child protection referrals to HSC Trusts for the quarter ending 31 December 2011 (4,566 in total for 2011). **It is prudent to note that children who are recorded on the 'referral list' may not end up being placed on the Child Protection Register** as some cases will not require, or meet, the threshold for child protection intervention.²⁸

Referrals for assessment come from a number of sources. During the most recent quarter, 55% of referrals originated from 'Social Services', 18% from the 'PSNI', 12% from school/Educational Welfare Officers, 6% from 'relatives', and 9% from 'other' sources.

4 Comparison with the rest of the UK

Table 2 shows the number of children listed on the register for individual jurisdictions in the UK who are on a child protection register or subject to a child protection plan.²⁹ There were 46,705 children on child protection registers or the subject of child protection plans in the UK as at 31 March 2010.

Jurisdiction	Total population in 2010	% of population under 18	Number of children on the register at 31 March 2010
N. Ireland	1.7m	25.4%	2,357
England	52m	22.4%	39,100
Scotland	5.2m	21.2%	2,518
Wales	3.0m	22.1%	2,730

Table 2 Comparison of Child Protection registers by jurisdiction and population³⁰

²⁶ DHSSPS (2011) Children Order tables 31 March 2011.

²⁷ DHSSPS (2010) Children Order child protection and referral statistics www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/2_tab-a_children_order_child_protection_and_referral_statistics_quarter_ending_30_september_2010.pdf

²⁸ The HSCB has advised that it continues to address the issue around Thresholds into the Child Protection system. A number of Trusts deploy Principal Social Workers to scrutinise any variances to assure managers that staff are applying consistent thresholds.

²⁹ In England, a Child Protection Register is no longer held; instead, information is collected on children who are the subject of a child protection plan. It should be noted that this data does not give a full picture of the extent of child abuse cases in the UK.

³⁰ Figures obtained from NSPCC website. Available online at: http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/statistics/child_protection_register_statistics_wda48723.html Website accessed 1.3.12.

According to the NSPCC, around **46,700** children in the UK were on child protection registers or the subject of child protection plans in March 2010.

Based on these figures, **Northern Ireland has the highest number of children on the Child Protection Register across the UK, relative to its population size.**

Northern Ireland also has a slightly higher percentage (around 2-3%) of the population under 18 compared with the rest of the UK, but this is not significant. As the data relates *only* to cases where the social services have been notified, this does not mean that our local landscape has the highest incidence of abuse.

5 Conclusion

This paper provides Members with a brief overview of the number of children on the Child Protection Register in Northern Ireland, and their equivalents in the UK. The latest quarterly figures indicate that **2,137** children were listed on the register in December 2011. As abuse often goes unreported, this figure is not reflective of the true extent of child abuse, and the value of this data is purely indicative of a trend in a certain point in time. Over the last ten years, the number of children on the Northern Ireland register peaked in 2009, but since then the rates have decreased slightly. It will be interesting to see if a declining trend continues in the future, and to better understand the reasons behind the trends.