

Written Ministerial Statement

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Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Child Exploitation in Northern Ireland

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Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): A range of actions have been taken by my Department and the HSC sector to strengthen our protection of children and young people. In 2012, I established the Safeguarding Board for NI to support and promote effective interagency co-operation in safeguarding children. The SBNI had identified child sexual exploitation and developed an action plan to address this.

I have initiated two joint roundtable meetings with the Minister of Justice and key stakeholders this year to discuss our shared commitment to improving the lives of young people in NI through better supports for families, earlier interventions when difficulties first emerge and partnership working between the police and social services in tackling all forms of child abuse, including child sexual exploitation.

This commitment is reflected in a number of developments including the co-located team currently investigating child sexual exploitation and the investment of my Department, along with other Departments, to an Early Intervention Fund. I have also made additional investment into specialist services such as the establishment of the Sexual Assault Regional Centre which opened this year as well as the extension of existing services targeted specifically at children and young people including Children and Adolescent Services and Drug and Alcohol services.

Working with vulnerable children is undoubtedly one of the most challenging jobs there is and I am committed to supporting staff in undertaking this work, particularly those working with children who, for whatever reason are in our care. I want to ensure that we have the most effective system of care in place that will provide young people with the stability and security they need and I will consider any changes that may be necessary to achieve this, including legislation if required.

I have directed the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland to undertake a thematic review of the cases that triggered the investigation in order to identify the learning from the management of those cases to inform and improve future practice.

Also, the Minister for Justice and I are setting up an independent expert-led Inquiry into child sexual exploitation in NI. I would hope that we have the full support of all parties in this endeavour, particularly those other Departments whose work substantively impacts on the lives of children and young people.

You will all be aware of recent media coverage on this matter. While the police have indicated that this investigation began with a focus on a number of young people from care they have clearly indicated that this is an issue affecting the lives of many more children living at home in the community. This is supported by evidence in the Barnardo's report 'Not a world away' and from other studies across the UK.

Judging from the public reaction to this issue I know that many, including those in this house, share with me a sense of disbelief and horror that this is happening in our society. People are also asking, and rightly so, valid questions about whether everything that can be done, is being done, to prevent, tackle and disrupt the sexual exploitation of children and young people.

It is clear to me from listening to those who work in this area that the understanding about this issue, how it can happen and how it can be stopped is developing all the time. Throughout the UK all

governments, academics, professionals, the public, service providers and frontline staff are working to better understand and respond to this devastating form of sexual abuse which violates, humiliates and, in many instances, traps children into a cycle of harm.

This is the reason why I, and the Minister for Justice, have agreed to set up an independent expert-led Inquiry here to be supported and facilitated jointly by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority and Criminal Justice Inspectorate of NI. We are also open to the involvement of the Education and Training Inspectorate.

The proposed remit of this Inquiry will be to:

- examine the nature and extent of child sexual exploitation in Northern Ireland in conjunction with relevant agencies and stakeholders;
- determine the most pertinent issues that need to be addressed that can help to prevent, tackle and disrupt CSE;
- examine the effectiveness of current measures aimed at tackling, preventing and disrupting CSE; and
- consider the effectiveness of measures to secure the safety and wellbeing of children in care, including those at risk of CSE;
- make recommendations on what needs to be done in HSC and Justice to improve the effectiveness of these measures: and
- highlight actions that should be taken by other Departments and their agencies, including the education sector, to prevent the risk of CSE, identify children at risk of CSE and support the work the HSC and Justice agencies.

The remit is wide-ranging and not confined to children in the care system. It is intended to address both broad concerns regarding child sexual exploitation and current responses to it as well as specific concerns about the protection of children in care.

I can assure Members of my commitment and the commitment of Minister Ford to respond to the recommendations emerging from this Inquiry. I have no doubt that the recommendations will be wider reaching than justice and health and social care.

It is our intention the Inquiry will be undertaken in conjunction with a wide range of agencies and stakeholders in NI, including the Safeguarding Board for NI who bring together many of the agencies involved in working with and safeguarding children.

I will provide a further statement to the Assembly when the independent expert to lead the Inquiry has been confirmed.