

Written Ministerial Statement

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Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Child Sexual Exploitation: Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland Thematic Review

Published at 5.00 pm on Friday 20 December 2013

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): On 25 September 2013, I announced that an independent expert-led Inquiry and a Thematic Review by the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI), both relating to child sexual exploitation, would be undertaken. On 5 November 2013, I announced that the Inquiry would be led by Professor Kathleen Marshall and advised members of the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry. At the same time, I indicated that I would make a further statement on the SBNI Thematic Review following the agreement of the Terms of Reference. The SBNI Review is being directed by my Department under section 4 of the Safeguarding Board Act (NI) 2011. As my Department is required in law to do, draft Directions were forwarded to the SBNI for consultation and, where relevant and appropriate, the comments of SBNI member agencies have been reflected in the final Directions, which include, in the Schedule, the Terms of Reference for the Review.

The final Directions were issued to the SBNI on 10 December 2013 and came into operation on 11 December. As a consequence, both the independent expert-led Inquiry and SBNI Thematic Review are now underway. It is estimated that both will take approximately one year to complete. Given the scope of the Inquiry, the Chair will report to me and the Ministers of Justice and Education. The SBNI Review, which will focus on the handling of 22 cases involving children in or previously in state care, will report solely to me.

Under the Terms of Reference of the Thematic Review, the SBNI has been asked to examine and evaluate:

- the extent to which SBNI member agencies acted in accordance with established policy procedure and guidance governing the welfare and safeguarding of children from the first point of entry by all of the 22 children into the care system;
- the effectiveness of any action taken by SBNI member agencies to safeguard the 22 children and promote their welfare during their time in care, taking into account whether or not steps taken were in accord with existing policy, procedure or guidance;
- the effectiveness of communication and co-operation between SBNI member agencies in accordance with relevant guidance ; and
- the effectiveness of engagement with and nature of relationships of SBNI member agencies staff with young people.

In particular, the Review will consider the following key issues -

- the nature and quality of the assessments carried out in respect of each of the 22 children and how these assessments informed initial decisions to place each child in care and any other placements which may have occurred subsequent to the initial placement, taking account of each child's previous life experience and any specific factors which influenced the decision to place him or her in care;

- the effectiveness of the care planning, risk assessment, risk management and review processes and how those processes took account of those factors which increase a child's vulnerability to risk of harm, including being absent from any placement without permission;
- the adequacy and effectiveness of the provision of care, including therapeutic and specialist services, to the 22 children in any placement or setting;
- the adequacy, effectiveness and timeliness by SBNI member agencies response to any of the 22 children being reported as absent from any placement or setting without permission and their response to allegations of criminal offences being committed against any of the 22 children. This includes any action taken by SBNI member agencies to put a stop to such activities, any preventative measures which were taken and the reporting of allegations to the PSNI;
- the effectiveness of reporting and information-sharing systems employed by SBNI member agencies and their adequacy in securing the safety and wellbeing of the 22 children who are the subject of this Review; and
- the involvement and support provided by senior management to frontline staff in the management of, or responses to any of the 22 children.

Also, taking account of the ongoing police investigation and the need to preserve the integrity of that process, the SBNI has been directed to seek the views of:

- each of the 22 children involved, taking account of each child's willingness to participate in the Review, the need to protect their anonymity and guard their need for confidentiality;
- the families of the young people; and
- key staff involved in the care or protection of any of the 22 children and any other personnel who played a significant role in their lives during the period they were in care.

The SBNI has specifically been directed to identify key learning points and opportunities for improvement. Where relevant, the Review will also feed into the wider Inquiry process. Should learning emerge in the course of the Review, which needs to be acted upon more quickly, the SBNI will advise accordingly. My aim in directing the SBNI to conduct this Review is to ensure that in future children and young people in care are offered the best possible protections from individuals who ruthlessly exploit them.