

**Public Consultation on the Multi-Agency Neglect Strategy 2017-2019**  
**{Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland}**  
**Consultation Response from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council**

### **Brief Background to the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council Area**

The District Council area is home to 114,992 people, approximately 52,500 jobs and 7,175 businesses. The District Council area is Northern Ireland's largest region in terms of land mass - approximately 3,000km<sup>2</sup> (or 20% of NI) - and is the smallest in terms of population. As a result, the population density of approximately 41 people per km<sup>2</sup> is the sparsest in Northern Ireland. This is a key feature of the district but presents challenges in terms of accessibility and service delivery.

### **Consultation Response**

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (Council) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the public consultation on the Multi-Agency Neglect Strategy 2017-2019, being undertaken by the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland.

The Council welcomes the fact that the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland has identified Neglect as a key priority over the next two years. Council understands that it is difficult to prioritise so many different, yet important, issues – however, issues like Neglect will always remain a significant on-going concern for both the Safeguarding Board and its member agencies.

It is vital that the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, as a multi-agency body, ensures as far as is practically possible, that its priorities are relevant to **all** of its member agencies.

The purpose of any Multi-Agency Neglect Strategy is to set out the strategic aims and objectives of the approach being undertaken to tackle neglect. The strategy should also identify the key principles under which work around neglect should be undertaken as well as identifying the key priority areas of work.

Ultimately, the Council believes that the aim of the Strategy should always be to improve the overall response to neglect, with each response being tailored to each individual circumstance.

### **Training for Professionals**

The Council believes that one of the most important aspects of the Strategy is the recognition of the need to equip professionals with the appropriate skills, knowledge and resources required to help children affected by neglect, and abuse.

Professionals should work in a timely and appropriate manner to keep individuals safe and the availability of additional guidance for professionals will assist the decision-making process, whilst also ensuring that processes are followed.

It is of vital importance that individuals receive appropriate support, and that all services are delivered to the highest possible standard. Therefore, support should be consistent, timely and adequate to all people to stay safe, develop and flourish.

Whilst Council acknowledges the high standards achieved in some areas, by both the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, its member agencies and other organisations, there are still some cases where individuals, including children, still do not get the timely assistance that they require.

Training for professionals and practitioners should be consistent across Northern Ireland, as well as being regular and appropriate to keep up-to-date with new and emerging trends/issues. Knowledge, understanding and experience of neglect across different services/professions can vary considerably, and this is something that should be addressed as part of any Multi-Agency Neglect Strategy, through a universal Neglect Training Strategy.

Council strongly recommends that training should be a key component of any Strategy for the Safeguarding Board, its member agencies and other relevant stakeholders.

## **Engagement**

The Council believes that there should be greater engagement between the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, parents, carers and young people.

The Council acknowledges that one of the Core Objectives, outlined within Chapter Six of the Consultation Document, addresses this, and it is vital that this engagement occurs, is encouraged and is taken on board.

Engagement should also be 'two-way', meaning that not only should the Safeguarding Board be taking on board the views of key stakeholders, but that it should also be promoting the Board, its role/responsibilities as well as the various systems/processes which are in place.

Generally, there needs to be an improvement in the general public's understanding of the systems, organisations and procedures involved. This should also be reflected in the Outcomes of the Strategy.

## Preventative Measures

Statistics in relation to Neglect demonstrate concerning trends within Northern Ireland. For example, between 2010/2011 and 2014/2015, the number of police-recorded offences of cruelty and neglect have risen by 60%.

This statistical increase is the highest in the UK, with England and Wales reporting an increase of 46% and 48% respectively, whilst Scotland has reported a decrease of 44% for cruelty and neglect reports. The fact that the percentage increase Northern Ireland is substantially higher than other parts of the UK is concerning. (Statistics taken from the 'How safe are our children?' report published in 2016).

Council acknowledges that the Aims, Objectives and Outcomes of the Strategy are all relevant and significantly important to addressing Neglect in Northern Ireland. However, the Council suggests that an additional emphasis should be placed upon preventative measures, as well as including the reactionary measures already outlined within the Consultation Documentation.

For example, by ensuring that professionals are able to identify circumstances where additional support and services are available, parents, children and families are enabled to obtain the right help at the right time. Some of these preventative measures/services include:

- Various assessment tools.
- Family support.
- Signposting to specialist services.
- Relationship building/enhancing.

It is also imperative that children, adults and communities understand what Neglect is – and this can be published or promoted through various means including print/visual media, schools, and community settings.

The Safeguarding Board, as well as relevant agencies/organisations, should promote:

- How to recognise the signs of Neglect – and the various type of Neglect.
- Examples of why this may happen.
- What can be done to help and who it should be reported to.
- Contact details of available support.

Neglect, by definition, is the persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical and/or psychological needs, likely to result in the serious impairment of the child's health or development. Neglect may occur for various reasons, however the Council believes that a targeted educational campaign will not only inform people of what to look out for, but it will also demonstrate to parents/carers/others what is expected and what should not be tolerated.

## **Going Forward**

The Council believes that the success of any Neglect Strategy will be dependent upon sufficient resources being made available to implement it in a manner which leads to better outcomes for all.

Good quality training should be made available to all relevant staff, as well as training being made available on other abuse concerns – namely sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual exploitation. Statistics show that whilst the majority of Neglect instances occur as ‘Neglect Only’, there are a substantial number of Neglect instances which incorporate another form of abuse/exploitation – e.g. ‘Neglect and Physical Abuse’. Therefore, when targeting Neglect there is also a need to consider it within the context of several other issues/concerns – i.e. physical abuse, sexual abuse, or poverty. This will also allow staff to have a deeper understanding of the circumstances surrounding Neglect.

The Council is also mindful of the fact that Neglect will continue to be an on-going concern, not only for the Safeguarding Board but also for its partner agencies and key stakeholders. Therefore, post-2019, it is important that Neglect is retained as a key priority for the Safeguarding Board.

The Council also believes that the Safeguarding Board should complement the Children and Young People’s Ten Year Strategy which is being developed, and was recently consulted upon.

## **Online Abuse and Safety**

A further key concern for the Council is online abuse. This is an ever-increasing area of abuse, and is one which the Council strongly recommends should be classed as a priority area for action.

The Council recognises that the Safeguarding Board has already undertaken significant work in areas of E-Safety, Online Abuse; however online abuse is ever-increasing and ever-changing with the continuous advancements in technology.

Issues such as online bullying, platforms/apps which facilitate anonymous online bullying or promote risky behaviours, as well as the viewing/exchanging of offensive materials should be continually addressed. Parents, guardians, teachers, etc. should be informed as to current online trends and risky behaviours to look out for.

The internet can be an extremely beneficial tool, particularly for children, who can use it for learning, communicating, developing, creating and exploring the world around them. However, the risks can leave individuals vulnerable, exposing them to experiences which they may find upsetting or harmful.

Recent statistics show that there has been a massive increase in the recorded offences for 'obscene publications' over the last five years. Worryingly, the percentage increase in Northern Ireland is again much higher than other parts of the UK, and this is something that should be addressed by both the Board and partner agencies – through awareness raising initiatives.

The percentage increases for the 'obscene publications' for the UK are as follows:

- Northern Ireland – 292% increase.
- Wales – 184% increase.
- Scotland – 168% increase.
- England – 134% increase.

More people are being exposed to these 'obscene publications' and as such are more at vulnerable to risky/harmful experiences.

## **Conclusion**

The Council commends the Safeguarding Board for introducing this Multi-Agency Neglect Strategy – it contains vital priorities and outcomes which should be taken forward to establish the profile of Neglect across Northern Ireland.

The Council believes that the overall aim should always be to ensure that there is an early recognition of Neglect and/or suspicious behaviours. The Safeguarding Board, as well as its partner agencies, should also look to work with families and affected individuals in both a positive and empowering way - delivering a long-lasting, positive, outcome for the well-being of children and young people across Northern Ireland.

The Council also believes that it would be beneficial for the Safeguarding Board to present the final Neglect Strategy at the meetings of the various Regional Safeguarding Panels. The meetings of these Panels contain representatives from various agencies and organisations, and as such it would be a good platform to create ownership around the final Strategy.