



The Centre for
Cross Border Studies

Response to the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland's consultation on the 'Child Protection and Safeguarding Learning & Development Strategy'

This response has been prepared by the Centre for Cross Border Studies (CCBS)¹ as a contribution to the consultation on the Child Protection and Safeguarding Learning and Development Strategy, produced by the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland.

About The Centre for Cross Border Studies

The Centre for Cross Border Studies possesses an authoritative reputation as an advocate for cross-border cooperation and is widely considered a valued source of research, information and support for collaboration across borders on the island of Ireland, Europe and beyond.

CCBS empowers citizens and builds capacity for cooperation across sectors and jurisdictional boundaries on the island of Ireland and further afield. This objective is achieved through research, expertise, partnership and experience in a wide range of cross-border practices and concerns.² The Centre for Cross Border Studies welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland's Learning and Development Strategy. Accordingly, this response is informed by the Centre's vision statement, experience and values.

Opening Comments

CCBS strongly endorses the aim of establishing a benchmark of key minimum learning outcomes for organisations to ensure the improvement of child protection and safeguarding within Northern Ireland. Moreover, the strategy's primary objective of *"identify[ing] opportunities for developing and enhancing multi-disciplinary/multi-*

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² For further information please visit www.crossborder.ie

agency safeguarding education and training strategies across all sectors in relation to Children's Service" is, to some extent, consistent with CBBS's commitment to transcending barriers to facilitate dynamic cooperation across all sectors of society and to utilise the benefits received by building sustainable relationships.

Accordingly, CCBS strongly concurs with the statement in Section 2.5³ of the Strategy's Equality and Human Rights Screening which highlights the importance of promoting "*sharing of expertise*." Evidence gathered by CCBS across all sectors attests to the value of knowledge exchange offered through enhanced cooperation.

However, it is essential that any strategy concerned with improving child protection and safeguarding must recognise that those aims are dependent upon ensuring that the necessary arrangements are met for the protection and safeguarding of citizens receiving or providing those services from neighbouring jurisdictions or further afield. Failure to recognise this and to fully engage in collaborative efforts with the relevant counterparts⁴, would be to attempt to address safeguarding and child protection in isolation. This would result in missed opportunities to achieve greater degrees of effective and sustainable safeguarding provision.

The Need for Enhanced Cross-Border Coordination and Cooperation

The Centre for Cross Border Studies welcomes the acknowledgement made within Section 2.4 of the Equality and Human Rights Screening of the cross cutting needs of the equality groupings and the need to take into account geographical differences and issues facing people who live in areas of high deprivation. Of particular interest is the recognition given to "*migrant workers*" and "*people living in border areas*".

Nevertheless, CCBS recommends that greater attention be given, within the strategic framework itself, in acknowledging the geographic disparities that are felt particularly in regard to communities living along the border. Indeed, as the strategy notes the importance for "*training needs analysis which will reflect national, regional and local needs*"⁵, it is our contention that many of the present challenges facing safeguarding and child protection will not be comprehensively addressed unless this is done on a cross-border basis.

For instance, the training strategy notes the plan for interagency training on the topic of 'Child Sexual Exploitation and child trafficking'⁶. Any such training can only be deemed thorough if it recognises that Northern Ireland is the only region within the

³ Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, *Equality and Human Rights Screening Template*, p.29-30.

⁴ In Ireland, for example, the Child and Family Agency in January 2014 became the dedicated State agency responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children. It represents the most comprehensive reform of child protection, early intervention and family support services ever undertaken in Ireland and brings together some 4,000 staff.

⁵ Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, *Child Protection and Safeguarding Learning & Development Strategy*, p.8.

⁶ Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, *Child Protection and Safeguarding Learning & Development Strategy*, p.8.

United Kingdom with a land border with another jurisdiction, and one which is largely porous and unmonitored.^{7 8}

The strategy notes the responsibility of organisations to “ensure that staff and volunteers have the appropriate knowledge, skills and competence to effectively safeguard and protect children”, and to “provide safeguarding induction to all new members of their organisation”.⁹ The efficacy of this will depend upon individual’s experience, skills and knowledge base.

While the Centre for Cross Border Studies acknowledges the benefits of providing induction on an individual needs basis, we have concerns about the blurring of lines between the strategy’s different levels of training, principally as the objectives to be met may differ within the existing arrangements for any staff and volunteers trained south of the border. This lack of operational continuity, in particular as would pertain cross-border workers, may hamper the strategy’s capacity to effectively implement a benchmark for safeguarding and child protection for those delivering and receiving such services.

While the consideration of alternative training practices may be required, we do not believe that this would necessitate an overhaul of this strategy’s structure of training. However, if the general principles for operational continuity are to be met, if necessary, this strategy should be flexible enough to consider restructuring. Short of providing any standardisation of training practices across the two jurisdictions, in order for the framework to be effective it must allow for both internal and external comparability of qualifications and training to be used as a point of reference by organisations training staff with unfamiliar accreditations.

CCBS recommends that SBNI liaise with the relevant counterpart groups headquartered in the Republic of Ireland, and other jurisdictions, in order to evaluate the training requirements set by other authorities. Such proposals for operational continuity would better serve cross-border providers and receivers of those services, by way of removing potential inconsistencies through greater coordination.

Moreover, such cross-jurisdictional collaboration and dialogue would provide organisations and individuals with valuable opportunities to share learning, ideas and best-practice experiences. The Centre’s experiences attest to the capacity for such activities to constructively influence policy and practice, with the potential to maximise coordinated output while minimising the cost of daily activities.

⁷ Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service, Human Trafficking in Northern Ireland, p.23.

⁸ Thus, it is easier for traffickers to move people between north and south. In 2010, there were 69 cases in which 78 alleged victims of trafficking reported to An Garda Síochána. More than half (42) of these were from Africa, others from the EU (17), Asia (10), Ireland (6) and non-EU Europe. Three victims of trafficking in 2007 and four in 2008 were trafficked through or into Northern Ireland.

⁹ Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, *Child Protection and Safeguarding Learning & Development Strategy*, p.8.

In short, what must be avoided is the establishment of a benchmark for safeguarding practice which is formed in isolation and is therefore uninformed by significant cross-jurisdictional developments. Any such effort would represent a missed opportunity for comprehensive safeguarding development, which can be offered through greater collaboration and coordination.

Structures and Arrangements to Achieve Operational Continuity

The Centre for Cross Border Studies welcomes the commitment made within the strategy to review future Child Protection and Safeguarding Learning and Development Strategies.¹⁰ We strongly agree with the need for flexibility in the structure of the strategy, to both ensure that it appropriately reflects policy and legislation developments and to provide that its central purpose is achieved.

One problematic characteristic of the island of Ireland is that the North-South land border often separates both jurisdictions into two distinct policy regimes. As noted above, this can, and frequently does, lead to policy asymmetries between each jurisdiction.

CCBS notes that recent years have seen significant policy development in joint co-operation and information sharing, between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, within the area of child protection, which has become one of the key issues of concern for the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) and remains high on its agenda.

Such developments include the creation of a jointly chaired cross-border group of officials to monitor five sub-groups set up by the NSMC, each of which comprise representatives from statutory and voluntary groups North and South and the establishment of a North South Child Protection Hub. Most recently, in the NSMC's Joint Communiqué¹¹ attention was given to e-Safety as the Council noted the good collaborative work taking place on Child Protection and recognised that *"issues such as these are cross-cutting and cross-jurisdictional and will require collaborative working to address"*.

The foundation for much of this work was provided by the publication in June 2009 from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, of 'Safeguarding Children'.¹² This document outlines the Northern Ireland Executive's policy statement on child protection and endorses the cross-border work initiated by the NSMC. Moreover, of particular note to this strategy, 'Safeguarding Children' stresses the need for greater integration of UK-wide and cross-jurisdictional bodies and stresses

¹⁰ The strategy notes that *"the SBNI Education and Training Committee will review this learning and development framework every 3 years to ensure it remains fit for purpose, and reflects any relevant developments in safeguarding practice, policy and legislation (p. 9).*

¹¹ Available at: http://www.northsouthministerialcouncil.org/index/publications/joint-communications/plenary-jc/plenary_jc_5_december_2014.htm

¹² OFMdfM (2009), Safeguarding Children: A Cross-Departmental Statement on the Protection of Children and Young People, Belfast: OFMdfM, p.23.

that it will ask the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland to “*seek to develop improved and more formalised linkages with these bodies*”.¹³ Accordingly, it is the contention of the Centre for Cross Border Studies that this and all forthcoming strategies appropriately reflect these developments by committing to more formalised cross-jurisdictional partnerships.

Closing Comments

The Centre for Cross Border Studies notes that the Child Protection and Safeguarding Learning & Development Strategy represents the opportunity, where possible, to develop and enhance formalised partnerships with counterpart bodies in the area of child protection. Such formalised collaboration would enable opportunities for knowledge exchange and greater operational consistency through coordination while avoiding unnecessary duplication and policy inconsistencies. Where that collaboration is taking place, this should be properly reflected in any major policy document, such as the Child Protection and Safeguarding Learning & Development Strategy.

¹³ OFMdfM (2009), Safeguarding Children: A Cross-Departmental Statement on the Protection of Children and Young People, Belfast: OFMdfM; see also <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/Documents/RaISe/Publications/2010/Health-Social-Services-Public-Safety/7310.pdf>