

EMBARGOED UNTIL 09.45HRS ON MONDAY 15 JANUARY 2007

15 January 2007

PROTECTING CHILDREN IS A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY - GOGGINS

Health Minister Paul Goggins has announced a fundamental reform of child protection services in Northern Ireland.

Key elements of the reform include:

- Establishment of an independently chaired Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland to replace the Area Child Protection Committees and Child Protection Panels
- A single assessment framework for children's services
- Agreed regional thresholds for access to children's services
- Strengthening of community child protection teams
- Improved training and registration for social workers
- Extending the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006 to Northern Ireland.

The announcement follows the publication of an inspection of child protection services in Northern Ireland entitled 'Our Children and Young People – Our Shared Responsibility'. The inspection, which was led by the Social Services Inspectorate, was undertaken in five health trust areas – Causeway, Craigavon and Banbridge, Foyle, South and East Belfast and Sperrin Lakeland.

The Minister said: **"The inspection report does not make for comfortable reading. Children and young people are our shared responsibility, they need to be kept safe and supported so they can become confident, well-adjusted adults.**

“The report identifies examples of skilled work being undertaken by highly motivated staff. However, the inspection also found evidence of serious failings and in some instances a failure on the part of organisations to protect vulnerable children and young people. This is not acceptable.

“I want to commend the contribution made to the report by young people themselves, and by parents. In particular, the views of children and young people who have personal experience of the child protection system have been very valuable and I thank the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) for taking this work forward.”

In order to drive forward the reform of child protection services in Northern Ireland the Minister said he had established a Reform Implementation Team.

He said: **“I was not prepared to wait for the publication of this overview report before taking steps to improve and strengthen child protection services in Northern Ireland. I have already established a Reform Implementation Team which will play a vital role in ensuring child care services are of the highest possible quality.**

“Children’s services have suffered from a significant lack of investment for many years. We have changed this. In the last few years alone children’s services have benefited from a massive injection of cash including almost £25m being spent on rebuilding children’s homes and more than £10 million to fund a range of services for children in care.

“Social services teams in health trusts will also benefit from additional investment and improved training.”

The Minister today launched a consultation document aimed at establishing a new Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland. He said:

“The new Board will have a duty to strengthen arrangements for safeguarding the welfare of children and young people.

“We are also now in a position to move quickly to extend the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act to Northern Ireland. This will widen the requirements for vetting persons working with children and will strengthen the arrangements for barring unsuitable persons from working with children.

Concluding the Minister said: **“While many of the recommendations made have already been implemented by boards and trusts, I will be looking to the RQIA to monitor their implementation and that of the remainder. The people of Northern Ireland need to know that children’s services are of the highest possible quality.**

“The messages from this Report must be heard; lessons learned and all the recommendations fully and consistently implemented.”

NOTES TO EDITORS:

1. The Overview Report and individual Trust inspection reports are available on the Department’s website at: www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/
2. As part of the delivery of a previous announcement by the Secretary of State in March 2006 to strengthen further child protection arrangements, the Department is writing to stakeholders seeking any comments about the implementation of the arrangements in the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act to Northern Ireland.

Media queries to Clare Baxter, DHSSPS Press Office on 02890 520571 or 07919 400248