

Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland

Strategic Plan

2026 – 2030

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Foreword



As the Independent Chair of the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) it gives me great pleasure to present to you our Strategic Plan 2026-2030.

This is the SBNI's fourth Strategic Plan and builds on the achievements of our member agencies and on the enormous amount of work that has been done during the last four years to tackle the SBNI strategic priorities of; Domestic Violence and Abuse, Online Safety and Children and Young People's Mental Health.

The SBNI is a partnership organisation consisting of all of the key statutory bodies, the major voluntary agencies and appointed independent persons that manage, operate and resource the safeguarding and child protection system in Northern Ireland. It was set up under the Safeguarding Board Act (NI) 2011. It is the statutory body responsible for coordinating and ensuring the effectiveness of its 21-member bodies, for the purposes of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of the 436,705¹ children and young people in Northern Ireland.

This new Strategic Plan sets out the direction for the SBNI over the next four years, 2026-2030. I am particularly grateful to the children and young people, their parents and carers, our member bodies and the partner organisations we work with, who took the time to share with us their views on what we should prioritise during this period. Based on what we have heard so far from these key stakeholders, the SBNI has confirmed that our four strategic priorities over the next four years will be;

¹ [Mid-Year Population Estimates | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency](#)

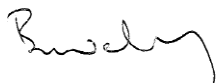
- To provide leadership and set direction in the safeguarding, protection and welfare of children and young people.
- Online Safety
- Domestic Violence and Abuse; and
- Child Exploitation (including sexual, criminal, and radicalisation).

The primary responsibility of the SBNI membership is to protect children and young people from risk and harm and ensure that effective work to protect children and young people is properly coordinated and conducted.

This new Strategic Plan sets out a clear path of how we intend to do this, the priorities we will focus on and how we will measure and monitor this work to make sure we are making a difference. Operationally, for each year of this Strategic Plan, we will develop an annual business plan that will detail how and what we will focus, and deliver, on.

A strength of our business planning process is that we maintain the facility to add new and emerging safeguarding and child protection issues to our workload as separate priorities if necessary over the duration of this Strategic Plan. This agility enables the SBNI to ensure that the key and current safeguarding harms, risks and issues affecting children and young people in Northern Ireland are at the forefront of our work over the four-year period.

This Strategic Plan commits me, as the Independent Chair of the SBNI, and all our members to work tirelessly to make sure that all the priorities and aims set out in it are realised. Our intention is to live up to our objective of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people in Northern Ireland.



Bernie McNally OBE

SBNI Independent Chair

Introduction

Throughout this plan we use the term safeguarding² in its widest sense to encompass the full range of both child protection and prevention activities.

Safeguarding children and young people is the process of positively promoting the safety and wellbeing of all children in society. It is about ensuring that children and young people grow up safely and securely and are provided with effective care. It is also about preventing the impairment of children and young people's health and development. Safeguarding also involves a comprehensive response to the needs of children and young people when it is suspected that they have suffered any form of abuse or neglect. Safeguarding also includes the promotion and protection of children and young people's rights. We want children and young people to have the best possible success in adulthood.

The Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) was established by the Safeguarding Board (Northern Ireland) Act 2011 (the Act). The principal functions stipulated in the Act are:

- to coordinate and ensure the effectiveness of what is done by each person or body represented on the Board for the purpose of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children
- to develop policies and procedures for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people
- to promote an awareness of the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people
- to keep under review the effectiveness of what is done by each person or body represented on the Board to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people
- to undertake case management reviews
- to provide advice in relation to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people

² Definition of safeguarding can be found at Cooperating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland, Version 2.1 October 2024 p.g.12

- to promote communications between the Board and children and young people
- to make arrangements for consultation and discussion in relation to the safeguarding and promotion of the welfare of children and young people.

Further detail of the membership, functions and procedures are provided in [The Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland \(Membership, Procedure, Functions and Committee\) Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2012 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#).

The SBNI is chaired by an independent person appointed by the Minister of Health through the public appointments process, who is independent of the member bodies. The membership of the SBNI is made up of representatives from the five Health and Social Care Trusts, the Department of Health's Strategic Planning and Performance Group, the Public Health Agency, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Education Authority, District Councils, the Youth Justice Agency, a member of the Northern Ireland General Practitioners Committee of the British Medical Association, the Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland, the NSPCC, two lay members and the Chair of the Case Management Review Panel. There is also representation from the voluntary sector from Barnardo's Northern Ireland, Children in Northern Ireland, the Voice of Young People in Care, and Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland. In addition to the Board members, two Safeguarding Panel Chairs, and the Chair of the Interfaith Committee are in attendance at the Board. The 21-member bodies are represented on the SBNI by a senior member of staff. Their common purpose is to help safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people in Northern Ireland and help protect them from all forms of abuse and harm.

The SBNI Independent Chair and the SBNI members are responsible for providing strategic leadership and direction to the child protection and safeguarding system across Northern Ireland and for ensuring the effective performance and discharge of its statutory objective, duties and functions as set out in the Act. The SBNI Independent Chair and member bodies are supported in their work by a small central support team made up of eight staff.

This Strategic Plan covers the period 1 April 2026 to 31 March 2030. It sets out the strategic direction of the SBNI and provides a guide to the work it will do for the next four years.

The SBNI continues to:

- work in partnership with other agencies, service users and communities to ensure our children and young people have the best start in life and are part of a caring society that supports people throughout their lives³
- provide leadership and set direction for the safeguarding system across Northern Ireland
- respond in a timely manner to new and emerging concerns
- drive improvements in the current child protection system
- build the capacity of the SBNI to enhance the knowledge and skills of the entire membership to ensure it is providing effective, evidence-based responses to the safeguarding challenges now and in the years ahead.

In addition, the SBNI continues to build on the achievements of the last four years to drive forward and embed a [trauma informed approach](#) - to underpin all of its work to safeguard children and young people. This strengths-based approach to practice, policy, procedure and strategy has shown how, when professionals better understand what has happened to the children and young people in their care and the adversity they have experienced, they respond more compassionately and more appropriately which ultimately leads to better outcomes over the long-term.

The relationship between many other issues affecting children and young people and safeguarding and child protection has long been recognised. These issues include poverty, mental health, substance misuse, trauma, equality and disability. These issues will be threaded throughout this Strategic Plan, as underpinning considerations, for all work undertaken on the strategic priorities. We recognise that there is a clear link to our work on understanding and addressing adverse childhood experiences and, thereby, increasing life chances.

³ [PfG 2024-27 Wellbeing Framework](#)

For example, in some cases family poverty can lead to an increased likelihood of abuse, harm and neglect as a result of the additional strains that it places on family life.

The SBNI continues to be cognisant of this and is seeking to ensure that the issue of poverty, in the many forms that it can impact on a child's life, informs and influences the Board's work.

The SBNI also recognises the occurrence and impact of paramilitary violence and organised criminal activity in relation to child protection and safeguarding. It continues to support the involvement and outputs of its member bodies as part of the ongoing work currently being undertaken by the Executive Programme on Tackling Paramilitarism and Organised Crime (EPPOC). The SBNI is committed to working with the EPPOC to support a multiagency trauma informed response to prevent risk and harm for the children and young people affected by paramilitary activity. The SBNI continues to participate in the strategic and operational forums designed to address this significant child protection issue.

Strategic Priorities for 2026 - 2030

- To provide leadership and set direction in the safeguarding, protection and welfare of children and young people
- Online Safety
- Domestic Violence and Abuse; and
- Child Exploitation (including sexual, criminal, and radicalisation).

Objectives

The SBNI Strategic Plan 2026-2030 aims to:

- contribute to delivering on the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government (PfG) 2024-2027
- fulfil our Personal and Public Involvement duties and satisfy the SBNI's statutory function to promote communication between the SBNI Board and children and young people

- be informed by the views of children and young people in Northern Ireland in its delivery
- acknowledge the important role played by parents/carers in safeguarding children and young people and to involve them.

Implementation

As mentioned above, the SBNI Strategic Plan 2026-2030 will be kept under review to ensure it takes into account changes in the external environment, best practice, new and emerging concerns, research developments and the needs of children and young people in Northern Ireland. Any proposed changes to this Strategic Plan resulting from developments will be carefully analysed, assessed and agreed with the SBNI member bodies. We will also consult with the Department of Health (DoH) prior to implementation, as required by legislation.

In developing this Plan, we have reviewed the previous SBNI Strategic Plan 2022-2026, considered progress to date and identified the continuing challenges in child protection and safeguarding.

We will fulfil any outstanding commitments from our previous four years work, in addition to our four strategic priorities and will specifically:

- ensure that the learning from case management reviews is embedded in child protection practice
- continue to uphold the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)
- continue to provide training and general awareness opportunities across all areas of our work
- commission professional training and awareness in relation to our strategic priorities as is appropriate
- continue to support and provide assistance to faith-based communities to assist in the sharing of best safeguarding practice
- continue to embed safeguarding and child protection policies and procedures to ensure standardisation of practice

- support parents in positive parenting and member agencies who help them to do this

In particular, the SBNI Safeguarding Panels at local levels will:

- coordinate the implementation of the SBNI Strategic Plan to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people in their areas
- promote an awareness of the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people
- where relevant, ensure that the findings of case management reviews are disseminated widely and implemented in full
- promote and facilitate communication and engagement with children and young people in the exercising of their statutory duties.

Strategic Context

Since the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) became operational in 2012, it has worked to improve the safeguarding and protection arrangements for children and young people in Northern Ireland.

This work has been informed, influenced and shaped by international treaties. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is of particular relevance. In accordance with the UNCRC the SBNI must at all times act in the best interest of the child (Article 3), in a manner which is non-discriminatory (Article 2) and in a way which respects the views of the child (Article 12).

The SBNI Strategic Plan 2026-2030 takes account of domestic legislation such as the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 as well as a number of departmental strategies, policies and priorities, such as the 'Keeping children and young people safe: an Online Safety Strategy for Northern Ireland, 2020-2025', the 'Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031', the Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030, the cross-departmental policy 'Cooperating to Safeguard Children and Young People (Version 2.1 October 2024)', the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024-2031, the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2022⁴.

The Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government (PfG) sets out the major societal priorities that the Executive wants to achieve. We have carefully considered this PfG and have identified three of the 10 strategic domains that especially apply to our work. These are:

- Thriving Children - our children and young people have the best start in life
- Caring Society - we have a caring society that supports people throughout their life
- Safer Communities - everyone feels safe – we all respect the law and each other.⁵

⁴ Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 (legislation.gov.uk)

⁵ [PfG 2024-27 Wellbeing Framework](#)

The SBNI is committed through this Strategic Plan to help ensure that these outcomes are realised. The strategic priorities for the next four years therefore reflect, support and complement the PfG.

The Department of Health (DoH) is the sponsor department for the SBNI. In accordance with guidance issued by the DoH, the SBNI is required to report on progress against its Strategic Plan and the annual business plans which flow from it. We are also required to provide assurance as to the ongoing effectiveness of our systems on internal control.

The SBNI remains committed to aligning our work with current and emerging departmental strategies, policies and priorities. In particular, the key policy document 'Cooperating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland (Version 2.1 October 2024)'. This provides the overarching, cross departmental policy for safeguarding children and young people in Northern Ireland and directs all safeguarding policy and practice.

In addition to the Safeguarding Board Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 which places a requirement on all member bodies to work together to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 strengthens this by providing a statutory duty for public authorities to co-operate in order to contribute to the well-being of children and young people. The addition of this legislation to the safeguarding arena strengthens the commitment to partnership working demonstrated within this strategic plan.

All public sector organisations, including all SBNI member bodies and our central support team, are facing substantial budgetary constraints. It is likely that these constraints will continue to be a theme throughout the duration of this Strategic Plan. It is imperative that the SBNI keeps the impact of any financial constraints under review and makes the best use of available resources to achieve the maximum outcomes.

The SBNI continues to use its Outcomes-Based Accountability (OBA) framework to help define the outcomes we want to achieve as a result of our work and how this can be measured. The use of OBA is helping improve safeguarding and welfare outcomes for children and young people in Northern Ireland.

Mission, Vision and Values

SBNI Mission Statement

Our mission is to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people by working together in partnership to prevent, and protect them from, risk and harm.

SBNI Vision Statement

Our vision is that all children and young people are seen, heard and feel protected, in order that they may grow up in safety, thrive and fulfil their individual potential.

SBNI Values

We strive to protect children and young people, particularly those who are marginalised.

We listen to children and young people and respond to them about their wishes, experiences and place them at the heart of what we do.

We work in partnership to safeguard and promote the welfare and rights of children and young people.

We develop, empower, respect and value those who work with us as we strive for excellence in what we do.

We are open, honest, transparent and compassionate in our dealings with children and young people, our members, partners and staff and we respect diversity and promote equality in all that we do.

Strategic Priorities

Strategic Priority 1: To provide leadership and set direction in the safeguarding, protection and welfare of children and young people.

SP1.1 To ensure that the Case Management Review and Safeguarding Panels meet their statutory functions.

SP1.2 To ensure that the non-statutory committees fulfil their delivery obligations within their terms of reference.

SP1.3 To participate in relevant child safeguarding and child protection fora.

Strategic Priority 2: To hear and respond to the voices of children and young people affected by domestic violence⁶ and abuse (DVA)

SP2.1 To work with government departments and their agencies to increase the skills and knowledge of children and young people, and of supporting adults in their lives, about forming healthy relationships, helping to prevent domestic violence and abuse.

SP2.2 To work with member and partner agencies engaged in the DVA arena to raise awareness among parents/carers and professionals of how to reduce the impact of DVA on children and young people, and how to recover from the trauma.

SP2.3 To work with member and partner agencies to enable children and young people to feel confident to report domestic violence and abuse.

⁶ Definition of Domestic Abuse as per the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024-2031

Strategic Priority 3: To support children and young people in exercising their rights to enjoy the benefits of the online world free from harm, fear and abuse.

SP3.1 To work with government departments and their agencies to continue to dynamically develop and embed online infrastructure and associated standards to prevent children and young people from experiencing harm and abuse online.⁷

SP3.2 To work with member and partner agencies to educate children and young people, their parents and carers and those who work with them to navigate the online world safely and confidently and support them to stay safe and well online.

Strategic Priority 4: To help prevent, protect and safeguard children and young people affected by child exploitation (sexual, criminal, radicalisation and other emerging forms of exploitation).

SP4.1 To work with government departments and agencies to prevent children and young people being exploited

SP4.2 To work with member and partner agencies to raise awareness among children, young people, parents, carers, and professionals of the different forms of child exploitation and promote protective factors

SP4.3 To work with partners to develop and promote resources to improve recognition, assessment and response to child exploitation.

⁷ This aligns with the Department of Health's Online Safety Strategy 2020-2025

Monitoring and Review

The SBNI believes that its plans and priorities for the next four years are ambitious and challenging and will require everyone to work together to make them happen.

The SBNI is committed to continually reviewing the Plan to ensure it remains relevant and fit for purpose and is able to respond to new and emerging concerns.

It will continually monitor its performance against each of the strategic objectives and priorities and aims outlined in the Plan. This will be done through monitoring and reporting mechanisms and the identification of outcome measures and indicators. The SBNI will receive regular reports throughout each year on progress against its Strategic Plan from the Safeguarding Panels and SBNI Committees. These will reference and comment upon the annual business plans to make sure the SBNI is achieving its strategic objectives and priorities. The SBNI will provide to the DoH an annual assurance statement relating to performance against the Strategic Plan's priorities and aims underpinned by supporting evidence.

Each year the SBNI will provide an annual report to the DoH to be laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly. This will include reports from all SBNI Safeguarding Panels and Committees.

The SBNI commits to making sure that children and young people, their parents and carers are involved in the out-workings of the Strategic Plan and are able to comment and influence this. This will be done through our Safeguarding Panels and the engagement exercises they undertake at their local levels.

The SBNI will also provide assurance that each member body is adhering to the SBNI requirements as set out in the legislation.

All member bodies must have in place arrangements to ensure that:

- their functions are exercised having due regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and
- any services provided are done so having due regard to that need.

The SBNI is committed to monitoring and reviewing its work to help ensure that it is on target to achieve its priorities and aims and that the member bodies are really listening and acting upon what they hear from children and young people and their parents and carers.

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