



**THE REGULATION AND QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AUTHORITY**

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**CHILD PROTECTION REVIEW REPORT**

**Stage 2 - Regional Views of Service  
Users**

Consultation process completed: June 2009  
Report completed: September 2009

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## 1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### 1.1 The Role and Responsibility of the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority

The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) is a non-departmental public body, established with powers granted under *The Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003*. It is sponsored by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), with overall responsibility for assessing and reporting on the availability and quality of health and social care services in Northern Ireland and encouraging improvements in the quality of those services. There are four core activities which define the focus of work of the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority.

- ❖ improving care
- ❖ informing the population
- ❖ safeguarding rights
- ❖ influencing policy

### 1.2 The Role and Responsibilities of the Voice of Young People in Care

The Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC) is an independent regional organisation that seeks to empower and enable children and young people with an experience of care to participate fully in decisions affecting their lives. Their aim is to improve young people's life chances through working in partnership with the young people, staff, managers, agencies and government. This is done through listening and learning and facilitating change which impacts and influences legislation, policy and practice.

### 1.3 Scope of Review

In May 2008, the RQIA began a two year review of child protection services in Northern Ireland. The review focused on selected recommendations from the report '*Our Children and Young People Our Shared Responsibility*'<sup>1</sup> (referred to as the SSI Overview Report). Where relevant, it also took into account recommendations from the '*Independent Inquiry Panel into the deaths of Madeleine and Lauren O'Neill*' (referred to as the O'Neill Report), and the '*Independent Report into the Agency Involvement with Mr McElhill, Ms Lorraine McGovern and their children*' (referred to as the Toner Report).

Due to the size and scale of child protection services in Northern Ireland and the number of recommendations in the SSI Overview Report, the review was subdivided into discrete stages during year one, 2008/09:

- ❖ Stage 1 - Corporate leadership and accountability
- ❖ Stage 2 - Regional views of service users
- ❖ Stage 3 - Quality of record keeping

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<sup>1</sup> DHSSPS (2006) *Our Children and Young People - Our Shared Responsibility* - Inspection of Child Protection Services in Northern Ireland <http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/print/oss-child-protection-overview.pdf>

- ❖ Stage 4 - Site visits to assess front line services
- ❖ Stage 5 - Interagency working

Each stage used different methodologies and produced separate reports.

## **1.4 Approach for Stage 2**

Stage 2 focussed on the theme of user involvement and engagement with social services. Reference was made to chapter 4, '*Access to Services*' of the SSI Overview Report and recommendations 20, 21, 24, 25, 26 and Chapter 5, '*Assessment, Case Planning, Case Management and Record Keeping*'.

### **Chapter 4 - Recommendation 20**

Trusts must ensure that adequate and appropriate information is available to potential service users and members of the public about the nature of child protection services and how and when to access them. This information should be presented, whenever necessary, in accessible formats, including translations for those for whom English is not a first or competent second language.

### **Chapter 4 - Recommendation 21**

Trusts must ensure that information is developed, disseminated and regularly audited in association with parents and young people and made available through the range of facilities commonly used by potential service users.

### **Chapter 4 - Recommendation 24**

Trusts must take action to improve arrangements for parents, children and young people as well as staff in other agencies, to access relevant services and support within agreed timescales and in line with agency standards.

### **Chapter 4 - Recommendation 25**

Trusts must take action to improve the reception, waiting and meeting room facilities within local children's services' offices.

### **Chapter 4 - Recommendation 26**

Trusts must take action to improve systems for parents, children and young people to enable them to contact their social workers, as required, including:

- ❖ provision of voicemail, email, and mobile telephone numbers;
- ❖ monitoring arrangements to check that responses are within agreed timescales; and
- ❖ customer care training for receptionists and duty officers.

## Chapter 5 - Recommendation 28

Trusts must monitor and audit the implementation of case conference procedures and ensure that:

- ❖ The case conference process remains focused on the needs of children;
- ❖ The parents' and family's strengths and qualities and their existing network of supports are assessed;
- ❖ The deficits in parenting skills and the kinds of supports required to address these are clarified;
- ❖ Any changes needed and standards to be achieved in order for children's names to be removed from the register are clearly set out;
- ❖ Advice is provided to parents of the importance of co-operating with the child protection plan and the potential consequences in terms of care order applications when the threshold of significant harm has been reached;
- ❖ The views of children and young people and parents about the conduct of case conferences are considered and, if necessary, appropriate action taken.

In recognition of VOYPIC's particular experience in engaging service users through their work, RQIA commissioned them to undertake a consultation exercise with a number of parents who had experience of child protection, or family support services. The objective of the consultation was to ascertain the views of parents against the recommendations from the SSI Overview Report set out above.

### 1.5 Methodology

This consultation process was carried out with a sample of parents across the five Trust areas between September 2008 and June 2009. In order to identify and gain access to parents, the Advocacy Coordinator from VOYPIC met with key personnel (affiliates) within each Trust. This meeting highlighted the aim and rationale of the consultation and VOYPIC's involvement.

An information flyer (appendix 1) and letter (appendix 2) were subsequently produced for the affiliate to distribute to key people in safeguarding and family support offices within the Trusts. The flyer was adapted to include contact information in relation to complaints procedures for the Trust area.

Further meetings formalised how contact would be made with parents. Agreement was reached whereby the affiliate made contact with specific heads of service who disseminated the information to social workers within the Trust. Field social workers forwarded on the relevant information and the names of parents willing to be involved in the consultation exercise to VOYPIC.

Initially, it was envisaged that the majority of parents would participate in focus groups. However, as most parents expressed their concerns in relation to talking about their experiences in front of other parents, they were offered the option of taking part in a one to one interview.

The views of the parents were ascertained through a questionnaire, the format of which reflected the recommendations from the SSI Overview Report, identified at Section 1.4 above.

The questionnaire was divided into 2 sections; one set of questions for parents involved in family support services and one for parents who had experience of child protection services.

Parents with children on the child protection register were asked to respond to both sets of questions. All responses were recorded and clarified by the interviewer/advocate to reflect accuracy.

For those parents who did take part in the focus groups, a structured group work session was designed to reflect the identified recommendations from the SSI Overview Report.

At the conclusion of the consultation process, meetings were arranged with Trust representatives in each of the five Trusts to provide feedback on the findings.

<b>Trust</b>	<b>Child Protection Participants</b>	<b>Family Support Participants</b>	<b>Total</b>
NHSCT	4	5	<b>9</b>
WHSCT	7	6	<b>13</b>
SEHSCT	3	2	<b>5</b>
BHSCT	5	4	<b>9</b>
SHSCT	7	8	<b>15</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>51</b>

Table 1

Table 1 indicates that a total of 51 parents participated in the consultation process across the five Trusts. Of the 51 parents, 26 were involved in child protection and 25 were availing or had availed of family support services.

## **1.6 Report Outline**

This report is an overview of the findings from the consultation with parents across the five Trusts areas by VOYPIC. It is presented in three discrete sections. Section 1 provides a context to the review and methodology used. Section 2 provides an overview of the high level findings. Section 3 provides the main findings against the recommendations. Section 4 outlines the four recommendations for all Trusts.

RQIA would like to acknowledge the valuable input of each of the 51 parents who took part in this consultation and to the VOYPIC organisation for undertaking this piece of work on behalf of the Authority.

## **2.0 Overview of High Level Findings**

### **2.1 Family Support**

- ❖ There was a waiting list for family support services in all five Trusts.
- ❖ The physical standard of reception, waiting and meeting rooms varied both across and within Trusts. There was a positive response regarding the design of the new health and well being centres where these had been built.
- ❖ There was very positive feedback in relation to reception and duty social work staff, who were described in the consultation as being courteous and responsive.
- ❖ There was positive feedback in relation to social work response times to service users individual queries.

### **2.2 Child Protection**

- ❖ The majority of parents received case conference reports at a minimum of two days before a case conference with only isolated examples of falling out side this timeline.
- ❖ The majority of parents consulted stated that they had received practical support to attend case conferences.
- ❖ Case Conferences and meetings relating to the child protection process were not arranged in consultation with parents.
- ❖ The majority of parents who had children on the child protection register expressed an understanding of the protection plan and what needed to happen to ensure de-registration.

## **3.0 Main Findings**

### **3.1 Findings Against Recommendations**

#### **3.1.1 Recommendation 20**

The majority of the 51 parents who took part in the consultation agreed that there was insufficient information available on family support or child protection services. It was evident from the responses that parents perceived information as not being accessible and that they would have asked professionals for guidance towards relevant information.

The majority of parents commented that information displayed in waiting areas related to matters such as domestic violence and alcohol abuse and not necessarily information relating to Trust services. A frequent comment from parents was that information is not regularly updated. Another example related to the inaccessibility of leaflets due to their location behind equipment. One father commented that the information available had a gender imbalance.

The issue of information being available in other languages and different formats was not raised by parents involved in this consultation, although it does continue to be an important issue for Trusts to consider.

#### **RQIA Recommendation 1**

**Trusts should produce clear and concise information on all services that families in need can avail of. This should detail the process involved in accessing these services and the contact and referral details.**

#### **3.1.2 Recommendation 21**

From the 51 parents who took part, only two parents in one Trust, had been involved in developing information relating to child protection and family support. The practice in this Trust is commended and the process of user involvement in the development of information should be introduced in all Trusts.

#### **RQIA Recommendation 2**

**Trusts should involve families who have experience of family support and child protection services in the development of information materials.**

#### **3.1.3 Recommendation 24**

In three Trusts, the majority of responses from parents were positive about accessing services. Parents reported that social services were prompt in identifying what support parents and their children needed. However, waiting times for family support services to be actioned was an issue in all Trusts. There was a general acknowledgement from parents that the majority of family support services were not directly managed by social services.

In two Trusts, issues were raised in relation to the delay in the allocation of a social worker to a family following an initial assessment.



### **3.1.4 Recommendation 25**

The consultation highlighted significant discrepancies across the five Trusts regarding the quality of the physical environment of reception, waiting and meeting facilities. A number were described as satisfactory and child friendly and others were described as unwelcoming, poorly furnished and presented. The new health and well-being centres received a very positive response from parents who particularly commented on the child friendly design.

### **3.1.5 Recommendation 26**

The majority of parents across all five Trusts were positive with regard to the prompt response from social workers when contacted. All parents had contacted social services either through calling to the local office or by telephone. A significant number of parents who had contacted social services by telephone commented that they were placed on hold, and for those parents on mobile phones this was problematic.

Of the 51 parents who participated, 50 felt that reception staff and duty social workers were both professional and courteous in dealing with their particular query. All social services' staff including administrative staff across the five Trusts should be commended for this finding.

As part of the consultation, parents were asked to comment on accessing support or assistance out of normal office hours. Of the 51 parents consulted, 44 parents were aware of how to access the service.

### **RQIA Recommendation 3**

**Trusts should consider the provision of a call back service or free phone number to facilitate contact for service users.**

### **3.1.6 Recommendation 28**

Parents were usually informed of the date of the child protection case conference at the previous meeting, by their social worker or by letter. The overwhelming majority of parents stated that the organisation for the meetings was undertaken by social services, with only one parent reporting involvement in the organisation of the case conference.

There was a mixed response from parents when asked about the support they received to attend the case conference. A number of parents commented that they had been offered transport by the social worker to enable them to attend. Parents stated that case conferences were sometimes re-scheduled to enable them to attend. In other cases, the case conference took place in their absence and parents were advised of the outcomes by the social worker.

### **Case Conference Reports**

A minority of parents stated that they did not receive the social worker's report until ten minutes before the case conference began. This was viewed as unhelpful as parents did not always agree with the accuracy or content of the report. In contrast, some parents stated that they received the case conference report in advance of the meeting and the social worker spent time with them discussing the content.

Parents were asked if they understood the content of the reports and all but one parent stated that they did. A number of parents commented that they were able to access independent support to ensure they understood both reports and the case conference process. These independent supports came from a range of professionals such as a probation officer, VOYPIC, Women's Aid and family members. A common theme that emerged was that parents would have preferred more time to fully digest the report.

### **Parental Participation**

Parents' participation at Child Protection case conferences was also explored as part of the consultation. The majority of parents stated that they took part in the case conference; they understood what was happening and were able to speak out and share their opinion. Some parents highlighted the importance of individual advocacy support to enable them to contribute to this process. Some of these parents felt that their views had tokenistic value and their opinions did not matter. They highlighted that they experienced the case conferences to be intimidating and questioned the relevance and numbers of professionals involved. Of the 51 parents involved in the consultation, two parents stated they were not supported to take part in the case conference.

### **Focus of Case Conferences**

When parents were asked if the case conference focussed on the needs of the child, there was a varied response across the five Trusts areas. In one Trust, there were very clear responses from parents who stated that the conference was very much focused on the needs of the child; whilst in two Trusts parents felt that the focus was on the needs of parents. In the remaining two Trusts, there was a mixed response, with some parents stating the focus was on the child whilst others commented that focus lay primarily with the parents.

Parents were asked to comment if consideration was given to their strengths and weakness. The overall majority of parents stated that consideration had been given to both their strengths and weakness. Some parents highlighted that at times more attention is given to their weakness and they reported this had a tendency to overshadow their positives.

### **The Child Protection Plan**

The importance of the child protection plan was discussed with parents. Twenty five parents across the Trusts stated that they had been advised by their social worker of the importance of co-operating with the child protection plan and the possible consequences of non co-operation. Of the 26 parents interviewed, 21 stated that they were aware of the process and implications of a Trust's court application for a Care Order.

Nineteen parents stated that they had targets for their children to be removed from the child protection register although a number of these parents stated that these were unrealistic. Of the 26 parents who took part in this element of the consultation, seven parents stated that they did not have an understanding of what to do to achieve de-registration.

These 26 Parents who were involved in the child protection process were asked if they were given enough support to assist them to develop appropriate parenting skills. Those parents who were engaged with family centres, highly commended these services on the level of support offered, which included, parenting classes, self esteem and healthy eating. One parent referred to a family centre they attended "as a lifeline".

Parents also highlighted other sources of support social services had put in place such as counselling, cooking and household supports.

**RQIA Recommendation 4**

**All Trusts should ensure compliance with the Regional Child Protection Policy and Procedures in relation to the involvement, preparation and participation of children, young people and parents in the child protection process.**

## **4.0 Summary of Recommendations**

### **RQIA RECOMMENDATION 1**

Trusts should produce clear and concise information on all services that families in need can avail of. This should detail the process involved in accessing these services and the contact and referral details.

### **RQIA RECOMMENDATION 2**

Trusts should involve families who have experience of family support and child protection services in the development of information materials.

### **RQIA RECOMMENDATION 3**

Trusts should consider the provision of a call back service or free phone number to facilitate contact for service users.

### **RQIA RECOMMENDATION 4**

All Trusts should ensure compliance with the Regional Child Protection Policy and Procedures in relation to the involvement, preparation and participation of children, young people and parents in the child protection process.

## **APPENDICES 1 AND 2**

## Confidentiality

All the information recorded during the group work meetings will be treated in the strictest confidence. No names of parents or young people will be used or shared with anyone.

## Your Right to Complain

### VOYPIC

If you have any concerns or are unhappy with the service you can:

- Discuss the matter with an Advocacy Worker
- Make a complaint

To do this:

- Phone or write to the Director at VOYPIC

### TRUST

If you are unhappy with the way you have been treated, or with a service you receive in your area you can make a complaint to your trust.

## What Next?

Once all of the group work sessions and questionnaires have been completed, they will be compiled into a report for the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA).

The RQIA will look at your experiences of Child Protection and/or Family Support and measure them against previous recommendations for improvement to see if any change has been implemented from their last review.

A copy of the recommendations will be available upon request.



## RQIA REVIEW OF CHILD PROTECTION/ FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES

A consultation to be carried out with a sample of parents from across the five Health Trust areas on the RQIA Child Protection and Family Support Review



We want to hear what you have to say about Child Protection and/or Family Support



The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority



9-11 Botanic Avenue  
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Tel: 028 90 244 888

**Appendix 2**



Dear Parent

VOYPIC (Voice of Young People in Care) in association with RQIA (The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority) are working in partnership to carry out a review of Child Protection Services and/or Family Support within your local trust area.

As a Parent/Guardian who has been involved either with the processes of Child Protection Services or Family Support we would like to give you an opportunity to have a say on how these services can be improved upon for the future.

To do this we would like to invite you to a short coffee morning with a small group of other people to chat about your experiences. This will be facilitated by the staff of VOYPIC, who are independent of Social Services, and will extend a friendly welcome to you and listen to what you have to say. If you do not wish to share your views/experiences within a group VOYPIC will organise an individual meeting to suit you.

All of your comments/suggestions will be treated in the strictest confidence, but will be recorded and fed back to the Trust so that they can make parents experiences of Child Protection Services and Family Support better in the future.

If you are interested in participating in this review, please contact:

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Dates/time and venue of coffee mornings will depend on the responses received from parents.

Look forward to hearing from you.

Yours Faithfully

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