



# **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 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 (Northern Ireland) 2011 and 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 all of the 436,705 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 in addition to our overarching Strategic Priority 1 – 'To provide leadership and set direction in the safeguarding, protection and welfare of all children and young people', our three main strategic priorities over the next four years will be;

- Domestic Abuse

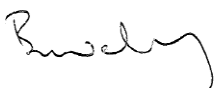
- Online Safety; and
- Child Exploitation (including sexual, criminal, and radicalisation).

The primary responsibility of the SBNI membership is to protect all 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 and embedding a culture of learning and continuous improvement. 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, derived from our strategic priorities and intentions.

A core facet of the business planning process year on year is the facility to add new and emerging safeguarding and child protection issues as separate priorities and aims that may arise at any time, 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 always at the forefront of our work.

This strategic plan commits me, as the Independent Chair of the SBNI, and all our members to work tirelessly to make sure all the priorities and aims set out in it are realised and that we 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 safeguarding<sup>1</sup> in its widest sense to encompass the full range of both child protection and prevention activities.

Safeguarding children<sup>2</sup> and young people is the process of positively promoting the safety and wellbeing of all children<sup>3</sup> in society. It is about ensuring that children and young people grow up safely and securely and are provided with effective care to enable them to attain greater success in adulthood. 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.

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

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<sup>1</sup> Definition of safeguarding can be found at Cooperating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland, Version 2.1 October 2024 2024 p.g.12

<sup>2</sup> The use of children in this strategy includes babies and toddlers unless stated otherwise.

<sup>3</sup> Note the distinct needs of and risks to babies

- to provide advice in relation to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people
- 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 for Health through the public appointments process, who is independent of the member bodies. The membership of the SBNI is made up of representatives from five of the 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 Northern Ireland and 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. Each of 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 the Board's 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 01 April 2026 to 31 March 2030. It sets out the strategic direction of the SBNI and provides a guide for 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 lives<sup>4</sup>
- 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
- continue to 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 connection between a wide range of issues impacting children and young people and safeguarding and child protection has long been understood. 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. In some cases, where families are unable to meet the basic needs of children and young people, this can lead to an increased likelihood of abuse, harm and neglect as a result of the additional strains that poverty places on family life. This strong association between family poverty and the potential risks for children and young

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<sup>4</sup> [PfG 2024-27 Wellbeing Framework](#)

people is also clearly reflected in the theory and outworkings underpinning the concept of adverse childhood experiences.

The SBNI continues to be cognisant of this and ensures that the issue of poverty, in its many forms that can impact on a child's life, informs and influences the Board as it continues to provide leadership and set direction in the safeguarding, protection and welfare of all<sup>5</sup> children and young people.

The SBNI 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 and organised crime activity. The SBNI continues to participate in the strategic and operational forums designed to address this significant child protection issue.

## **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 promoting their welfare by involving them in its implementation.

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<sup>5</sup> By including the word 'all' before children, the SBNI is recognising the particular needs of children who are disabled, neurodivergent, marginalised or excluded in society for whatever reason.

## Implementation

The SBNI Strategic Plan 2026-2030 is 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 all children and young people in Northern Ireland. Any changes to this strategic plan resulting from these 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 the legislation requires us to do so.

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 all children and young people in their areas

- promote an awareness of the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of all 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 all 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 all 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 and the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland ) 2022<sup>6</sup>, 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)’ and the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024-2031.

The Northern Ireland Executive’s Programme for Government (PfG)<sup>7</sup> 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 lives
- Safer Communities - everyone feels safe – we all respect the law and each other.

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<sup>6</sup> [Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2021 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> [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.

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, such as risk and financial management and procurement.

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 will direct 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. In particular, the SBNI will carefully consider the implications of any effects, as a result of these constraints and pressures, on its strategic and operational intentions, priorities and workplans and be mindful to respond accordingly.

The SBNI continues to develop 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 all children and young people by working together in partnership, to intervene early 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 ensure that children and young people are protected, 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.

We ensure that all of our work and relationships are undertaken from an awareness of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and a trauma informed perspective.

# **Strategic Priorities**

**Strategic Priority 1: To provide leadership and set direction in the safeguarding, protection and welfare of all 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 1**

**To provide leadership and set direction in the safeguarding, protection and welfare of all children and young people**

### **What success would look like**

- Strong system leadership and clearer accountability
- Children's voices shaping decisions, not just informing them
- Consistent practice improvement
- Inclusion of the most vulnerable children
- Effective use of limited resources

## **Strategic Priority 2: To hear and respond to the voices of all children and young people affected by domestic<sup>8</sup> abuse (DA)**

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

SP2.2 To work with member and partner agencies engaged in the DA arena to raise awareness among parents/carers and professionals of how to reduce the long-term impact of DA on all children and young people, and develop supports to assist recovery from the associated trauma.

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

SP2.4 To work with member and partner agencies to elevate the voices of children & young people in sharing their lived experiences of domestic abuse.



### **Strategic Priority 2**

**To hear and respond to the voices of all children and young people affected by domestic abuse**

#### **What success would look like**

- Children recognised as victims in their own right
- Improved knowledge, confidence and skills among children and adults
- Accessible and trauma-informed recovery pathways
- CYP feel safe and confident seeking help
- Strong cross-agency alignment with NI strategies

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<sup>8</sup> [Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024–2031](#)

**Strategic Priority 3: To support all 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 safety infrastructure and associated standards to prevent all children and young people from experiencing harm and abuse online.<sup>9</sup>

SP3.2 To work with member and partner agencies to educate all children and young people, their parents and carers and those who work with them to navigate life online safely and confidently as online harms continue to change and emerge.

SP3.3 To undertake research with children and young people on their experiences of online harms to inform the wider policy and practice landscape.



## **Strategic Priority 3**

**To support all children and young people in exercising their rights to enjoy the benefits of the online world free from harm, fear and abuse**

### **What success would look like**

- Children feel safer and more confident online
- Improved knowledge, confidence and skills among children and adults
- Accessible and trauma-informed recovery pathways
- Safe, inclusive and developmentally appropriate education

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<sup>9</sup> This aligns with the Department of Health's Online Safety Strategy 2020-2025

**Strategic Priority 4: To help prevent, protect and safeguard all 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 all children and young people being exploited.

SP4.2 To work with member and partner agencies to raise awareness among all 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.



## **Strategic Priority 4**

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

### **What success would look like**

- Improved recognition of all forms of exploitation
- Children, parents and professionals can clearly identify sexual, criminal and paramilitary exploitation
- Awareness programmes reach schools, youth clubs, online spaces and community hubs
- Earlier identification and disruption of exploitation
- Trauma-informed recovery and long-term support

# **Monitoring and Review - What Success**

## **Looks Like.**

The SBNI believes that achieving its ambitious plans and priorities over the next four years will require everyone to work together. Delivering these plans will help strengthen the safeguarding and welfare of children and young people in Northern Ireland.

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 priorities and objectives 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 the SBNI Committees. These will reference and comment upon the annual business plan/s to make sure the SBNI is achieving its strategic objectives and priorities. Each year the SBNI will provide an annual report to the DoH relating to its performance against the strategic plan's priorities and aims underpinned by supporting evidence. This will be laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly and 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 outworkings 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.

The SBNI continues to work together in partnership to safeguard and promote the welfare of all children and young people and prevent and protect them from risk and harm and to achieve the vision that all children and young people are seen, heard and feel protected in order that they thrive, grow up in safety, and fulfil their individual potential. Children and young people are the most important members in our partnership and as such their views will inform and influence all policy, practice and training development undertaken in the delivery of this strategic plan.

 <p><b>Strategic Priority 1</b> To provide leadership and set direction in the safeguarding, protection and welfare of all children and young people</p> <p><b>What success would look like</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong system leadership and clearer accountability</li> <li>• Children's voices shaping decisions</li> <li>• Consistent practice improvement</li> <li>• Inclusion of the most vulnerable children</li> <li>• Effective use of limited resources</li> </ul>	 <p><b>Strategic Priority 2</b> To hear and respond to the voices of all children and young people affected by domestic abuse</p> <p><b>What success would look like</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children recognised as victims in their own right</li> <li>• Improved knowledge, confidence and skills among children and adults</li> <li>• Accessible, trauma-informed recovery pathways</li> <li>• Children feel safe and confident seeking help</li> <li>• Strong cross-agency alignment with NI strategies</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Strategic Priority 3</b> To support all children and young people in exercising their rights to enjoy the benefits of the online world free from harm, fear and abuse</p> <p><b>What success would look like</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children feel safer and more confident online</li> <li>• Strong regional online safety infrastructure</li> <li>• Better reporting tools and child-friendly pathways</li> <li>• Parents and carers feel equipped</li> <li>• Safe, inclusive and developmentally appropriate education</li> </ul>	 <p><b>Strategic Priority 4</b> To help prevent, protect and safeguard all children and young people affected by child exploitation (sexual, criminal, radicalisation and other emerging forms of exploitation)</p> <p><b>What success would look like</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved recognition of all forms of exploitation</li> <li>• Children, parents and professionals can clearly identify sexual, criminal and paramilitary exploitation</li> <li>• Awareness programmes reach schools, youth clubs, online spaces and community hubs</li> <li>• Earlier identification and disruption of exploitation</li> <li>• Trauma-informed recovery and long-term support</li> </ul>