



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

High Level Independent Review of the Department of Education's Current Child Protection Policies and Processes

Independent Reviewer: Noelle Buick

Table of Contents

About the Independent Reviewer/Acknowledgements	3
Foreword/Glossary of Terms and Definitions	4
Executive Summary	6
Introduction/Child protection and safeguarding	12
Figure 1: Four Key Areas of Wellbeing Promotion	13
The Legal Framework and Statutory Obligations	13
Terms of Reference for the Review	14
The Department of Education's role in Relation to Child Protection	15
The Internal Audits of Child Protection	16
Developments in Child Protection since 2017	16
The Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools 2017	18
A Designated Member of the Board of Management for Child Protection and Safeguarding	18
The Work of the Designated and Deputy Liaison Person	19
A Student Safeguarding Support Team	19
Naming School Employees in Reports to the Full Board of Management Where There is an Allegation of Abuse Against the Employee	20
The Child Safeguarding Statement	21
Training in Child Protection and Safeguarding	23
Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE)	25
Inspection	26
Anti-bullying	27
Departmental internal procedures for child protection	28
Non-commercial bodies under the aegis of the Department	29
Administrative Leave	31
Vetting Arrangements for Teachers and Other School Personnel	32
School Transport	33
Schools with Boarding Provision	34
Further Education and Training and Higher Education	35
Covid -19 Pandemic	35
Conclusion	36

About the Independent Reviewer

Noelle Buick was Chief Inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) in Northern Ireland from May 2011 until March 2020. During that time, she was responsible for the inspection safeguarding and child protection arrangements for pre-schools, schools, further education, youth and Education Other Than at School centres. The Inspectorate held organisations to account for safeguarding and child protection but also provided support through identifying best practice and providing evidence-based advice.

The findings in relation to safeguarding and child protection were assimilated into a high-level review and were presented as part of the Chief Inspector's Report every two years. She was a member of the Department of Education's Board and as such advised the Board on child protection and safeguarding matters, based on evidence from inspection.

She was a member of the Programme Board for the Marshall Report: An Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (2014). The Programme Board comprised of senior figures with a key role in safeguarding and child protection. ETI also undertook a significant contributory report: An Evaluation of Preventative Education and the Statutory Curriculum, to inform the Inquiry.

Prior to that she held a senior civil service role in Ofsted as Head of Organisational Development. This included responsibility for all staff training and covered training on how to inspect safeguarding and child protection for inspectors across all phases. Prior to that, in Ofsted, she was an Assistant Divisional Manager (ADM) responsible with ADM colleagues for the delivery of inspections in one of Ofsted's regions, that included the inspection of care and welfare, safeguarding and child protection.

Currently she is Regional Inspections and Accountability Lead - Middle East and Asia, for an inspection provider based in Dubai and is their Designated Safeguarding Lead.

Acknowledgements

This High Level Independent Review examines the policies and processes that the Department of Education has in place with regard to child protection and safeguarding. (The full Terms of Reference are outlined in the main body of the Review). This review is informed by discussions with Departmental staff, education stakeholders and other agencies/bodies involved in child protection and safeguarding. I am grateful to everyone who took the time to engage with me on this review. The participants were reflective, giving consideration to the areas that could be improved but also pointing out the areas of good practice. It was clear from all the discussions and documents received that there is a high level of commitment in the Department of Education and among education stakeholders to keeping children safe.

A special word of thanks to Jennifer Bliss, Executive Officer in the Parents and Learners Unit who provided excellent administrative support for the review.

Foreword

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)¹ recognises that a child should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding. It states that children have a right to protection from violence, abuse and neglect and to an education that enables them to reach their full potential as well as to express their opinions and be listened to. All of these rights are fundamental to the health, welfare, protection, and safeguarding of children.

While it is not possible to ensure the absolute safety of every child, despite our best combined efforts, we should do everything in our powers to protect children from harm. Keeping our children safe requires a multi-agency approach and a high level of co-operation. While it is everyone's responsibility to keep children safe, it is important to have clarity of roles and responsibilities and robust procedures to follow to protect children which outline the actions to be taken if there is a concern about a child.

Child protection systems and procedures need to be dynamic and able to respond to new and emerging threats, especially those associated with social media which are fast moving and challenging. The Department of Education takes its responsibilities for child protection very seriously. The Department is committed to implementing best practice in child protection and safeguarding and to continuing to keep children safe, enabling them to achieve their full potential, free from harm.

This High Level Review, commissioned by the Department, examines the Department's current child protection policies and processes and how they meet current best practice as well as identifying any existing and/or potential gaps, risks or areas for improvement. It aims to make recommendations, as appropriate, for improvements both short, medium and long term.

Glossary of Terms and Definitions

Board of Management (BoM)	Unless the context requires otherwise, Board of Management means a Board of Management established under section 14 of the Education Act, 1998 and also refers to any other person or persons appointed by the patron to manage the school on behalf of the patron.
Child Abuse	Where the words "child abuse" are used they should be taken to include all four categories (neglect, emotional, physical and sexual abuse) as outlined in chapter 2 of

¹ https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_summary-1.pdf

	Children First: National Guidance (for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2017).
Children First Inter-Departmental Implementation Group (CFIDIG)	CFIDIG provides a forum at which child safeguarding issues with a cross-departmental focus can be raised. Membership includes all government departments, Tusla, the Health Service Executive and An Garda Síochána.
Children First, National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2017	The guidance provides information on recognising and reporting reasonable concerns about the welfare or protection of a child. It also contains information about best practice in child safeguarding and incorporates information on the Children First Act 2015.
Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools 2017 (2017 Procedures)	The procedures give direction and guidance to school authorities and personnel in relation to meeting their statutory obligations under the Children First Act, 2015 and the best practice (non-statutory) guidance set out in Children First National Guidance 2017.
Department of Education Child Protection Oversight Group (CPOG)	The CPOG meets quarterly, and its membership includes members of the Inspectorate, National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and officials from the Department's Schools Division. It receives reports about the compliance of schools with the procedures and the volume and nature of child protection concerns received by the Department. The CPOG coordinates the Department's actions in cases where there are serious concerns regarding the compliance of a school with the requirements of the 2017 procedures.
Child Safeguarding Statement (CSS)	A Child Safeguarding Statement is a statement prepared in accordance with section 11 of the Children First Act, 2015. The CSS provides an overview of the measures that an organisation has in place to ensure that children are protected from harm.
Department	In this review, Department refers to the Department of Education unless the context states otherwise.
Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)	The DCEDIY has overall responsibility for developing the State's policy and legislative framework in relation to child welfare and protection.
Designated Liaison Person (DLP)	The person nominated by the Board of Management, as the designated liaison person for the school when dealing with Tusla - Child and Family Agency, An Garda Síochána and other parties in connection with allegations of and/or concerns about child abuse. A school should also have a Deputy Designated Liaison Person (DDLDP).
Garda National Vetting Bureau	A relevant organisation cannot permit any person to undertake relevant work or activities on behalf of the organisation, unless the organisation receives a vetting

	disclosure from the Garda National Vetting Bureau in respect of that person.
National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)	The National Educational Psychological Service psychologists work with primary and post-primary schools and are concerned with learning, behaviour, social/ emotional development, and supporting the wellbeing, inclusion and participation of children and young people in the school context.
Mandated persons	Mandated persons are persons who are specified in schedule 2 of the Children First Act, 2015 and includes all teachers registered with the Teaching Council and NEPS psychologists. A mandated person has a statutory obligation to make a report to Tusla where he or she considers that a child protection concern is at or above a threshold of harm as defined in the Act.
Parents and Learners Unit (PLU)	The Child Protection and Parental Complaints Section within the Parents and Learners Unit is the unit in the Department of Education with lead responsibility for child protection. Other units in the Department deal with specific aspects of child protection relevant to their remit.
Relevant person	As set out in Section 8 of the Children First Act, 2015, a relevant person is a person who is appointed by a provider of a relevant service to be the first point of contact in respect of the provider's Child Safeguarding Statement. In a school setting this is the DLP.
Relevant service	This is any work or activities specified in schedule 1 of the Children First Act, 2015.
Tusla – the Child Family Agency	Tusla is a statutory organisation, established in January 2014 to support and promote the development, welfare and protection of children.

Executive Summary

Following the commencement of the Children First Act 2015 and the publication of the updated Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2017, the Department made significant changes to its child protection procedures. The Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools 2017 give clear guidance to school authorities and personnel in relation to their statutory obligations under the Children First Act 2015 and the Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2017. They give clarity to Boards of Management, principals, teachers and school personnel on their roles and responsibilities.

While this work was ongoing the Department's internal audit unit undertook two internal audits, the first of which was a systems audit of child protection processes and procedures in the then Department of Education and Skills prior to 11 December 2017. The main part of the audit fieldwork was carried out from mid-October 2017 to mid-March 2018; this period coincided with the introduction of revised Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools 2017 and consequent changes in oversight and inspection arrangements. The audit

gave a 'limited assurance' opinion. A further compliance audit was carried out in March 2020 the purpose of which was to complete a follow up assessment of the findings in the earlier audit. This further audit noted that considerable progress had been made. At this High Level Review, it is clear that further progress has since been made in addressing the audit actions.

In January 2021 the Procedures for Responding to Child Protection Concerns Which Come to the Attention of Staff Employed by the Department of Education were updated and training provided. Greater emphasis was put on the inspection of child protection and safeguarding with the implementation of the Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspections by the Inspectorate in 2019. Oversight arrangements have been strengthened with the setting up of the Child Protection Oversight Group. It meets quarterly and reports to the Minister and the Management Board of the Department of Education on the implementation of The Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017 and the Department's Procedures for Responding to Child Protection Concerns Which Come to the Attention of Staff Employed by the Department of Education. The Child Protection and Oversight Group also coordinates the Department's actions in cases where there are serious concerns regarding the compliance of a school with the requirements of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools 2017.

The Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017, the Procedures for Responding to Child Protection Concerns Which Come to the Attention of Staff Employed by the Department of Education, the establishment of the Child Protection Oversight Group and the other actions taken as a result of the internal audit are really positive steps and the Department is to be commended for the actions it has taken. There are, however, a number of areas that this review has found should be reconsidered, broadened or updated to provide the very best protection for children.

This review has made 17 recommendations and with sub-recommendations, a total of 31. A number of these are longer term actions. The recommendations relate to broadening and strengthening the roles and responsibilities in relation to child protection and safeguarding in schools; the reporting of allegations of child abuse to the Board of Management; the Child Safeguarding Statement; training in child protection and safeguarding; the strengthening of wellbeing promotion in schools including Social, Personal and Health Education and Relationship and Sexuality Education; anti-bullying; inspection; Departmental internal procedures for child protection; oversight of child protection in the Aegis bodies; administrative leave due to child protection concerns; vetting arrangements; school transport; schools with boarding provision; oversight of child protection in further education and training and higher education and Covid-19.

The recommendations are:

Recommendation 1

The Department should consult with management bodies, teaching unions and other relevant partners on the merits of implementing the role of a designated member of the board of management for child protection and safeguarding in larger schools. This is not intended to

diminish the full board of management's responsibilities or those of the Designated Liaison Person.

Recommendation 2 (a) and (b)

- (a) That the Department encourages larger schools to widen the role of the Designated Liaison Person to a member of the senior leadership team, rather than the principal.
- (b) That for all schools (except the smallest one teacher schools) the Department gives consideration to widening the role of the Deputy Designated Liaison Person to supporting the Designated Liaison Person's work, including sharing information and data, as well as deputising in their absence.

Recommendation 3

That the Department considers the wider concept of safeguarding within which child protection sits and encourages larger primary and post primary schools to set up a Student Safeguarding Support Team to promote the wellbeing, safety and protection of children in the school.

Recommendation 4

The Department should, subject to legal advice, and in consultation with the teaching unions and the school management bodies, review the process at 9.5 of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017, to consider a form of reporting to the board of management that enables the board of management to undertake their oversight arrangements while not disclosing the identity of the school employee against which there is a child abuse allegation, to the whole board.

Recommendation 5 (a), (b), (c), (d)

- (a) That the Department reviews Mandatory Template 2 used for the annual review of the Child Safeguarding Statement to make it more evaluative and qualitative.
- (b) That the Department reminds schools of the importance of seeking parents' and pupils' feedback in relation to the school's compliance with the child safeguarding requirements of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools 2017 as part of its annual review of the Child Safeguarding Statement.
- (c) The Department encourages all schools to provide parents with a copy of the Child Safeguarding Statement (not just when requested) and reminds schools of the importance of publishing their Child Safeguarding Statement on their website.
- (d) That all school inspections check the accessibility of the Child Safeguarding Statement to the ages and stages of children in the school. The language should be simple and straight forward and it should be clear who a child should go to if they have a concern.

Recommendation 6 (a), (b) and (c)

- (a) The Department should consider strengthening the requirement for training in child protection and safeguarding for all school personnel (both teaching and non-teaching staff). The Department should also consider a requirement for refresher training for all school personnel.
- (b) While compliance with the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools 2017 is important, the training (which can be online) should focus on covering both child protection and safeguarding to give a well-rounded view on keeping children safe and be dynamic and informative.
- (c) The Department should consider requiring schools to retain a record of all child protection and safeguarding training accessed by its staff. This record could then be made available to the Department on request.

Recommendation 7

With the roll-out of the Department's Wellbeing Policy Framework and Statement of Practice to all schools from 2021 to 2025, together with the welcome focus on Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) in the Junior Cycle and an intention to move this to all levels, it is important that teachers have sufficient training and support to feel confident to deliver a sensitive curriculum. There should be a strong representation of the student voice in the content and review of the lessons delivered to ensure that they are meeting their needs.

Recommendation 8 (a) and (b)

- (a) To further enhance the inspection of child protection and safeguarding, the Inspectorate should consider a stronger focus on the culture and climate of schools in relation to child protection and safeguarding, following what has been a necessary focus on the implementation of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017 as they were embedding.
- (b) Parents and Learners Unit and the Inspectorate, with the relevant partners, should consider if it is sufficient to receive self-reported assurance from schools that all staff have been vetted.

Recommendation 9 (a), (b), (c)

- (a) The Department has recognised the need to update the action plan and the anti-bullying procedures for primary and post-primary schools. There is a need for these to be updated as soon as possible, in consultation with education partners, children and parents.

- (b) To complement the updating of the anti-bullying procedures the Department, in consultation with education partners, needs to provide greater clarity and guidance in relation to when a bullying incident should be dealt with as a child protection concern.
- (c) Going forward the Inspectorate should maintain a strong focus on anti-bullying matters in all its inspections.

Recommendation 10

That the Department considers how the Parents and Learners Unit can have greater oversight of all aspects of child protection and safeguarding including those aspects that sit within separate sections of the Department and, that the Parents and Learners Unit has the authority to support the implementation of actions in relation to child protection and safeguarding by these other sections, if required.

Recommendation 11 (a) and (b)

- (a) The Department should review its Sectoral Implementation Plan and revisit the list of institutions under its remit to ascertain if all are providing a 'relevant service' within the meaning of Schedule 1 of the Act. If they are, they have a statutory duty to produce a Child Safeguarding Statement which should be complied with.
- (b) For those non-commercial bodies under the aegis of the Department that do provide an assurance statement in relation to child protection, it is important that the host unit in the Department has sufficient checks and balances in place to monitor the quality of the statement and processes provided in the assurance.

Recommendation 12 (longer term) and (b)

- (a) That the Department of Education at a senior level, along with senior representatives from Tusla, An Garda Síochána and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth consider reviewing the child abuse investigation process in relation to school personnel to ascertain if it can be carried out more expediently while still maintaining the safety of the child as paramount and, without diminishing the accuracy of the investigation or the individual's right to fair procedure.
- (b) That the Department review the reemployment arrangements: for substitute teachers and Special Needs Assistants subject to a child abuse allegation when their contract and/or administrative leave ends in one school but the investigation by Tusla/An Garda Síochána is not concluded; for a teacher, principal or Special Needs Assistant who resigns or retires when an investigation is still ongoing; in relation to redeployment to ensure that no teacher, principal or Special Needs Assistant subject to a child abuse allegation investigation can be redeployed.

Recommendation 13 (a) and (b), (c longer term) and (d)

- (a) That the Department of Education together with the Department of Justice and other relevant partners take forward proposals for the re-vetting of a member of school staff where a bona fide concern has been reported to the Garda National Vetting Bureau.
- (b) The Department with the agreement of the Department of Justice, the Garda National Vetting Bureau and other partners consider providing advice to schools that re-vetting of non-teaching staff takes place every three years. This will be a further positive move in keeping children safe.
- (c) The Department with the Department of Justice, the Garda National Vetting Bureau and other partners consider how the vetting process can be streamlined and made more accessible without diminishing the importance of vetting and its crucial role in keeping children safe.
- (d) That the Department reminds boards of management and management bodies of the importance of undertaking recent safer recruitment training and refreshing this at a suitable interval.

Recommendation 14

The Department and Bus Éireann are committed to incorporating a specific reference to child safeguarding responsibilities in the next review of the Service Level Agreement. It is important that the Department, in its oversight role, monitors this action and seeks assurances regarding the Child Safeguarding Statement.

Recommendation 15

In order to have clarity, the Department continues to seek legal advice on the responsibility for inspecting boarding provision from a child protection perspective and acts accordingly on that advice.

Recommendation 16

That the Department of Education and the Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science consider drawing up a formal memorandum of understanding in relation to child protection oversight and that the Department of Education discuss with the Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science their plans for inspecting child protection arrangements in further education colleges so that this may be included in the memorandum.

Recommendation 17

The Department and relevant partners to assess the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children as they return to full time education and to consider child protection and safeguarding

actions/contingencies/emergency plans that could be put in place to help schools deal with the impact of any future crisis on keeping children safe.

Introduction

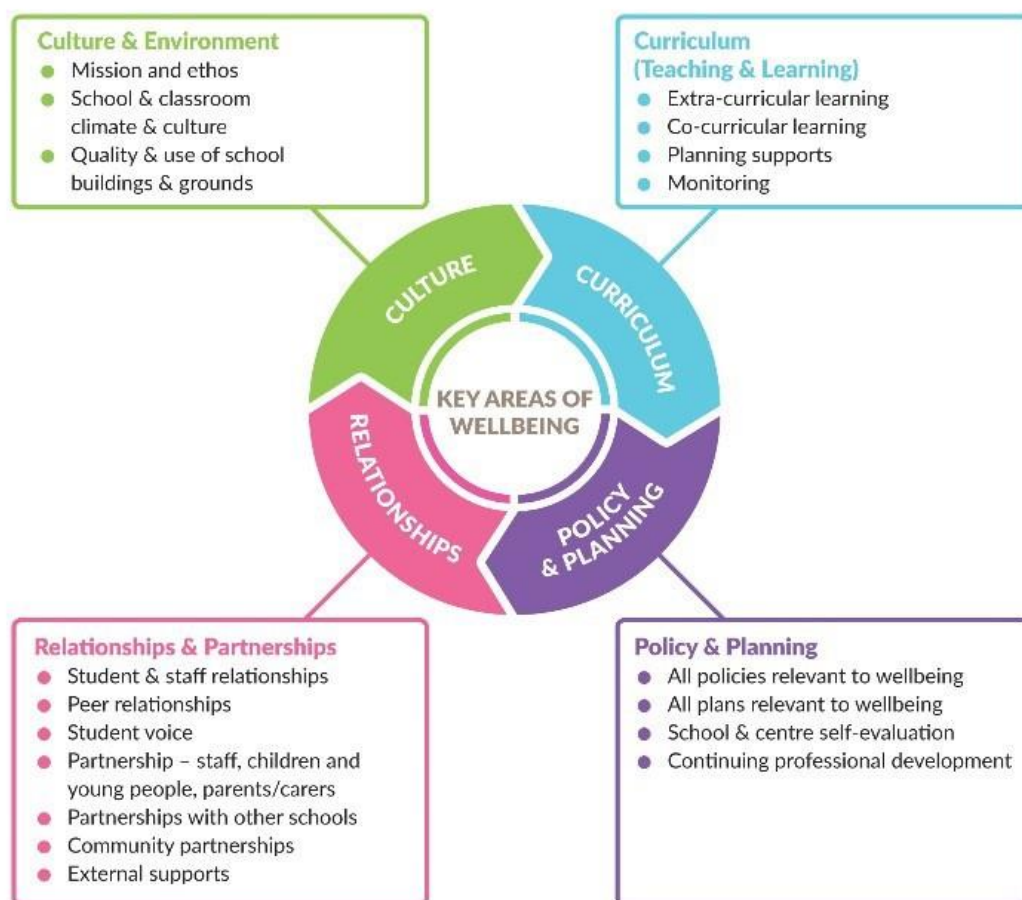
Child protection and safeguarding

Child protection and safeguarding policies and procedures are integral to keeping children safe and are intertwined. Tusla defines 'Child Safeguarding' as ensuring safe practice and appropriate responses by workers and volunteers to concerns about the safety or welfare of children, including online concerns, should these arise. Child safeguarding is about protecting the child from harm, promoting their welfare and in doing so creating an environment which enables children and young people to grow, develop and achieve their full potential. Safeguarding covers everything that is done to keep children safe, protecting their health, safety, welfare, well-being and entitlements related to child protection.

Child protection is part of safeguarding practice and relates to a suite of policies and procedures to prevent and/or respond to abuse, neglect, exploitation or violence affecting children. It is everyone's responsibility to protect children and young people and to keep them safe.

The Department of Education's Wellbeing Policy Framework and Statement of Practice 2019 conceptualises Wellbeing as an 'umbrella term' that encompasses multiple components (set out in Figure 1) that includes but is not limited to policy and planning relating to promoting welfare and protecting from harm. The Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum, Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) and policy and practice relating to anti-bullying are also conceptualised as dimensions of the Wellbeing Framework.

Figure 1: Four Key Areas of Wellbeing Promotion



The Legal Framework and Statutory Obligations

Child welfare and child protection policy is based on a legal framework provided primarily by the Child Care Act 1991² and the Children First Act 2015³. Under the Child Care Act 1991 Tusla (set up as a single body in 2014) has a statutory responsibility to promote the welfare of children who are not receiving adequate care and protection and a duty to take appropriate action to promote the welfare of a child.

Where a child is at immediate risk of harm, Tusla and An Garda Síochána will work together to ensure the safety of the child. If a member of the Gardaí has reasonable grounds for

² <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1991/act/17/enacted/en/html>

³ <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2015/act/36/enacted/en/pdf>

believing that there is an immediate and serious risk to a child, they remove the child from danger and bring them to a place of safety.

The Children First Act 2015 places certain statutory obligations on all schools and on all teachers, who are mandated persons in the Act. Mandated persons are required to report concerns of child abuse directly to Tusla. A full list of mandated persons is outlined in the Children First Act 2015⁴ Schedule 2, Section 2.

The policy and practice that supports the Children First Act 2015 is outlined in the Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2017⁵. This outlines the statutory obligations that apply to mandated persons and to organisations such as schools. It also outlines the best practice, non-statutory obligations that are in place for all individuals including teachers and all sectors of society.

The National Vetting Bureau Acts 2012-2016⁶ places statutory obligations on school authorities to obtain a vetting disclosure from the Garda National Vetting Bureau (GNVB) prior to the employment, contract, permission or placement of a person to undertake relevant work or activities with children or vulnerable persons. It also covers statutory retrospective re-vetting of employees and volunteers. It is a criminal offence for a school authority not to comply with the statutory vetting obligations under the Act.

The Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017⁷ (hereafter referred as the ('2017 Procedures')) have been developed following extensive consultation with the education partners. Through the procedures, clear guidance is given to school authorities and personnel in relation to their statutory obligations under the Children First Act, 2015 and Children First National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2017.

Terms of Reference for the Review

The terms of reference state this review should:

- ✓ be a High Level Review of the Department of Education's current child protection policies and processes and report and advise on how they meet current best practice;
- ✓ have regard to the Report on the Audit of Child Protection in the Department;
- ✓ report on whether the policies and processes currently in place are considered robust enough, including in the current Covid-19 environment, to account for all child protection oversight obligations both in relation to the Department and bodies within the Department's remit;
- ✓ report on whether the policies and processes provide the appropriate level of assurances for the Department specifically in relation to:

⁴ <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2015/act/36/enacted/en/pdf>

⁵ https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Children_First_National_Guidance_2017.pdf

⁶ https://www.lawreform.ie/fileupload/RevisedActs/WithAnnotations/HTML/en_act_2012_0047.htm

⁷ https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Child-Protection/child_protection_guidelines.pdf

1. The Child Protection Procedures for Schools;
2. The Department's Internal Child Protection Procedures;
3. The Department's Sectoral Implementation Plan;
4. The Department's Child Safeguarding Statement.

The aim of the report is to identify any existing and/or potential gaps, risks or areas for improvement and make recommendations, as appropriate, for improvements both short and long term. The review was carried out in May-August 2021. During the course of the review the Department's documentation in relation to child protection was reviewed; training videos reviewed; meetings were held with staff in the Department of Education including the lead unit for child protection, the Child Protection and Parental Complaints Section within the Parents and Learners Unit (PLU) of the Department, the Inspectorate, National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS); the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) ; the Department of Further and Higher Education Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) in relation to aspects of child protection; representatives from the teaching unions and management bodies; non-commercial bodies under the aegis of the Department; Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST); National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NCCA); National Council for Special Education (NCSE); Tusla - Child and Family Agency, GNVB and the Ombudsman for Children.

The Department of Education's role in Relation to Child Protection

The DCEDIY has overall responsibility for developing the State's policy and legislative framework in relation to child welfare and protection. In all matters relating to child protection the Department of Education is required to operate under and in accordance with the national policy contained in the Children First Act 2015 and the Children First National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2017. The role of the Department is to provide child protection guidance and support to all recognised schools in implementing child protection policy. The Department must report any child protection concerns it receives directly to the appropriate authorities (Tusla/An Garda Síochána).

The Inspectorate is a division of the Department and monitors compliance with the 2017 Procedures in school inspections. Child protection checks in pre-school settings are carried out by Tusla. The Inspectorate conducts a programme of inspection in early learning and care settings which are funded by the DCEDIY. If, in the course of an inspection, an inspector becomes aware of a child protection concern, the inspectors follow the Procedures for Responding to Child Protection Concerns Which Come to the Attention of Staff Employed by the Department of Education and report these concerns to the Child Protection and Parental Complaints Section within PLU. The NEPS psychologists are the only mandated group, as outlined in Schedule 2 of the Children First Act, in the Department.

The Internal Audits of Child Protection

An internal audit of child protection took place between mid-October 2017 and mid-March 2018. It focused on the child protection process and procedures in the Department prior to 11 December 2017. The report was finalised in September 2019. It found weaknesses in the governance, risk management and control framework in place up to 11 December 2017 and resulted in a 'limited assurance' opinion.

Given child protection is a high-risk area, a further audit was carried out in March 2020. This compliance audit conducted a review of the status of the findings of the original audit. Many of the original 15 recommendations (30 sub-recommendations) had been implemented when this audit was finalised in August 2020 and published in September 2020. The audit acknowledged that some recommendations were not due to be implemented by this date and that good progress had been made even though some recommendations had been delayed by Covid-19. The internal audit noted that 15.5 out of 30 sub-recommendations had been implemented and 14.5 were in progress.

At the time of the High Level Review in May-August 2021 further progress has been made. A total of 26 sub-recommendations have been completed with four outstanding that can be addressed through recommendations 10, 11 (a) and (b) in this review. These relate to PLU's role in the oversight of child protection; assurances that child protection matters are being fully addressed in the wider education sector; and responsibility for obligations arising from the sectoral implementation plans which also contains two sub recommendations. While the audit recommendations in 3.14 in relation to guidance and oversight in the further education sector and 3.15 in relation to oversight of the higher education sector have been implemented, there is an additional action outlined for consideration in this report in recommendation 16.

Developments in Child Protection since 2017

In the period prior to the audit taking place and while the audit was underway, the Department had been undertaking an extensive review of its Child Protection Procedures for Schools and the associated arrangements for child protection within the Department. During 2016 and 2017, intensive work was undertaken to develop new and more rigorous procedures, in anticipation of the forthcoming Children First Act 2015 (enacted on 19th November 2015 and commenced in full on December 11th, 2017).

The work was undertaken in consultation with the education partners, Tusla, DCEDIY, and the Office of the Ombudsman for Children. The work led to the development of the 2017 Procedures. The 2017 Procedures and the more rigorous oversight arrangements, came into force in December 2017, just after the commencement of the audit (which focussed exclusively on the redundant older procedures.)

The 2017 procedures are comprehensive and provide clarity on the role of the board of management and the principal and teachers in implementing the procedures. The procedures cover the legal framework; the types of abuse children may be subjected to (neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse) as well as bullying; the responsibilities of school

personnel; the statutory obligations of teachers as mandated persons; the reporting of concerns; the role of Tusla and An Garda Síochána; guidance to schools on dealing with an allegation of abuse against an employee; the statutory obligations of a board of management in relation to child protection and safeguarding; and oversight arrangements.

The Inspectorate developed new inspection arrangements for child protection in all schools in early 2017. This was followed by the introduction of specialised Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspections (CPSI) in February 2019, developed through a collaborative approach.

Progress was made towards developing more rigorous oversight within the Department. In January 2021 the Procedures for Responding to Child Protection Concerns Which Come to the Attention of Staff Employed by the Department of Education were updated and a training plan implemented to ensure that child protection concerns are reported speedily, efficiently and accurately to the relevant authorities. The updated procedures for staff provide greater clarity on reporting obligations, including the statutory obligations on NEPS psychologists as mandated persons. The updated procedures for staff also provide a step-by-step guide to dealing with concerns, outline the roles and responsibilities of staff, and provide detailed information on oversight measures across the Department of Education.

The PLU report to the Department's Child Protection Oversight Group (CPOG) regarding the child protection concerns received by staff in the Department. This includes the following information: the number and nature of child protection concerns, area of the Department where the concern was first raised, and the timeframe from which the concern was received in the Department to the concern being referred to the appropriate authorities.

The Inspectorate also report to CPOG, providing a quarterly report on schools' compliance with the 2017 Procedures, and follow up with the PLU on matters of non-compliance. Data is also exchanged to assist the planning of child protection checks on inspection and CPSI inspections.

The Department's CPOG, as well as representatives from the PLU and the Inspectorate, includes representatives from the Terms and Conditions Section, School Governance Section and NEPS. It meets quarterly and reports to the Minister and to the Management Board of the Department on the implementation of the 2017 Procedures, and on the implementation of the Department's Procedures for Responding to Child Protection Concerns Which Come to the Attention of Staff Employed by the Department of Education.

The Department is also a member of the Children First Interdepartmental Implementation Group which includes all government departments, Tusla, the Health Service Executive and An Garda Síochána. It reports to the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and provides a forum at which child safeguarding issues with a cross-departmental focus can be raised.

The Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools 2017

While the 2017 procedures are comprehensive, there are a number of areas that should be reconsidered, broadened or updated.

A Designated Member of the Board of Management for Child Protection and Safeguarding

It is the responsibility of the board of management to satisfy itself that the school has robust procedures in place to enable it to deal fully and properly with all child protection matters in accordance with The Children First Act 2015, the Children First National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2017 and the 2017 Procedures.

The 2017 Procedures contain certain oversight requirements that the board of management must comply with in this regard. While the school principal and the chair will be the main sources of information, they need to have substantial understanding of child protection arrangements and compliance.

A number of jurisdictions appoint a designated board of management member to take the lead in child protection and safeguarding matters to support the full board of management and the Designated Liaison Person (DLP). If the DLP is the principal he/she will be on the board of management but the designated board of management member's role is intended to be strategic, not the operational day to day work in relation to child protection. This role could include being up to date and well informed about child protection legislation and procedures and using this well-informed basis to provide advice to the board of management on its role in reviewing the Child Safeguarding Statement, reviewing the Principal's Child Protection Oversight Report (CPOR) and in implementing the requirements of Chapter 7 of the procedures in relation to allegations or suspicions of child abuse regarding school employees. The designated board of management member could meet regularly with the DLP to provide support and challenge and provide advice to the board of management on recruitment, selection and vetting procedures.

It is important to note that it is not envisaged that this role in any way diminishes the board of management's or the DLP's overall responsibilities for child protection but helps to support the DLP and board of management in carrying out their responsibilities.

Recommendation 1

The Department should consult with management bodies, teaching unions and other relevant partners on the merits of implementing the role of a designated member of the board of management for child protection and safeguarding in larger schools. This is not intended to diminish the full board of management's responsibilities or those of the Designated Liaison Person.

The Work of the Designated and Deputy Liaison Person

The role of the DLP in most schools, where it is a principal, is a fairly solitary one. The DLP is normally the principal and while there is scope for this to be another senior member of staff, this happens less regularly. In a larger school extending this role to another senior member of staff may reduce some of the burden of the principal's work, enable the principal to act in a more advisory capacity in support of the staff member who is the DLP and provide a development opportunity for the member of staff. The 2017 procedures rightly state that in these circumstances (3.5.2), where the board of management appoints a DLP who is not the principal, the school authority should put in place arrangements to ensure that the DLP will keep the principal appropriately informed of child protection matters.

In a school of any size, except a one teacher school where there is no requirement to appoint a Deputy Designated Liaison Person (DDL), greater support could be provided to the DLP if the DDL role was extended to be a supporting deputy role. In the 2017 Procedures a DDL must be appointed but their role is purely to deputise for the DLP in their absence. In an extended role the DDL would work alongside the DLP as well as deputise in their absence.

This serves a dual role of supporting the DLP but also means that decisions regarding reporting to Tusla can be discussed rather than being an individual's decision alone. It also allows for succession planning. At all times the DLP would be the lead child protection officer in the school.

Recommendation 2 (a) and (b)

- (a) That the Department encourages larger schools to widen the role of the Designated Liaison Person to a member of the senior leadership team, rather than the principal.**
- (b) That for all schools (except the smallest one teacher schools) the Department gives consideration to widening the role of the Deputy Designated Liaison Person to supporting the Designated Liaison Person's work, including sharing information and data, as well as deputising in their absence.**

A Student Safeguarding Support Team

At post-primary level, schools are encouraged to set up Student Support Teams and the Department has recently published revised Student Support Team Guidelines. The Student Support Team is the overarching team concerned with progressing actions for the welfare and wellbeing of all students. It is a mechanism through which many of the existing student supports are co-ordinated and planned.

A Student Support Team acts as a school hub, bringing coherence to the support system by co-ordinating the valuable work of departments, teams and/or groups such as the Junior Cycle Wellbeing Curricular Planning team, the Special Education Needs (SEN) department, the

Critical Incident Management Team (CIMT) along with guidance and pastoral staff. School Leadership also has a significant role guiding and supporting the Student Support Team.

As soon as possible, but no later than at the next review of the Student Support Team Guidelines, consideration should be given to renaming the Student Support Team the Student Safeguarding Support Team to make it clear that it incorporates those with responsibility for child protection and safeguarding and that the team has responsibility for highlighting the importance of child protection and safeguarding in the school and ensuring greater co-operation and co-ordination across a range of roles and areas of the school which relate to wellbeing. This in no way diminishes the responsibilities of the DLP and board of management in relation to child protection. Should the school have a designated member of the board of management for child protection and safeguarding, it is important that they have close links with the team on matters of children protection and safeguarding.

Recommendation 3

That the Department considers the wider concept of safeguarding within which child protection sits and encourages larger primary and post primary schools to set up a Student Safeguarding Support Team to promote the wellbeing, safety and protection of children in the school.

Naming School Employees in Reports to the Full Board of Management Where There is an Allegation of Abuse Against the Employee

The 2017 Procedures at 9.3.1, states that under the Education Act, 1998, the board of management is the body charged with the direct governance of a school. Accordingly, it is the responsibility of the board of management to ensure that the 2017 procedures are implemented in full and to quality assure their effectiveness on a regular basis. The board of management is the employer of school personnel, except in schools that operate under the Education and Training Board (ETB).

The board of management is informed through the principal's CPOR of the number of cases and reports in respect of an allegation of abuse against a member of school personnel, as outlined under 9.5.1 of the 2017 procedures (including ETB schools). Section 9.5.2 of the 2017 procedures outlines the relevant documentation that the board of management is provided with. This documentation names the school employee where there is an allegation of abuse against the employee.

The rationale for this, as outlined in 9.5.4 of the 2017 procedures, is solely to review whether, based on the information available to the DLP and any Tusla advice available, the relevant reporting requirements were followed. This enables the BoM to carry out their role in relation to oversight of the reporting requirements set out in these procedures. Section 9.5.4 of the 2017 procedures clarifies that any discussion, investigation or decisions in respect of any

further actions to be taken in respect of the employee against whom the allegation has been made, must be undertaken separately.

The board of management must return any documentation on this matter that they receive as part of reviewing the cases and the reports to the DLP and maintain confidentiality. The minutes of the board of management meeting shall not name the employee, or any children referred to in the documentation but shall record the matter by reference to the unique code or serial number assigned to the case/parties concerned.

This process does raise the question as to the appropriateness of the requirement that where an allegation of abuse is made against a school employee, that the employee must be named in the CPOR, particularly when the allegation was not reported based on the advice of Tusla. If an allegation of abuse is made against a person who is not a school employee, their name is not shared with the board of management.

Recommendation 4

The Department should, subject to legal advice, and in consultation with the teaching unions and the school management bodies, review the process at 9.5 of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017, to consider a form of reporting to the board of management that enables the board of management to undertake their oversight arrangements while not disclosing the identity of the school employee against which there is a child abuse allegation, to the whole board.

The Child Safeguarding Statement

Section 11 of the Children First Act, 2015 places a statutory obligation on providers of a relevant service to prepare a Child Safeguarding Statement. Schedule 1 of the Act provides that a relevant service includes any work or activity which is carried out by a person, a necessary and regular part of which consists mainly of the person having access to, or contact with, children in a school or centre for education. The 2017 procedures require that the Child Safeguarding Statement is reviewed annually. An annual review is good practice and meets the statutory obligations of the Children First Act 2015 which states it should be reviewed every two years. The requirements of the annual review are set out section 8.13 of the 2017 procedures.

The Department provides a number of templates to assist the board of management in preparing and communicating their school's Child Safeguarding Statement. Mandatory Template 1 is the Child Safeguarding Statement and risk assessment template, published by the Department which must be used by the board of management. It is important that the board of management carry out a risk assessment that is specific to their school's context and how children might be at risk in their particular school. It should not be generic or solely focus on health and safety matters.

Mandatory Template 2 is a checklist for the annual review the Child Safeguarding Statement. While it is good practice to provide assistance to the board of management with the annual review, the template needs to be more qualitative and self-evaluative. While it does encourage board of management to look more widely, it is mainly a 'yes/no' checklist.

Mandatory Template 3 is for use by the board of management for notifying the patron, school personnel and the Parent's Association that the review has taken place and publishing on the school website that the review has taken place.

While most schools do publish their Child Safeguarding Statement and a communication that the annual review has taken place, on their website, not all do. Checks with compliance are made on all school inspections and where a school is not compliant with the 2017 procedures with regard to the Child Safeguarding Statement, this is followed up rigorously by the Inspectorate. Tusla holds a register of non-compliance, detailing any providers of relevant services that fail to provide a copy of the Child Safeguarding Statement to them when requested to do so. There is a question however about how the Department assures itself that **all** schools are following the Child Safeguarding Statement requirements, outside those that are part of a Tusla request or inspection in a particular year.

Schools must display their Child Safeguarding Statement in a prominent position near the main entrance and the name of the DLP must be prominently displayed next to the statement. This is checked on all school inspections. While it is not a legal requirement, there needs to be a child friendly and accessible version of the statement so that children know what to do or who to speak to if they have a concern. It needs to be understandable to children of all ages and stages in the school. Checks on the accessibility of the statement to children in the school should be a feature of inspections going forward.

It is unclear the extent to which a board of management seeks parents' feedback in relation to the school's compliance with the child safeguarding requirements of the 2017 procedures or the extent to which the pupil's voice in relation to child safeguarding arrangements is sought, as part of the annual review process. Section 8.13.4 of the 2017 procedures provides that, as part of its annual review of the Child Safeguarding Statement, the BoM must seek feedback from parents in relation to the school's compliance with the child safeguarding requirements of these procedures. In seeking the pupils' voice, this should be done in a manner appropriate to the age and maturity of the children concerned. The enactment of the Student and Parent Charter Bill is likely to assist in this area but in the meantime, it is important that the Department reminds schools of the importance of the involvement of parents and pupils in the review of the Child Safeguarding Statement.

Recommendation 5 (a), (b), (c), (d)

- (a) That the Department reviews Mandatory Template 2 used for the annual review of the Child Safeguarding Statement to make it more evaluative and qualitative.**

- (b) That the Department reminds schools of the importance of seeking parents' and pupils' feedback in relation to the school's compliance with the child safeguarding requirements of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools 2017 as part of its annual review of the Child Safeguarding Statement.**
- (c) The Department encourages all schools to provide parents with a copy of the Child Safeguarding Statement (not just when requested) and reminds schools of the importance of publishing their Child Safeguarding Statement on their website.**
- (d) That all school inspections check the accessibility of the Child Safeguarding Statement to the ages and stages of children in the school. The language should be simple and straight forward and it should be clear who a child should go to if they have a concern.**

Training in Child Protection and Safeguarding

In the 2017 procedures 8.7.1 it states that 'It is imperative that board of management ensure that all school personnel and board of management members have the necessary familiarity with these procedures to enable them to fulfil their responsibilities therein' and 'where appropriate ensuring that available training is undertaken'. The Child Safeguarding Statement template only requires confirmation that in relation to instruction and training in child protection, the school; '*Encourages* staff to avail of relevant training' and '*Encourages* Board of Management members to avail of relevant training'.

In other jurisdictions it is more emphatic e.g. board of management must/should ensure safeguarding and child protection training is given to all staff and board members including regular refresher training. When the 2017 Procedures were implemented, there was a strong focus on training and a significant number of teachers and BoM members undertook the training. The focus was on familiarity with the 2017 procedures. Tusla provides an e-learning module, An Introduction to Children First, and while this is a useful as an introduction it needs to be followed up with more targeted training for school staff.

The PDST provides training for DLPs and DDLPs normally in the form of a one-day seminar at education centres, when conditions allow. It is expected that the DLP and DDLP cascades this training back to teachers in their school. Due to Covid-19 this training has moved online and includes a short update for all school staff on child protection.

The training provided by PDST focuses mainly on the 2017 procedures and while this was necessary to raise awareness of the 2017 procedures (and continues to be so), the training should move to being more dynamic and informative about the wider aspects of child protection and safeguarding. As well as the 2017 procedures, the training, with input from NEPS and relevant experts, should focus on the following (and not restricted to): trauma informed practice; features of abuse (which require constant updating); advice and guidance

on online safety; how to be an effective first responder when a child comes forward with a concern; features of peer-on-peer abuse with regular updating; bullying incidents and how they may become a child protection issue; the use of scenarios and case studies and interviews with experts. The training should also include an update on any new legislation such as The Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020, commenced in February 2021, which extends the previously limited child protection legislation and the proposed Online Safety and Media Regulation (OSMR) Bill. Webinars for schools in relation to the promotion of wellbeing are currently being developed by NEPS and the first of these: The Stress Factor is a webinar that focuses on trauma-informed practice for all teachers.

When training was face to face for DLPs and DDLPs (pre-Covid-19), PDST were able to capture the numbers attending but this has not been possible with the move to online as the number of views is not an indicator of full engagement with the training, also the number of teachers availing of the cascaded training is unknown. A system should be developed to confirm that staff have undertaken the appropriate training and also to ensure that refresher training takes place at the appropriate time. There is no requirement for refresher training at present, but best practice suggests this should be undertaken every two years. There continues to be, rightly, a focus on all new staff completing child protection training at induction.

School management bodies provide child protection training for board of management members. For example, the Catholic Primary Schools Management Association provide three webinars for board of management members covering the statutory requirements in relation to child protection, reporting child protection concerns and, the Child Safeguarding Statement. The same points in relation to the need for more dynamic and informative training, beyond the 2017 procedures, apply to training for board of management members.

Recommendation 6 (a), (b) and (c)

- (a) The Department should consider strengthening the requirement for training in child protection and safeguarding for all school personnel (both teaching and non-teaching staff). The Department should also consider a requirement for refresher training for all school personnel.**
- (b) While compliance with the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools 2017 is important, the training (which can be online) should focus on covering both child protection and safeguarding to give a well-rounded view on keeping children safe and be dynamic and informative.**
- (c) The Department should consider requiring schools to retain a record of all child protection and safeguarding training accessed by its staff. This record could then be made available to the Department on request.**

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE)

One of the four key areas of the Department's Wellbeing Policy Framework and Statement of Practice 2019, being rolled out to all schools from 2021 to 2025 (Figure 1), is Curriculum, (Teaching and Learning). The key indicators of success for this element of Wellbeing Promotion are that:

- ✓ Children and young people experience positive, high-quality teaching, learning and assessment, which provides opportunities for success for all.
- ✓ Children and young people access curricular activities to promote their physical, social and emotional competence to enhance their overall wellbeing.

SPHE is a mandatory part of the curriculum at primary and at post-primary level until the end of the Junior Cycle. RSE is taught through the SPHE curriculum and is mandatory all the way through post-primary. The Stay Safe programme is a mandatory personal safety skills programme for primary schools. The aim of the programme is to reduce vulnerability to child abuse and bullying through the provision of personal safety education for children. It is developmentally structured to enable primary school teachers to deliver an abuse prevention education that addresses personal safety issues such as physical, emotional and sexual abuse as well as bullying and stranger danger.

A report on RSE was published in 2019 which included extensive consultation with the sector. This information is being used as part of the review of the SPHE/RSE curriculum that is taking place in the Junior Cycle in the first instance for implementation in 2023. It is likely to include new topics such as consent, healthy and positive sexual relations, effects of social media, self-esteem, pornography, sexual discrimination, sexual violence, cultural norms around sexuality and will be more inclusive, integrating diverse gender identities further into the programme. The outcomes currently are very broad with the result that all aspects that matter to young people may not be covered. This updating of the RSE curriculum and specificity is welcome and reflects the matters that are important to and identified by young people during the consultation.

There is a need for greater emphasis on training to deliver the SPHE/RSE curriculum. There are large numbers and a high turnover of teachers delivering the subject. Most teachers will only undertake the two-day introduction course and so do not have a chance to develop an in depth knowledge of the subject matter. The continuous professional development in this area should focus not only on the knowledge and content of the subject but on the skills required to deliver SPHE/RSE effectively. A good SPHE/RSE curriculum is important to provide children with a safe space to discuss sensitive matters and to acquire the knowledge, experience and confidence should they need to raise issues and concerns at any time because they do not feel safe. From September 2022, schools will provide a 400-hour Junior Cycle Wellbeing programme comprising of learning experiences that will enhance the physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing of students. This extra focus is welcome.

Recommendation 7

With the roll-out of the Department's Wellbeing Policy Framework and Statement of Practice to all schools from 2021 to 2025, together with the welcome focus on Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) in the Junior Cycle and an intention to move this to all levels, it is important that teachers have sufficient training and support to feel confident to deliver a sensitive curriculum. There should be a strong representation of the student voice in the content and review of the lessons delivered to ensure that they are meeting their needs.

Inspection

Since 2017 considerable improvements have been made to the inspection of child protection arrangements in schools. The 2017 Procedures provided clarity to schools and in particular to board of management and principals in relation to their roles and emphasised for the first time, teachers' roles as mandated persons.

There are three levels of inspection: level 1 monitoring on short models of school inspection which reports on schools' compliance with three key aspects of child protection; level 2 monitoring on longer inspections where inspectors check eight key aspects of child protection and the level 3 stand-alone CPSI introduced in February 2019 following extensive consultation. The CPSI inspection is an in depth look at ten key aspects of child protection consisting of two inspections carried out in a short timeframe of typically four to six weeks.

The Inspectorate monitors and reports on the implementation of the 2017 Procedures at school level in its inspection reports and representatives from the Inspectorate sit on the Department's CPOG. At CPOG meetings inspectors report on the compliance/non-compliance of schools inspected and report on follow-up activities. Information is shared regarding schools at risk and the action to be taken. The CPOG also monitors the volume and nature of child protection concerns received by the Department.

While accepting that there is a lot to fit into the time allocated for the inspection, consideration should be given as to whether it is sufficient for inspectors to rely on self-reported assurances from schools that all staff have been vetted.

The inspection of child protection at level 1 and level 2 is mainly compliance based and it is accepted that while schools were becoming familiar with the new procedures, this was appropriate. Consideration should now be given to moving to look at more of the schools' culture and ethos in relation to child protection and wider safeguarding.

For example (and not restricted to), inspections should check the following: if the information contained in the Child Safeguarding Statement is available to children in an age and stage appropriate manner; how effective and rigorous is the board of management's annual review of the Child Safeguarding Statement and does it include the parental and children's voice; when did staff and the board of management undertake child protection training and have they undertaken refresher training: have pupils, particularly at post-primary level had input into the

content of SPHE/RSE to ensure that it matches their needs; are schools creating a culture of respect and a school ethos where sexual harassment and sexual abuse, including online are not tolerated and are schools knowledgeable and responding to new and emerging threats in relation to child protection.

It is noted that annual inspections are carried out at schools attached to Special Care Units (SCUs). Following a review of child protection compliance levels in schools attached to SCUs, the Inspectorate plans to implement a programme of subject inspections in SPHE in all of these schools.

Recommendation 8 (a) and (b)

- (a) To further enhance the inspection of child protection and safeguarding, the Inspectorate should consider a stronger focus on the culture and climate of schools in relation to child protection and safeguarding, following what has been a necessary focus on the implementation of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017 as they were embedding.**
- (b) Parents and Learners Unit and the Inspectorate, with the relevant partners, should consider if it is sufficient to receive self-reported assurance from schools that all staff have been vetted.**

Anti-bullying

In accordance with the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 all schools are required to have an anti-bullying policy within the framework of their overall code of behaviour. This should be published on the school website and provided to the Parents Association and the Department/patron, if requested. The Action Plan on Bullying and the Anti-bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools date back to 2013. The Department recognises the need to update the Action plan on Bullying and the Anti-bullying Procedures. This work should include consideration of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

There is a need to give anti-bullying the same priority as child protection and safeguarding in schools, particularly given that a bullying incident may turn into a child protection matter. As this is not always recognised, such incidents may not be dealt with in an appropriate manner.

The Education (Student and Parent Charter Bill) 2019, stipulates the need for a school to consult with students and their parents on individual school plans, policies and activities. This approach will help ensure that the various views of students and parents will be heard and responded to by schools on issues/policies including anti-bullying procedures.

On school inspections there should be a greater focus on anti-bullying which is currently not a significant enough feature of level 1 and level 2 monitoring inspections. Plans are in place to include anti-bullying checks in all inspections and to undertake a thematic review of anti-bullying arrangements across a range of schools.

At the time of this High Level Review, the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science was carrying out a review of school bullying and the impact on mental health. The report's findings will be important to the Department and other partners in the review of the Action Plan on Bullying and the Anti-bullying Procedures.

Recommendation 9 (a), (b), (c)

- (a) The Department has recognised the need to update the action plan and the anti-bullying procedures for primary and post-primary schools. There is a need for these to be updated as soon as possible, in consultation with education partners, children and parents.**
- (b) To complement the updating of the anti-bullying procedures the Department, in consultation with education partners, needs to provide greater clarity and guidance in relation to when a bullying incident should be dealt with as a child protection concern.**
- (c) Going forward the Inspectorate should maintain a strong focus on anti-bullying matters in all its inspections.**

Departmental internal procedures for child protection

A positive step in the Department's handling of child protection matters was the setting up of the Child Protection and Parental Complaints Section within Parent and Learners Unit in 2018. This section has responsibility for developing policy guidance in relation to child protection for schools and for recording and forwarding to Tusla child protection concerns which come to the attention of staff employed by the Department. The Department issued the 2017 procedures in December 2017 following the commencement of the Children First Act 2015 by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. The Procedures for Responding to Child Protection Concerns Which Come to the Attention of Staff Employed by the Department of Education were updated in January 2021, accompanied by familiarisation training.

The PLU also has responsibility for other aspects of child protection. This includes providing administrative support to and being a member of the Department's CPOG. The CPOG coordinates the Department's actions in cases where there are serious concerns about a school's compliance with the child protection procedures and monitors implementation of the child protection procedures by schools as well as the implementation of the Department's Procedures for Responding to Child Protection Concerns Which Come to the Attention of Staff Employed by the Department of Education. This group reports quarterly to the Management Board of the Department and to the Minister. It is noted that the PLU has a good working relationship and effective sharing of information with the Inspectorate through the CPOG. The PLU also have responsibility for providing guidance and information to schools on their vetting obligations, for review and implementation of the Department's Children First Sectoral

Implementation Plan and represent the Department at the Children First Inter-Departmental Implementation Group.

However, certain aspects of child protection reside in other units in the Department: such as training for DLPs/DDLPS and school staff in child protection which is the responsibility of Teacher Education (ITE and Professional Development) Section as they have responsibility for the Teacher Education Support Services, including PDST who deliver the child protection training; responsibility for the SPHE/RSE curriculum sits with the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit and is developed by the NCCA; management of administrative leave is the responsibility of Teacher/Special Needs Assistants Terms and Conditions Section; School Governance looks after boards of management and the governance of schools which includes the anti-bullying procedures for primary and post-primary schools (responsibility for anti-bullying is due to transition to PLU shortly) and, responsibility for receiving assurances in relation to the non-commercial bodies under the aegis of the Department adherence to child protection requirements sits with the Sectoral Governance Section within Corporate Services. While each section is aware of and takes its responsibility for child protection seriously there is a need for greater coherence in the Department regarding child safeguarding and protection matters.

Recommendation 10

That the Department considers how the Parents and Learners Unit can have greater oversight of all aspects of child protection and safeguarding including those aspects that sit within separate sections of the Department and, that the Parents and Learners Unit has the authority to support the implementation of actions in relation to child protection and safeguarding by these other sections, if required.

Non-commercial bodies under the aegis of the Department

The Children First Act 2015 places an obligation on each government minister to ensure that their department prepares a Sectoral Implementation Plan. Sectoral Implementation Plans outline the programme of measures taken, or proposed to be taken, to ensure compliance with the Children First Act 2015 and with the Children First National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2017 by the Department itself and any body that provides a relevant service and receives funding from the Department in that regard.

The Department's Sectoral Implementation Plan states that agencies/bodies under the aegis of the Department who fall within the definition of a provider of a 'relevant service' under the legislation, have been notified of the statutory obligation to produce their own Child Safeguarding Statements. They have also been notified of the need to ensure that appropriate reporting procedures are in place to reflect the Act's reporting requirements in respect of any mandated persons working in those organisations and also to ensure best practice reporting obligations for all persons set out under the updated Children First National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2017.

While not a requirement of the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies (2016), the Department also from 2019 onwards, requires relevant agencies/bodies operating under its aegis (and the aegis of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science) to provide appropriate assurances regarding their compliance with the Children First Act 2015 and the Children First National Guidelines.

Based on returns made to the Department's Sectoral Governance Unit via the 2020 Compliance Assurance Return process, the Department of Education understands that some Aegis bodies do not produce a Child Safeguarding Statement as they maintain they are not a provider of a 'relevant service' and have no direct involvement with children. The aegis bodies currently under the remit of the Department of Education are as follows: Educational Research Centre, An Chomhairle um Oideachais Gaeltachta and Gaelscolaíochta, National Council for Guidance in Education, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, State Examinations Commission, The Teaching Council, National Council for Special Education, Caranua (the Residential Institutions Statutory Fund), The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, Residential Institutions Redress Board and the Residential Institutions Review Committee. The aegis bodies currently under the remit of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science are as follows: Irish Research Council, Higher Education Authority, Quality and Qualifications Ireland, Léargas – The Exchange Bureau, Grangegorman Development Agency, SOLAS – (An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna), Skillnet Ireland and Science Foundation Ireland. Clarification should be sought as to whether these aegis bodies are considered providers of a 'relevant service' and if so, the Departments should seek assurances that a child safeguarding statement is in place.

For those non-commercial bodies under the aegis of the Department that do produce a Child Safeguarding Statement, the assurance that a statement is in place is managed by the unit within the Department to which they are attached. The relevant unit then sends the assurance to the Sectoral Governance team who maintain the records of compliance. There is however too much reliance on an assurance statement without sufficient checks and balances regarding the quality of the statement.

Recommendation 11 (a) and (b)

- (a) The Department should review its Sectoral Implementation Plan and revisit the list of institutions under its remit to ascertain if all are providing a 'relevant service' within the meaning of Schedule 1 of the Act. If they are, they have a statutory duty to produce a Child Safeguarding Statement which should be complied with.**
- (b) For those non-commercial bodies under the aegis of the Department that do provide an assurance statement in relation to child protection, it is important that the host unit in the Department has sufficient checks and balances in place to monitor the quality of the statement and processes provided in the assurance.**

Administrative Leave

The BoM as the employer, (except in ETB schools where it is the CEO of the ETB), may take the decision to place a member of school personnel against whom there is an allegation of child abuse, on administrative leave (2017 procedures 7.4.5). In so doing formal approval will be sought from the Department for continuation of pay for the relevant period and the employment of a substitute teacher where necessary (2017 procedures 7.4.7).

The employer has the right to conduct its own disciplinary investigation in accordance with the relevant employee disciplinary procedures independent of any Tusla assessment/An Garda Síochána investigation. The employer should always take legal advice as to whether disciplinary proceedings should proceed or be stayed pending the conclusion of the Tusla assessment/An Garda Síochána investigation and make a decision on whether or not to proceed with disciplinary proceedings in light of that advice (2017 procedures 7.5).

The Department checks at two intervals with the board of management on the progress of the case being investigated by Tusla/An Garda Síochána. When the case/disciplinary process is concluded the board of management contacts the Department with the outcome which may be that the member of staff is returning to the school, is dismissed, resigning or retiring. The investigation by Tusla/ An Garda Síochána and a disciplinary process where invoked, can take a considerable amount of time, sometimes going into two or three years for the more complex cases.

When a substitute teacher or special needs assistant is on administrative leave until their contract in that school ends, it is unclear if they may be reemployed in another school when this administrative leave ends, but the investigation is still ongoing. Clarification is also required in relation to whether it is possible to reemploy, full or part-time, a teacher, principal or special needs assistant who resigns or retires when an investigation is still ongoing or whether it is possible that a principal, teacher or special needs assistant could be redeployed while subject to a child abuse allegation investigation.

Recommendation 12 (longer term) and (b)

- (a) That the Department of Education at a senior level, along with senior representatives from Tusla, An Garda Síochána and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth consider reviewing the child abuse investigation process in relation to school personnel to ascertain if it can be carried out more expediently while still maintaining the safety of the child as paramount and, without diminishing the accuracy of the investigation or the individual's right to fair procedure.**
- (b) That the Department review the reemployment arrangements: for substitute teachers and Special Needs Assistants subject to a child abuse allegation when their contract and/or administrative leave ends in one school but the investigation by Tusla/An Garda Síochána is not concluded; for a teacher, principal or Special**

Needs Assistant who resigns or retires when an investigation is still ongoing; in relation to redeployment to ensure that no teacher, principal or Special Needs Assistant subject to a child abuse allegation investigation can be redeployed.

Vetting Arrangements for Teachers and Other School Personnel

Section 19 (1) of National Vetting Bureau Act (NVBA) 2012 (enacted 2016) states that a scheduled organisation is obliged to notify the GNVB if as the result of an investigation, inquiry or regulatory process they have a bona fide concern about the person who is the subject of the investigation, inquiry, or regulatory process in relation to child protection. In addition, Section 19 (2) of the NVBA, requires Tusla to notify the GNVB where, in the course of exercising its powers under the Child Care Act 1991, the agency has a bona fide concern that a person may pose a risk to children.

There may be circumstances where a bona fide concern has been raised by a scheduled organisation as listed under the NVBA, but currently re-vetting will only take place at the three year stage for teachers or if the teacher or member of staff moves school. Work is ongoing through an interdepartmental group to consider the NVBA and whether re-vetting should take place where a bona fide concern has been notified regardless of the three year time frame. This consideration should be welcomed as a further safeguard to children's welfare and protection.

The Teaching Council is the authorised body for administering vetting for teachers in Ireland and is required to assess the vetting disclosure for suitability for registration. The school is required to receive and assess the vetting disclosure for employment purposes. The relevant diocesan office or school management body acts as a conduit for schools for the purposes of Garda vetting of all persons other than teachers and in the case of ETB schools the relevant ETB is the relevant organisation for such purposes. The GNVB advise all organisations that it is good practice to conduct re-vetting on a policy basis every three years.

There is merit in the longer term for considering one organisation (similar to the Teaching Council) for vetting and holding the vetting details for non-teaching staff and for that to be digital. Currently, the vetting outcome belongs to the organisation that submits it, not the individual so that if a non-teaching member of staff works in more than one school or moves between schools they need to be vetted again. Individual ownership of the vetting disclosure and a central repository for non-teaching staff would ensure this does not happen.

Vetting is important and crucial to keeping children safe and no actions should diminish its importance but longer term consideration needs to be given as to how this process can be streamlined and made simpler especially for non-teaching staff.

Circular 0031/2016, The Commencement of Statutory Requirements for Garda Vetting⁸ states that thorough recruitment procedures are an essential element of child protection practice and

⁸ https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0031_2016.pdf

should include seeking and following up of references and ensuring that any unexplained gaps in employment records/curriculum vitae are satisfactorily accounted for. Vetting should not take the place of good recruitment procedures but must be used as part of those procedures. It is important that board of management and management bodies have in place relevant and up to date safer recruitment training and best practice suggests that this is refreshed every two to three years.

Recommendation 13 (a) and (b), (c longer term) and (d)

- (a) That the Department of Education together with the Department of Justice and other relevant partners take forward proposals for the re-vetting of a member of school staff where a bona fide concern has been reported to the Garda National Vetting Bureau.**
- (b) The Department with the agreement of the Department of Justice, the Garda National Vetting Bureau and other partners consider providing advice to schools that re-vetting of non-teaching staff takes place every three years. This will be a further positive move in keeping children safe.**
- (c) The Department with the Department of Justice, the Garda National Vetting Bureau and other partners consider how the vetting process can be streamlined and made more accessible without diminishing the importance of vetting and its crucial role in keeping children safe.**
- (d) That the Department reminds boards of management and management bodies of the importance of undertaking recent safer recruitment training and refreshing this at a suitable interval.**

School Transport

The Department has a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with Bus Éireann for school transport. The current SLA does not explicitly refer to child safeguarding but both the Department and Bus Éireann have made a commitment to do so when the SLA is next renewed. The current SLA does outline the roles and responsibilities of the bus company which includes Garda vetting of all drivers involved in school transport duties. In relation to child safeguarding, school bus service supervisors, school bus drivers and bus contractors and their nominated drivers are issued with a Code of Conduct and Child Safeguarding Policy Booklet and, child safeguarding training forms part of induction for new Bus Éireann drivers and service supervisors. Relevant staff and drivers in Bus Éireann are also required to submit a successfully completed 'Introduction to Children First E-Learning Programme' certificate (awarded online by Tusla) and arrangements are currently underway which will require contractors and their nominated drivers complete the same programme.

The Department is satisfied that Bus Éireann's Child Safeguarding Policy contains the key principles of child safeguarding, outlines their Policy Statement and Code of Conduct, details the steps to be taken should a child protection concern arise and is consistent with the principles set out in the Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2017. The company has three DLPs and the Child Safeguarding Statement and child safeguarding report form are available online and visible to parents and guardians. At the time of this review, the Bus Éireann Code of Conduct and Child Safeguarding Statement were being revised and arrangements were being made to update the Bus Éireann Child Safeguarding Policy Booklet. Once complete, the amended documents will be made available online.

When a child protection concern is raised, Bus Éireann informs the Department of Education when a pupil is removed from transport or is not travelling due to a child protection concern. The Department's School Transport section is informed, and they deal with any such reports under the Department's Procedures for Responding to Child Protection Concerns Which Come to the Attention of Staff Employed by the Department of Education. The bus company reports any child protection concerns to Tusla and/or An Garda Síochána as appropriate.

Recommendation 14

The Department and Bus Éireann are committed to incorporating a specific reference to child safeguarding responsibilities in the next review of the Service Level Agreement. It is important that the Department, in its oversight role, monitors this action and seeks assurances regarding the Child Safeguarding Statement.

Schools with Boarding Provision

The Department has identified a need for greater clarity in relation to oversight of provisions for safeguarding children in boarding schools. Based on the responsibilities of the Minister and recognised in the Education Act (1998), the 2017 procedures do not specify particular requirements in relation to boarding facilities. They simply advise that if a school provides any after school activity or service to its pupils such as boarding facilities, it should have appropriate safeguarding measures in place.

The Department does not inspect out-of-school activities or facilities such as boarding. The Inspectorate and PLU are currently seeking legal advice on whether there are specific actions that the Department should take to ensure adequate oversight of the implementation of child protection arrangements in boarding schools. It is important that this matter continues to be pursued as a matter of urgency.

Recommendation 15

In order to have clarity, the Department continues to seek legal advice on the responsibility for inspecting boarding provision from a child protection perspective and acts accordingly on that advice.

Further Education and Training and Higher Education

Currently as part of the transition arrangements to the new Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the Department of Education maintains a certain level of oversight of child protection arrangements for further and higher education. This relationship is managed through oversight of the non-commercial bodies under the aegis of the Department (Recommendation 11 (a) and (b)). Oversight arrangements were strengthened as a result of the implementation of the internal audit recommendations but there still is no formal memorandum of understanding in place between the two departments in relation to child protection.

While the Inspectorate carries out inspections of Youthreach that includes child protection, there is no inspection of child protection in further education even though there may be young people under the age of 18 years attending. While this is not directly an issue for the Department of Education, given its current oversight role, it is an area that should be discussed further with the Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

Recommendation 16

That the Department of Education and the Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science consider drawing up a formal memorandum of understanding in relation to child protection oversight and that the Department of Education discuss with the Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science their plans for inspecting child protection arrangements in further education colleges so that this may be included in the memorandum.

Covid-19 Pandemic

During the Covid-19 pandemic the Department put in place contingency measures to monitor child protection arrangements, supported by clear guidance. (The period of the pandemic covered in this Review is March 2020- June 2021).

Following the closure of schools in March 2020, the Department advised schools that the requirement in the 2017 Procedures for the principal (normally the DLP) to provide a CPOR would not apply to board meetings held remotely due to concerns about keeping the required documentation secure.

Each board of management was required to hold a face-to-face meeting at least once in every school term in order to receive the CPOR report covering each of the headings as set out in sections 9.5 to 9.7 of the 2017 Procedures, as part of its important oversight role for child protection. A board meeting for these purposes was considered essential work.

In this period, the Inspectorate carried out 74 CPSI's, a number of urgent follow-through inspections, Supporting the Safe Provision of Schooling visits (in the context of Covid-19) and a small number of other necessary inspections that provided opportunities to carry out Level 1 child protection checks.

While schools were operating remotely, the Inspectorate continued to monitor child protection measures through the development of the Evaluation of Remote Teaching and Learning (ERTAL) inspection model. During ERTAL inspections in 36 schools, modified level 1 child protection checks were carried out.

In cases where schools' adherence to the 2017 Procedures were deemed to be less than satisfactory on any of these inspections, inspectors continued to engage with the relevant schools until issues identified during the inspections were resolved.

It is reassuring that during the pandemic the Department has continued a focus on child protection. However, the pandemic and the associated lockdowns and school closures has brought additional and new pressures on children and families in relation to child protection and safeguarding. Children have been more isolated from friends and trusted adults from outside their home; long periods of social isolation and changed routines may have impacted on their mental and emotional health; long periods at home may expose some children to prolonged neglect and abuse; families may feel under stress due to the pressures of being isolated and/or financial concerns and may have had reduced access to the wider support services normally available.

The response to the impact of the pandemic on children will require a multi-agency approach. All Departments, including the Department of Education, and agencies responded quickly to an unprecedented set of circumstances. From the Department's perspective in relation to keeping children safe, it will be important to review the lessons learned, what went well, what could have been done differently and going forward to plan for the impact of any future crisis on child protection and safeguarding.

Recommendation 17

The Department and relevant partners to assess the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children as they return to full time education and to consider child protection and safeguarding actions/contingencies/emergency plans that could be put in place to help schools deal with the impact of any future crisis on keeping children safe.

Conclusion

The overall outcome of the High Level Review is that the Department of Education takes its responsibility for child protection and safeguarding extremely seriously. The 2017 procedures, the Procedures for Responding to Child Protection Concerns Which Come to the Attention of Staff Employed by the Department of Education, the changes to inspection including the

introduction of the CPSI inspection model in 2019, and the implementation of the recommendations of the internal audits have had a positive impact on arrangements for keeping children safe and on the seriousness with which child protection is taken across the Department, schools and other partners.

Up until now there has been a strong focus by the Department on process and procedures, and that was and is necessary to ensure compliance and understanding of roles and responsibilities. However, the time is now right for the Department to turn greater attention to practice and to take a more qualitative approach to child protection. This includes a focus on the wider safeguarding of children within which child protection sits and approaches that change the culture and climate within schools, not just determining if the school is compliant with the 2017 procedures. Child protection is everyone's responsibility and there is an opportunity to broaden the skills and knowledge of staff in schools through expanding the roles in relation to child protection without diminishing the responsibilities set out in the 2017 procedures.

There are many challenges to keeping children safe. Some of these challenges have been well known for a long period of time but the advances in communication technology are leading to new challenges that are constantly changing. This needs to be reflected in child protection and safeguarding training which should be responsive to new threats and risks to child safety. The challenges also need to be reflected in the SPHE/RSE curriculum that is actually delivered in schools and ensuring that teachers have the confidence, knowledge and skills to cover sensitive topics to the appropriate level needed by the students. The curriculum delivered should develop student's ability to recognise, resist and report risk situations or abusive encounters and to know their rights. As recognised by the Department, there needs to be a stronger focus on anti-bullying measures.

The Child Safeguarding Statement is important and necessary but there needs to be an emphasis on whether its principles are understood by all children and does its implementation have a meaningful impact on child protection and safeguarding in the school. The pupil and parent voice are important in developing any child protection and safeguarding arrangements. This will be even more at the forefront with the implementation of the Student and Parent Charter.

There is also a need to look more broadly at vetting arrangements for school staff, the oversight by the Department of the non-commercial bodies under its aegis (and on a shared governance basis of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science aegis bodies) and the coherence of oversight by the PLU of child protection across the other units in the Department. The Covid-19 pandemic led to unprecedented pressures on the management and implementation of child protection arrangements. It will be important that lessons are learned that can be used to plan for any other crisis.

In conclusion, the Department, schools and other partners work and commitment to keeping children safe is substantial. Commissioning this High Level Review has shown foresight and a willingness to improve child protection and safeguarding arrangements so that they can be

even better. Effective child protection and safeguarding arrangements depend on close working between departments, schools, health bodies, An Garda Síochána, Tusla and other partners. It is essential that all these partners and agencies continue to cooperate in safeguarding children.

The full list of participants is outlined below:

Albert Kelly	Executive Officer, Teacher/SNA Terms and Conditions, Department of Education
Anne Murray	Assistant Principal Officer, Central Policy Unit, Department of Education
Anne Piggott (ASTI)	President, Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland
Anne Tansey	Director, National Educational Psychological Service, Department of Education
Annette Dolan	Deputy General Secretary, Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI)
Annette Honan	Education Consultant, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)
Blaithín Dowling	Assistant Principal Officer, Sectoral Governance, Department of Education
Breda Redmond	Higher Executive Officer, Teacher/SNA Terms and Conditions, Department of Education
Brian Mac Giolla Phádraig	Assistant Chief Inspector, Department of Education
Ciara O'Donnell	National Director, Professional Development Service for Teachers
Conor Rowley	Assistant Secretary General, Child Policy and Tusla Governance Division, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)
Deirdre Shanley	Assistant Secretary General, Schools Division, Department of Education
Eddie Ward	Principal Officer, Special Educational Needs Section (SEN), Department of Education
Eileen Guiney	Assistant Principal Officer, Human Resources, Department of Education
Elizabeth Dunican	Executive Officer, School Transport, Department of Education

Frank Hanlon	Assistant Principal Officer, Further Education, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)
Ger Brophy	Chief Social Worker, Child and Family Agency (TUSLA)
Gerry McCaul	Director, School Management Advisory Unit, Joint Managerial Body for Secondary Schools (JMB)
Grainne Morrissey	Principal Officer, Child Welfare and Protection Policy, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)
Harold Hislop	Chief Inspector, Department of Education
James Gould	Compliance Manager, Garda National Vetting Bureau
Joe McKeown	President, Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO)
John Curtis	General Secretary, Joint Managerial Body (JMB)
John Irwin	General Secretary, Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS)
Judith Lyons	Principal Officer, Parents and Learners Unit, Department of Education
Ken Fennelly	Secretary, General Synod Board of Education
Kieran Christie	General Secretary, Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI)
Martin Mc Loughlin	Principal Officer, Teacher Education (ITE & Professional Development Section)), Department of Education
Michael Gillespie	General Secretary, Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI)
Moirin Moynihan	Assistant, Principal Officer, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)
Dr. Niall Muldoon	Ombudsman for Children
Noreen Bevens	Assistant Principal Officer (Acting), Higher Education – Governance and Quality Unit, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)
Noreen Lawlor	Development and Training Executive, Catholic Primary Schools Management Association (CPSMA)
Nuala Ward	Director of Investigations, Ombudsman for Children
Paddy Lavelle	General Secretary, Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)

Padraig Hennigan	Assistant Principal Officer, Higher Education – Governance and Quality Unit, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)
Paraic Joyce	Principal Officer, School Governance and Teacher Allocations, Department of Education
Paul Fields	Director of Schools, Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)
Paula Long	Regional Director, National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), Department of Education
Sarah Heneghan	Higher Executive Officer, School Transport, Department of Education
Shirley Kearney	Principal Officer, School Transport, Department of Education
Sinead Brett	General Secretary, Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA)
Stephen Beamish	Administrative Officer, Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit, Department of Education
Tadgh O'Leary	Head of Business Support Services, National Council for Special Education (NCSE)
Teresa Fitzgibbon	Assistant Principal Officer, Residential Institutions Redress Unit (RIRU), Department of Education
Teresa Griffin	Chief Executive Officer, National Council for Special Education (NCSE)
Teresa McNeill	Principal Officer, ETB Financial, Administrative & Personnel, Department of Education
Valerie Lewis	Post Primary Educational Policy and Development Officer, Educational Policy & Development Post-Primary Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)
Wendy Ross	Assistant Principal Officer, Higher Education – Governance and Quality Unit, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)
Yvonne Keating	Deputy Chief Inspector, Department of Education