

Comprehensive Vetting System

Childhood is precious and fragile and needs to be treasured. The protection of all children is a responsibility that falls to parents, family, friends and society as a whole. A comprehensive vetting procedure is one key aspect of a child protection system. It is imperative that all professionals and volunteers who are working with or have access to children are subject to police checks in advance of taking up their posts.

The Central Garda Vetting Unit was set up in 2002. The service runs criminal record checks on prospective employees who in their role would have unsupervised access to children. The staff within the Unit expanded from 13 to 30 in 2006 but the Unit is still not fully staffed and as a result there can be delays in the processing of applications. The service initially began with vetting all full-time Health Service Executive (HSE) staff with direct unsupervised access to children but this was extended in 2006 to include:

- all remaining and prospective full-time and part-time employees of the HSE and certain agencies funded by the HSE
- all new teachers in the primary and post-primary education sectors starting from the new school year in Autumn 2006. It is also the intention to vet all new non-teaching staff of primary and post-primary schools, such as caretakers, from this date
- all new employees and volunteers working in the youth work sector, such as the scouts and girl guides
- all new employees and volunteers of selected sports organisations throughout the country,

During 2007, it is planned that vetting will be further extended to such sectors as crèche employees, private hospitals, residential childcare centres, agencies working with the homeless, local community initiatives, arts organisations, and private tuition centres and organisations.

Limitations of the Current Vetting Procedures

At present the checks undertaken by the Central Garda Vetting Unit provide information on police convictions but do not include any soft information such as allegations, concerns or inquiries, nor do the checks cross reference against those on the Sex Offenders Register.

Barnardos is aware of the comprehensive system that is operational in Northern Ireland and would like to see it extended to the Republic of Ireland. The system includes the provision of soft information such as allegations, concerns or inquiries as well as convictions and disqualifications.

In essence, in the North, the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults Order 2003 came into force in 2005 and registered organisations can have their prospective employees and volunteers checked against the Disqualification of Working with Children Lists held by different Departments, all records within the Criminal Records Office and the Child Care Policy Directorate. This investigation also extends to those prospective employees who have lived at other UK and some EU addresses.

In the Republic though, since the beginning of 2006, organisations working with children have had difficulties in having prospective employees from the UK vetted. Previously, the Central Garda Vetting Unit contacted the British authorities to carry out the checks on these prospective employees but now the British authorities have withdrawn that service. As a result it is largely up to the prospective employees with UK addresses to prove they are not a threat to children. This can be done by obtaining a Data Protection access request to the UK authorities through any UK police station at their own cost. However, this is far short of being a full police check and could potentially place children in danger. Some Irish based organisations including Barnardos are exploring other avenues to accessing full checks on prospective employees before any are appointed.

Barnardos welcomed the 'Memorandum of Understanding' established between Ireland and UK in 2006 to increase shared information on sex offenders in the pursuit of protecting children. While this is a step in the right direction, there still remains the danger that some prospective employees who have convictions from abroad but seek employment in Ireland will not be fully vetted because of the lack of similar commitments and protocols between authorities to share information on sex offenders and other individuals who pose a threat to children.

Staff Limitations

Despite the introduction of the 2006 Childcare Regulations, Barnardos is disappointed to learn that the extension of the vetting procedures to all crèche employees is being deferred to September 2007 due to staff limitations within the Central Garda Vetting Unit.

The extension of the vetting procedures to all teachers and non-teaching staff is welcomed and will lead to over 80,000 employees being vetted. Unfortunately, these Garda checks will not extend to the 100,000 staff working with children in the vocational education sector as these staff are not paid directly by the Department of Education and the Central Garda Vetting Unit will only deal with applications from employees of the Department of Education.

The expansion of professions now to be vetted will place a huge additional burden on the Unit with the total number of applications it handles rising from 2,000 per week to between 3,000-4,000 per

week. In fact due to the numbers to be processed it is estimated that it could take years to have all newly qualified teachers and older teachers and non teaching staff vetted.

Barnardos recommendations:

- Increased resourcing of the Central Garda Vetting Unit to allow it to carry out the necessary background checks on everyone working with children
- Adopt the model used in Northern Ireland, for checks to include 'soft information' such as allegations, concerns and inquiries
- The establishment of protocols with police forces in other countries to allow for full background checks on all individuals intending to work with children in this country.