

FOI 3273

27th August 2025

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 2000 – INFORMATION REQUEST

Freedom of Information Request: Thresholds for Child Removal and Related Decision-Making (Ray Jones Review 2023)

I am writing to request the following information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, in relation to your Trust's implementation of child protection powers, particularly decisions involving the removal of children from their families.

This request is submitted with reference to the 2023 Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services in Northern Ireland, led by Professor Ray Jones, which raised significant concerns regarding inconsistencies and systemic issues around thresholds for removal, decision-making quality, and early intervention.

Thresholds for Removal

Please provide:

a) Copies of any policies, protocols, internal guidance, or threshold criteria used to determine whether a child meets the threshold for removal (i.e., significant harm under Article 50 of the Children (NI) Order 1995).

Response:

Children (NI) Order	https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1995/755/contents/made
Co-Operating to Protect Children	https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/co-operating-safeguard-children-and-young-people-northern-ireland

Regional Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland Procedures Manual	https://www.proceduresonline.com/sbni/
Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland (UNOCINI) Guidance	https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/understanding-needs-children-northern-ireland-unocini-guidance

b) Any assessment tools, flowcharts, threshold matrices, or documentation used by social workers to apply these thresholds in practice.

Response:

See above UNOCINI Guidance

Consistency and Review of Threshold Decisions

a) Any internal audits, reports, or correspondence from 2021–2024 identifying concerns about inconsistent application of thresholds within your Trust or in comparison to other Trusts.

Response:

There were no audit or reports within the SHSCT or across HSC Trusts from 2021 – 2024 identifying inconsistent application of thresholds.
The SHSCT was subject to A Pilot Joint Inspection of Child Protection Arrangements in the SHSCT Area in 2023 (report attached).

b) Details of any reviews or practice learning events where variation in threshold decisions was raised as a concern.

Response:

There are no reviews or practice learning events in the SHSCT where variation in threshold decision was raised as a concern.

Case Statistics (2021–2024)

Please provide the annual totals for the last 3 calendar years:

a) Number of children removed from their homes under:

i) Emergency Protection Orders;

ii) Interim Care Orders;

iii) Voluntary accommodation (Article 21).

Response:

Table 1 No of children in which the Court granted an Emergency Protection Order, or an Interim Care Order or where children voluntary accommodated under Art 21 of the Children NI Order, by year 2021-2024

Children NI Order	Years			
	2021	2022	2023	2024
Legal Status				
ART.21	232	223	307	337
ART.57(1) INTERIM CARE ORDER	123	131	152	139
ART.63(1) E.P.O.	31	36	39	12

b) Number of cases where removal was considered but not pursued due to thresholds not being met, including:

Whether families were then referred to Early Help or family support services.

Response:

The Trust does not hold this data in a readily available format and to provide it would require a manual trawl of records, which would take more than 18 hours.

Under section 12 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000, Public Authorities are not obliged to comply with an information request where to do so would exceed the cost limit.

Unfortunately we are unable to provide the information you have requested as the cost of locating and retrieving the information exceeds the "appropriate limit" as stated in the Freedom of Information (Fees and Appropriate Limit) Regulations 2004. It has been estimated that it would take more than 18 hours to locate and retrieve the requested information. In order to obtain this information and it would exceed the £450 limit and is therefore cost prohibitive.

Workforce Training and Threshold Interpretation

a) Any training materials, presentations, or written guidance provided to staff relating to:

Applying thresholds for removal;

Differentiating between neglect, poverty, and risk of significant harm.

Response:

Within safeguarding/child protection training the issue of threshold is addressed in line with the policies and protocol outlined in the response to question 1. This includes what constitutes a child in need, a child in need of protection, the threshold of significant harm and the criteria which needs to be considered.

Safeguarding training addresses the different types of abuse. With specific reference to neglect examination focusses on what constitutes intentional and unintentional neglect. Poverty is not considered a reason for neglect and this is outlined within our training sessions.

Relevant training where the above is addressed includes:

- Child protection awareness
- Recognising and responding to child abuse and neglect
- UNOCINI and the Hardiker model
- Neglect awareness and specific neglect training
- Trauma Informed practice
- Female Genital Mutualisation training
- Domestic abuse training
- Graded Care Plans 2 training
- Joint protocol training.

When making decisions in relation to referrals into social services and the need to safeguard children – signs of safety and the associated tools underpin the assessment and decision making process.

b) Details of any policy or practice changes made as a result of the Ray Jones Review or internal review of threshold practices.

Response:

The Department of Health is leading a programme of work on service improvement and the delivery of transformation in children's social care services under the auspices of the Children's Social Care Services Strategic Reform Programme. It has been established to deliver reform and development across children's social care services to address a range of challenges outlined within the NI Review of Children's Social Care Services report. The programme of work involves a regional review of specific service areas and any proposals for service improvement including access to services and thresholds, will be made at a regional level.

Email: Foi.Team@Southerntrust.hscni.net