



# Helpline highlight: Northern Ireland

A year in review  
April 2011-March 2012



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# Introduction

The NSPCC has provided a helpline in Northern Ireland for the last 25 years, as part of a UK-wide service. The helpline protects children by providing advice and information to adults and professionals, and by making referrals to trusts and the police when necessary. People can get in touch by telephone, text, email or online. Those who are deaf or hard-of-hearing can make contact by textphone or webcam.

In 2011/12<sup>1</sup>, over 44,000 people across the UK reported concerns about children, a 29 per cent increase on the previous year. This report, however, explores the data available for Northern Ireland.

It identifies the numbers of adults in Northern Ireland who contacted the helpline, the nature of the concerns they had about children, the length of time they waited before getting in touch, and the number of cases the helpline had to refer to Northern Ireland children's services or police.

These topline statistics have been supplemented by an in depth review of 200 Northern Ireland contacts that resulted in a referral to social services or police. This report features anonymised quotes from some of these contacts, to provide the reader with a sense of the nature and content of these cases.



## Key findings

- In 2011/12 the helpline responded to 691 contacts from people in Northern Ireland.
- This is an increase of 58 per cent on the previous year.
- 353 of the contacts in 2011/12 resulted in referrals – involving 717 children – to children's services or the police in NI (1.7 per cent of all referrals made by the helpline across the UK).
- 338 were contacts where helpline counsellors<sup>2</sup> provided information or advice, helping an estimated 676 children (1.6 per cent of the total number of advice calls dealt by the helpline across the UK).
- Neglect was the leading cause for referrals (138 cases, 39 per cent); it accounted for 12 per cent of cases where we offered advice (40 contacts).
- 14 per cent of referrals (50) were about sexual abuse. This is higher than the UK average, which was 10 per cent.
- 289 children (45 per cent) involved in referrals were under six years old<sup>3</sup>.
- In total, 138 people contacting us from Northern Ireland reported that they had concerns for more than a month, with 68 of these being so serious we had to make referrals.
- In cases where the concerns were so significant we had to make referrals, 41 people (32 per cent)<sup>4</sup> had waited more than six months before getting in touch (compared to 26 per cent for the rest of the UK).
- The majority of contacts leading to referrals came from members of the public, not from family members or professionals.

1 1 April 2011 to 31 March 2012.

2 Helpline practitioners are referred to as counsellors. They come from a range of backgrounds including social work, education, police, counselling and psychotherapy.

3 Data about children's ages was only available in 327 out of the 353 cases in which we made a referral.

4 Information relating to how long people waited before calling was available in 128 out of 353 contacts that led to a referral.

**Callers from Northern Ireland described many situations where they have had concerns for children and contacted the helpline for support. The following are examples.**

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“It’s happened before but I didn’t pay too much attention, but I’ve been woken up in the middle of the night by the mum screaming abuse at the child and slamming doors. He’s only a very young child and you can hear him crying. Friends visiting me have heard it too, I just didn’t know what to do about it.”

A woman called, worried about a child in her neighbourhood

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“For the last few months I’ve seen the little boy being shouted at, it’s just too much. They dragged him into the house, they had him by the arm and he was screaming and crying, I heard his parents swearing at him, his brothers and sisters were screaming and crying too.”

A caller got in touch to discuss concerns about how a boy was being treated

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“It’s been a pretty hot summer but the kids are locked in a room all day and not allowed out, I haven’t seen them outside for a few weeks now. I’m worried about the youngest child especially; she just needs somebody to play with.”

A neighbour called during the summer holidays

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“When they contact us they’ll say that they’ve been worried about a child or family for a while, that they have been thinking about it on their own, but now it has got to the point where they’ve felt they have to do something about it.”

A helpline counsellor told us why some callers wait before getting in touch.

# ‘Calls and contacts’ – how people get in touch

There are a number of ways in which people can contact the helpline. Aside from calling, people can contact the NSPCC with concerns about children by text, email and online. Because of this, we refer to ‘contacts’ rather than calls.

The helpline receives two main types of contact, which we categorise as ‘advice’ or ‘referral’.

Referral contacts are where concerns about a child’s safety are so serious they have to be referred on to children’s services or the police. In order for this to happen, we must have enough identifying information about the child.



Advice contacts fall into three categories:

- the person contacting the NSPCC is only seeking guidance
- there is insufficient information to make a referral
- the concerns are not serious enough to require a referral.

In 2011/12, across the UK, the helpline was contacted a total of 44,510 times. 20,985 (47%) of these resulted in referrals, with the remainder (23,525) categorised as ‘advice’.

We are able to identify which contacts came from people in Northern Ireland when:

- people contacting us for advice give sufficient identifying information
- contacts lead to referrals to Northern Ireland children’s services or police.

Information from Northern Ireland is not available for advice emails, online forms or texts. However, this only accounts for a small minority (6 per cent) of contacts to the helpline.



# Levels of risk and abuse in Northern Ireland

According to the annual Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Northern Ireland (DHSSPS) figures for Northern Ireland<sup>5</sup>, at 31 March 2012 there were 2,127 children on child protection registers in Northern Ireland, 50 per cent were boys and 50 per cent were girls. 10 per cent were aged under one year old, and 5 per cent were aged 16 or older. 45 per cent were assessed to be at risk of physical abuse.

However it is widely recognised that there is a gap between “substantiated cases of maltreatment that come to the attention of child protection agencies and the larger number of cases that are not detected, reported or recorded<sup>6</sup>”.

Indeed, findings from the NSPCC’s survey on the prevalence of child abuse and neglect across the UK indicates that more than one in eight children aged 11-17 (13.4 per cent) have experienced severe maltreatment by a parent or guardian<sup>7</sup>.

However, more than one in five 11-17 year olds (22.9 per cent) who were physically hurt by a parent or guardian, and more than one in three (34 per cent) who experienced contact sexual abuse by an adult, did not tell anyone else about it.

Child abuse and neglect often exist alongside a range of family problems and adversities such as alcohol and substance misuse, domestic violence and relationships conflict, mental health and poverty. The majority of child protection cases known to social services involve multiple difficulties and needs, including abuse. This highlights the need for professionals and agencies to develop a multifaceted response when working with families who are dealing with complex problems<sup>8</sup>.

Analysis of the UK Millennium Cohort Study (MCS)<sup>9</sup> has produced national estimates of the proportion of families with a child under one who are likely to be facing multiple risk factors. The 10 areas of risk are categorised as:

- depression
- financial stress
- teenage parenthood
- basic skills
- overcrowding
- substance abuse
- alcohol abuse
- domestic violence
- physical disability
- unemployment.

The results show that 54 per cent of children under one in Northern Ireland were potentially exposed to at least one of these risk factors, 24 per cent to two factors, 10 per cent to three, and 6 per cent to four or more risk factors.

Given the high levels of abuse and the presence of multiple risk factors within the child population of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, there is a need to develop more effective ways of identifying and supporting families in difficulty.

The NSPCC helpline helps to do this by providing ways for adults to voice concerns they have about children, helping to reduce the gap in the time between abuse taking place and being reported and, ultimately, helping to protect more children from harm.

5 DHSSPSNI (2012) Children’s Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2011 – 12. Belfast: DHSSPSNI

6 NSPCC (2011) *Child cruelty in the UK 2011; an NSPCC study into childhood abuse and neglect over the past 30 years*. London: NSPCC. Page 18

7 Radford, Lorraine, Corral, Susana, Bradley, Christine, Fisher, Helen, Bassett, Claire, Howat, Nick and Collishaw, Stephan (2011) *Child Abuse and Neglect in the UK Today*. London: NSPCC.

8 Davidson, G., Bunting, L. & Webb, MA (2012) *Families Experiencing Multiple Adversities: A Review of the International Literature*. Belfast: Barnardo’s, NSPCC, NCB.

Spratt, T. (2011) ‘Why Multiples Matter: Reconceptualising the Population Referred to Child and Family Social Workers’, *British Journal of Social Work*, Advance Access, doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcr165. First published online: November 22, 2011;

9 Bunting, L., Galloway, S. *What the Millennium Cohort Study can tell us about the challenges new parents face: statistics for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland*. London: NSPCC 2012.

**Calls from Northern Ireland illustrate the complex needs of children living with a range of issues, including drugs and neglect.**

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“The mother is pregnant and she is using a lot of drugs; ecstasy or cocaine and the like. There’s nobody else in the house.”

A caller got in contact with the NSPCC, concerned about a mother’s drug use

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“I see this child quite often when I call into to see his mammy, he always seems to have the same clothes on and smells; the house is untidy and so unclean. He is such a quiet child I just feel so sad myself when I see him.”

A family friend called the helpline





# The NSPCC helpline in Northern Ireland

## Total calls in Northern Ireland

In 2011/12, the helpline made 353 referrals for Northern Ireland involving 717 children (1.7 per cent of all referrals made by the helpline). Additionally, the helpline dealt with 338 advice contacts from Northern Ireland (1.6 per cent of all advice contacts dealt by the helpline throughout the UK).

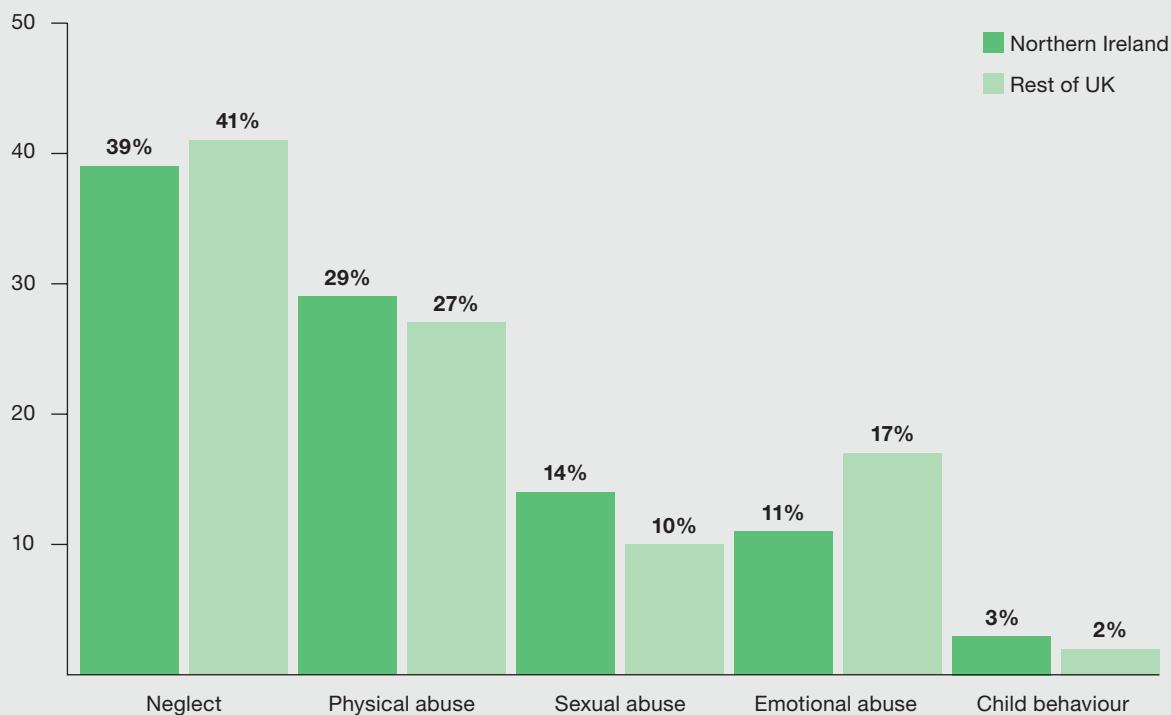
The NSPCC estimates that each advice contact involves a minimum of two children. On that basis in Northern Ireland 676 children were helped through the advice contacts received last year. The total number of contacts from Northern Ireland (691) in 2011/12 reflected a 58 per cent increase on the previous year.

## Referral contacts to the NSPCC helpline from Northern Ireland

Of the 353 Northern Ireland referrals, neglect was the main concern (39 per cent, 138 contacts), followed by physical abuse (28.8 per cent, 102 contacts), sexual abuse (14 per cent, 50 contacts), emotional abuse (11 per cent, 40 contacts), and child behaviour (3 per cent, 12 contacts) [Figure 1].

The proportion of Northern Ireland referrals relating to neglect and physical abuse was broadly similar to the rest of the UK. It was slightly higher for sexual abuse, and 6 per cent lower for emotional abuse. However, such comparisons should be treated with caution given the small sample sizes in Northern Ireland.

**Figure 1: Referrals**  
What concerns do people contact the NSPCC about?



### Breakdown of referrals by NI Trust 2011/12:

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust	100
Northern Health and Social Care Trust	110
South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust	77
Southern Health and Social Care Trust	58
Western Health and Social Care Trust	35

*There are 380 referrals in this Northern Ireland breakdown rather than the 353 recorded by the NSPCC. This is because some referrals were passed to more than one trust.*

The reasons for referring cases vary in each Trust area and this information may be useful in targeting locations in Northern Ireland-wide awareness-raising campaigns.

NSPCC data on referrals made by the helpline is broadly in keeping with trends in child protection registrations in Northern Ireland over the past decade. Neglect and physical abuse, either alone or in combination, have been the predominant cause of registration<sup>10</sup>. In 2011/12 the DHSSPS recorded physical abuse as the reason for 29 per cent of registrations and neglect 28 per cent, by single category<sup>11</sup>.

Helpline counsellors have told us that from their experience, neglect is linked to a range of risk indicators such as poor school attendance, a lack of contact with extended family members and lack of connection with the community.

The invisibility of these families can sometimes lead to problems developing over long periods of time without intervention or support. This highlights the importance of both professionals and the community proactively responding to the needs of children and young people living in families that struggle to provide the basic requirements for their care and development.

The NSPCC helpline provides an additional way for the public and communities to seek advice and information on how best to do this. The helpline also supports statutory safeguarding services by providing a source of information and support to cases that may not require a referral to children's services or police.

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“She has three children under five, and you hear a lot of bangs, and screaming and crying at night. She (the mother) seems to sleep all day and be out at night. They sometimes are completely naked out in the garden, they don't really leave the house. It's been going on for nearly a year now.”

One caller from Northern Ireland contacted us about a family with three young children

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“With substance abuse, including alcohol, there's not only the issue of the parent directly neglecting their children or not being able to meet their needs; but also the fact that they cannot always safeguard the children from other people that may pose a risk as well. These home environments often feel quite dangerous and frightening places for children to be.”

A helpline counsellor

<sup>10</sup> DHSSPSNI (2011). Children Order Statistical Trends for NI 2005/06 to 2010/11. Belfast: DHSSPSNI.

<sup>11</sup> DHSSPSNI (2012) Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2011 – 12. Belfast: DHSSPSNI

**Who contacts us in Northern Ireland?:**

The majority of people (282) whose contacts resulted in a referral were members of the public. 24 contacts were from parents or carers [Figure 2].

This pattern is quite different from child protection referrals made to social services, in which professionals are the most common referrer. For example, DHSSPS figures show that in 2011/12 professionals accounted for 70 per cent of child protection referrals. This suggests that the NSPCC helpline is adding something important to the child protection system. By enabling and encouraging members of the public to report their child protection concerns, children who may otherwise have remained unknown to the authorities are being protected.

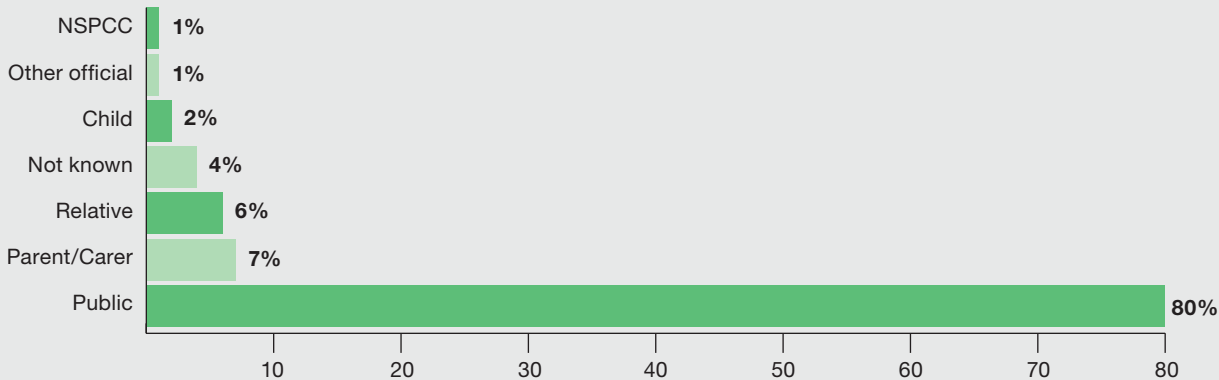
However, more work is required to clarify the precise contribution the NSPCC helpline makes to child protection systems in Northern Ireland. Referrals are currently recorded differently between the NSPCC and the DHSSPS. For example, despite the 353 referrals made by the helpline in 2011/12, DHSSPS Northern Ireland child protection figures show just 1.6 per cent (73) of the referrals it received came from the voluntary sector. Some of this discrepancy may be explained by the fact that not all NSPCC referrals will have been categorised as child protection referrals by social services, but there may be value in seeking to explore this difference further.

The importance of members of the public and family and friends sharing child protection concerns with agencies has been highlighted in learning from serious case reviews (SCR) in England and Wales, underlining the vital role of adults who able to speak on behalf of the child<sup>12</sup>. These adults include parents, grandparents, neighbours, and members of the public. Recent research on Northern Ireland Case Management Reviews (CMRs), published by NSPCC NI in partnership with Queen’s University Belfast, has provided valuable insight into Northern Ireland case reviews and enabled comparisons of trends and issues of concern with the SCR process in other parts of the UK.

The CMRs examined for the report illustrated some key reasons why the parents involved could not ensure their children’s safety and wellbeing, including parental mental illness, learning disability, living with domestic abuse, substance misuse and a lack in their own parenting ability due to experiencing poor parenting as children themselves<sup>13</sup>.

12 Ofsted (2011) *The voice of the child: learning lessons from serious case reviews*. Manchester: Ofsted.  
 13 Devaney, J., Bunting, L., Hayes, D., Lazenbatt, A., (2013) *Translating learning into action: an overview of learning arising from Case Management Reviews in Northern Ireland 2003–2008*. Belfast Queen’s University Belfast, NSPCC, DHSSPSNI

**Figure 2: Referrals – Northern Ireland  
Who contacts the NSPCC?**



A recently commissioned report by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), that examined the impact of early childhood experiences on adolescent suicide and accidental death, also reviewed a sample of CMRs undertaken during a five-year period (January 2003-December 2008). The report highlighted that many of the cases shared a number of characteristics, including parental rejection and loss, typically coupled with severe maltreatment over many years.

Additionally, parental mental health and parental substance use were common characteristics among this group of young people<sup>14</sup>. These themes reflect those mentioned within the Millennium Cohort Study, which showed that a significant number of children and families in Northern Ireland are living with multiple problems and safeguarding issues.

“We have a relationship with the general public, with parents and with relatives. They feel that they can turn to us for support, we will listen to them and respect them and not minimise their concerns.”

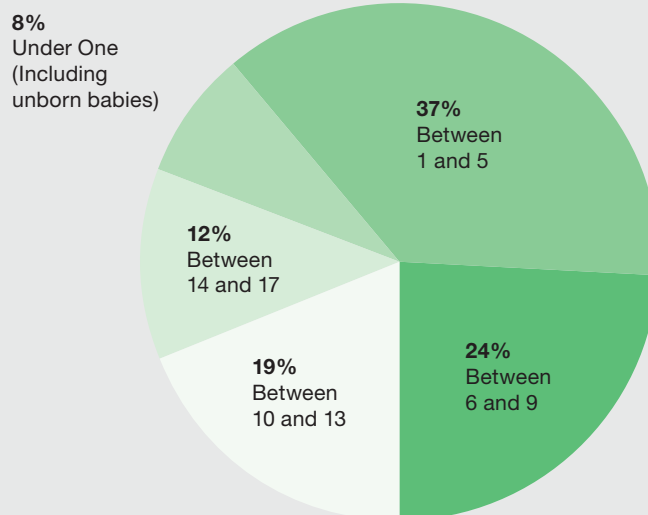
Helpline counsellor

### Age of children

Overall 717 children were the subject of the concerns in NI referrals. Of the 642 children whose age was known, more than two thirds (442) were under 10. 53 were under one.

This age range is broadly similar to all referrals received by children’s services in Northern Ireland in the year April 2011-March 2012. However, direct comparisons cannot be made due to the slight variance in age categories used by DHSSPS and the NSPCC helpline<sup>15</sup>.

### Age of children in referrals – Northern Ireland



14 Devaney, J et al. (2012) *Still vulnerable: the impact of early childhood experiences on adolescent suicide and accidental death*. Belfast: NICCY

15 DHSSPSNI (2012) *Children’s Order Statistical Table for Northern Ireland 2010/11*. Belfast: DHSSPS

16 Scannapieco, M and Connell-Carrick, K (2005) *Understanding child maltreatment: an ecological and developmental perspective* Oxford: Oxford University Press

17 Bunting, L. & Toner, K. (2009) *Attitudes towards child protection in Northern Ireland: a survey by the four Area Child Protection Committees and NSPCC*. Belfast: four Area Child Protection Committees and NSPCC

## Waiting time before contacting the helpline - referrals

Research tells us that the sooner action is taken to protect a child the better the outcome. Child abuse and neglect, and general trauma – including witnessing violence – impact on normal child development. Without intervention, this can have lifelong consequences<sup>16</sup>. The earlier in an abused child’s life this intervention takes place, the higher the probability of better outcomes for the child and their family.

Data on the length of time the person had waited before contacting the NSPCC was only available in 36 per cent of cases (128). Nonetheless, this data shows that 53 per cent of adults (68) waited more than a month before raising their concerns with the NSPCC, whilst 32 per cent (41) had waited more than six months.

These delays in reporting concerns to the helpline in Northern Ireland warrant further investigation. If we can identify the barriers to reporting suspected abuse, we will be able to develop appropriate responses aimed at closing the gap between concerns first arising and reports being made.

Recent research in Northern Ireland has shown that of those who suspected abuse, 70 per cent had taken action, including talking to a professional<sup>17</sup>. However a significant percentage (23 per cent) had done nothing at all.

The main reasons cited for not taking action included: not wanting to get involved; being unsure that abuse was actually taking place; and worries about making things worse.

Encouraging the public to seek help is one of the issues that the new Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland may focus on in its key public messages about safeguarding and abuse.

**Table 1: How long people wait before contacting NSPCC (Northern Ireland – referral calls)**

	NI (no.)	NI %	rest of UK (no.)	rest of UK %	Referral calls for all regions	%
Didn't wait	29	23%	1,521	19%	1,550	19%
Waited a couple of days	6	5%	817	10%	823	10%
Waited between one to four weeks	25	20%	1,300	16%	1,325	16%
Waited between a month and six months	27	21%	2,210	28%	2,237	28%
Waited more than six months	41	32%	2,067	26%	2,108	26%
All referral calls when information about the wait period is captured	<b>128</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>7,915</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>8,043</b>	<b>100%</b>

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“People don’t always understand how important it is. When abuse is impacting on children’s development the sooner that is picked up the more chance they have of catching up and not permanently damaging their development.”

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“Some people are waiting for someone else to make the referral, and they are frightened of the repercussions if they do make the referral.”

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“If people were made aware of the long-lasting and damaging impact neglect can have on children then maybe they would contact us sooner, because then you can reduce the abuse suffered by the child. Also, giving the parents that opportunity to improve and make a relationship; by getting in early and addressing the issue, you’re giving the parent the chance to make the necessary improvements.”

Helpline counsellors

## Gender

Information relating to the gender of people contacting the helpline was available in 218 of the contacts that resulted in referrals.

Of these, two-thirds were female (147) and one-third were male (71). This is in keeping with findings from Northern Ireland research, which has shown that women are more likely to both have concern and report their concerns<sup>18</sup>.

This information may support the way messages about child protection are targeted to both genders in Northern Ireland, and help when exploring any additional barriers that may prevent men from contacting the NSPCC or other agencies.

## Northern Ireland advice calls

In addition to the 353 referral contacts, the NSPCC received 338 advice contacts from Northern Ireland (Figure 3).

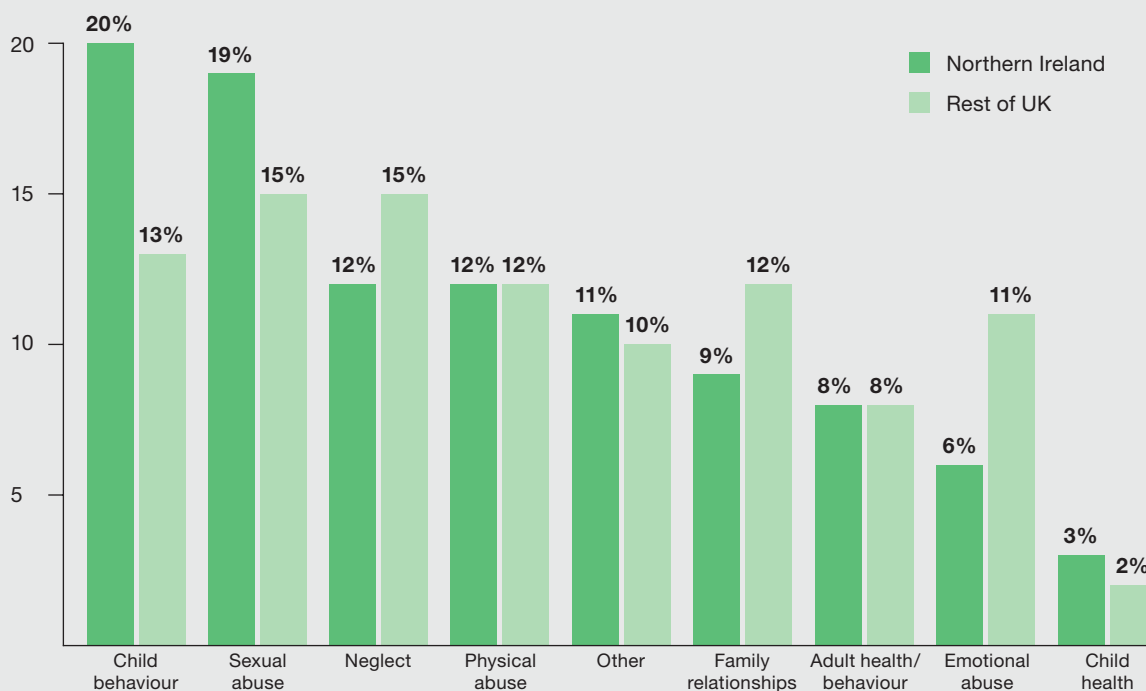
The data on the number of children involved in advice calls is not collected but we can assume that each call or contact involves an average of two children. This average figure would give an advice contact figure of 676 children. The most common reason for seeking advice was child behaviour, followed by sexual abuse, neglect and physical abuse.

Other calls involved concerns about family relationships, adult health and behaviour, emotional abuse and child health.

A higher proportion of Northern Ireland contacts were in relation to child behaviour and sexual abuse than in the rest of the UK, whilst figures were lower for emotional abuse. However, such comparisons should be treated with caution given the small sample sizes in Northern Ireland.

<sup>18</sup> ibid

**Figure 3: Advice calls**  
**What concerns do people contact the NSPCC about?**



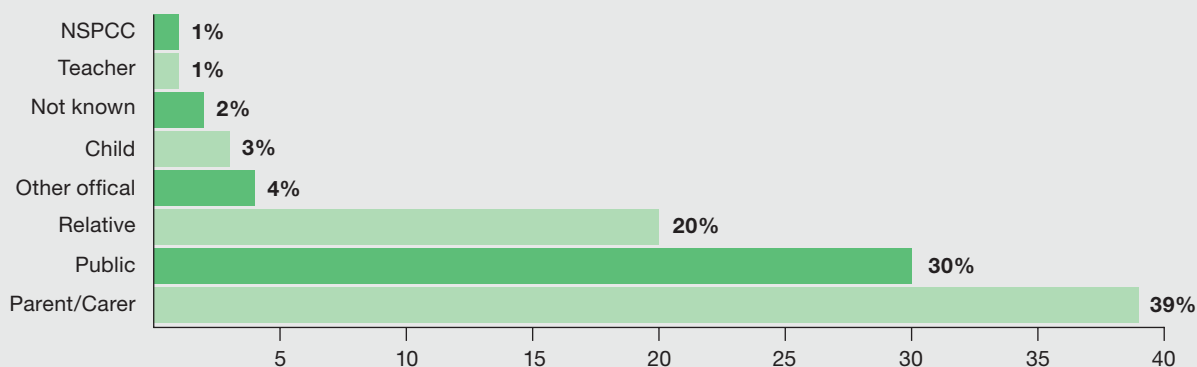
It is worth noting that while 129 advice contacts (39 per cent) to the helpline from Northern Ireland were from parents or carers, only 7 per cent of the contacts that resulted in a referral came from parents or carers.

In addition, relatives from Northern Ireland accounted for 64 advice contacts (20 per cent), compared to only 20 (6 per cent) of referral contacts.

This suggests that parents and family are inclined to use the helpline for advice and that the helpline provides a valuable service in supporting family and relatives to discuss safeguarding concerns at this level.

During 2013, the helpline will be further promoted to community and voluntary sector groups supporting parents in Northern Ireland. It is expected, given their reach into communities, through projects such as SureStart and community parenting health initiatives, that information about the helpline and child protection will cascade through these community networks and client groups.

**Figure 4: Advice calls – Northern Ireland  
Who contacts the NSPCC?**



“I noticed one of the girls in the group, she had marks on her arms, bruises and scratches. I’m ringing you because it’s the weekend and there is no one I know to get in touch with. I have spoken to her and she told me she does this to herself when she is nervous or angry, she wouldn’t tell me what was making her feel this way.”

A sports coach called the NSPCC about a girl in his group

“We deal with many calls that don’t end up as a referral to children’s services. In these calls we may have given out advice that promotes and safeguards the children’s wellbeing and offered a range of information to support the caller.”

A helpline counsellor

Helpline counsellors may provide callers with information on non-statutory and child protection agencies, and signpost other sources of help. This may stop cases escalating to the point where they become child protection concerns. They may also provide the callers with advice and guidance enabling them, on subsequent reflection, to decide to make referrals themselves to statutory agencies. At the time of the call they may not be ready to take that step.



**Waiting time before contact – advice contacts**

Information relating to how long people waited before contacting the helpline was available in 56 per cent of Northern Ireland advice contacts (188 contacts).

While a greater proportion of people contacted the helpline within the month than for referral contacts, 37 per cent still waited a month or more, while one in five waited more than six months. The delay in contacting the helpline for advice from Northern Ireland compares similarly to the rest of the UK.

**Table 2: How long people wait before contacting the NSPCC. (Northern Ireland – Advice Calls)**

	NI (no.)	NI %	rest of UK (no.)	rest of UK %	Advice calls for all regions	%
Didn't wait	44	23%	2,453	21%	2,497	21%
Waited a couple of days	35	19%	1,969	17%	2,004	17%
Waited between one to four weeks	39	21%	2,418	21%	2,457	21%
Waited between a month and six months	30	16%	2,113	18%	2,143	18%
Waited more than six months	40	21%	2,537	22%	2,577	22%
All referral calls when information about the wait period is captured	<b>188</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>11,490</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>11,678</b>	<b>100%</b>

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“Some people aren’t very clear as to what abuse actually is, so that’s why they wait. Then when things get worse for the family down the line, as often happens, it’s only then they realise the full extent of the problem and contact us.”

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“Some say they haven’t reported concerns because they feel the child will be removed from the parents. They’re not aware that children’s services do a lot of work in trying to keep the family together.”

Helpline counsellors described the barriers that can prevent people contacting the helpline

### Examples of calls from Northern Ireland.

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“The mother is always hitting the child around the head, even if she only wants to say something to her. She treats her very rough pulling her around; she and her brother aren’t washed properly they’re often smelly.”

A caller shared concerns with the NSPCC about two small children

“I saw a child in the street. The father was shouting and roaring at him and then he hit him really hard and called him names and shouted at him to get in the house. The car was from the Republic of Ireland, so I didn’t know who to ring, they might just be visiting. I don’t know whether to do something about it but I don’t think any child should be treated like this.”

A caller contacted the NSPCC after witnessing an incident in the street

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“The mother goes out drinking and lies in bed the next day and she brings men home. The teenage daughter had just had a baby. One of the older kids is suicidal and even one of the younger kids is depressed he is never taken anywhere. I am calling because it has got so serious.”

A caller was worried about a family in his area

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“I have never seen the child. The only way I know there is one is the crying that goes on and the parents shouting. The child was crying for about half an hour earlier tonight. I have never heard a child cry so much. I am really concerned.”

A neighbour called the NSPCC with concerns about a young child



# Rebecca and Aaron's story

This case study shows how a neighbour contacting the NSPCC resulted in siblings being protected from neglect and emotional abuse.

A helpline counsellor took a call from a concerned member of the public in Northern Ireland. The caller was the neighbour of a young family. She had seen the family's three-year-old daughter out on the street on her own, near a busy road.

The caller took the child, called Rebecca, back to her home and was even more concerned to find the doors open and another child – Rebecca's brother, Aaron, who was about five years old – in the house with the mother, Kathy, asleep on the settee.

The caller told us she had been unable to rouse Kathy, and did not feel she was in a fit state to look after the children. The caller said there was a strong smell of alcohol in the room and several empty wine bottles around. The caller had previously heard children crying in the home for long periods of time and, on a number of occasions, house parties took place with Rebecca and Aaron present. These often carried on late into the night, with adults coming and going. The caller also described the children as often looking unkempt and cold.

The helpline counsellor took the relevant details and reassured the caller that the NSPCC would access immediate assistance for the children. The caller was understandably anxious as she knew the family, but agreed to remain near the family home until help arrived. The caller provided her mobile phone number to the helpline counsellor so that the NSPCC could stay in contact with her. The NSPCC reassured the caller that any details that would enable her to be identified would not be shared with family.

The helpline counsellor then contacted social services and the police.

When the police officers arrived, they were equally concerned about the safety and wellbeing of the children, and also the presentation of their mother. Later that day Rebecca and Aaron were placed with supportive extended family members, who were unaware of the extent of the mother's problems, and who were able to meet the children's needs until their mother received the support she required for them to return home.

# The value of the helpline in supporting the public to protect children

The NSPCC helpline provides a unique service to members of the public who have concerns about a child. The helpline is free, available 24/7, and offers expert advice and information. Helpline counsellors can take the burden of responsibility from members of the public by assessing the level of risk and – in some cases – referring cases onto the relevant authorities.

An evaluation of the helpline, based on a sample of calls from throughout the UK, found that the NSPCC helpline was the first agency two-thirds of people had contacted to share their concerns.

Many of those contacting the helpline subsequently reported that they were glad they had got in touch. Comments were made on a range of themes including: reassurance and feeling relieved about what could be done; feeling positive about doing the right thing; and believing the child would be safer<sup>19</sup>.

## The role of the public in Northern Ireland in safeguarding children

Northern Ireland child protection guidance, *Co-operating to Safeguard Children* recognises the important role local communities and members of the public can play in protecting children.

“The community also possesses strengths and skills that can be harnessed for the benefit of vulnerable children and their families, including children at risk of significant harm. Community resources might include self-help and mutual aid initiatives, information resources and networks, support services, and advocacy and campaigning initiatives.”<sup>20</sup>

The NSPCC helpline provides a valuable additional resource to local safeguarding services in Northern Ireland by providing adults with an accessible way to seek support, advice and guidance if they have concerns about a child.

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“The fact we are a 24-hour service is a big thing; if it wasn’t there it would really limit how people can discuss their concerns out of traditional hours.”

Helpline counsellor

Research shows how children have died because of a failure to recognise the adverse circumstances some children experience, or due to the failure of individuals to make a referral of a childcare concern to the appropriate child welfare services<sup>21</sup>.

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“All of our work is focused on the child, they are central to every phone call, to every piece of work we undertake. We review all the information that tells us about the child’s situation; what it suggests about a child, rather than caseloads and thresholds and what resources there might be at the end of an assessment process.”

Helpline counsellor

19 NSPCC unpublished evaluation 2010

20 DHSSPSNI (2003) *Co-operating to Safeguard Children* Belfast: DHSSPSNI

21 Creighton (2007) *The Child Protection Handbook* – The practitioner’s guide to safeguarding children.

# Listening to adults who speak on behalf of children

The significant proportion of contacts to the helpline that came from members of the public in Northern Ireland (80 per cent in 2011/12) provide information that may prove critical in responding to children at risk of abuse.

In other parts of the UK, evidence suggests that child protection agencies are not always felt to be effective at listening to members of the public who may have information about children who are at risk.

In the Ofsted report, *The voice of the child: learning lessons from serious case reviews*<sup>22</sup>, one of the key findings is that agencies did not listen to adults who tried to speak on behalf of the child and that may have had significant information to share with them. The authors felt there was a need to establish channels, independent of child protection agencies, that enabled the public to speak up on behalf of children when they had serious concerns.

Furthermore, it has been found that agencies often place insufficient importance on information from family, friends and neighbours, and instead focus on prioritising contacts and referrals from professionals in the early stages of referrals and assessment<sup>23</sup>.

The NSPCC report *Ten Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them* (2010) stressed the importance of giving equal weight to contacts and referrals from family, friends and neighbours. Additionally it highlighted that anonymous calls should be taken seriously as they may provide vital information.

More recently an overview of learning arising from CMRs in Northern Ireland 2003-2008<sup>24</sup>, has suggested that finding more effective ways of informing the public about the challenging lives some families lead, the range of services available to meet their needs and the success that agencies have in trying to help improve the lives of these families, could help the public have more confidence in the child welfare system.

We would hope that this review of contacts to the helpline from Northern Ireland will contribute to informing the public and professionals of the issues that children and young people continue to face. Additionally, by focusing on the helpline and other channels, it highlights alternative ways in which the public are able to help protect children about whom they have concerns.

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“We can help callers think through issues. We can simplify the language, all the processes and the different layers of management. We provide advice, and can pass the information on, or refer them to another agency if it’s not a child protection issue”.

Helpline counsellor

22 Ofsted (2011) *The voice of the child: learning lessons from serious case reviews*. Manchester: Ofsted.

23 NSPCC (2010) *Ten pitfalls and how to avoid them, what research tells us* London: NSPCC

24 Devaney, J., Bunting, L., Hayes, D., Lazenbatt, A., (2013) *Translating learning into action: an overview of learning arising from Case Management Reviews in Northern Ireland 2003 – 2008*. Belfast Queen’s University Belfast, NSPCC, DHSSPSNI.

# Northern Ireland safeguarding context

Considerable efforts have gone into reforming statutory frontline services following the DHSSPS's inspection report in 2006 .

This report led to the development of Gateway teams in each Health and Social Care Trust area. Gateway is a social work service for children and families, and was established to create a single point of contact for people who are concerned about a child or young person not already known to social services.

The NSPCC has also taken forward various initiatives, such as schoolwork, with the Department of Education. We have helped to develop the keeping safe curriculum and the established new ways for children and young people to get in touch through ChildLine. Both of these initiatives offer opportunities for parents, the community, and children to seek information and support in relation to concerns regarding child protection.

The NSPCC has been concerned to ensure that its helpline is at the forefront of developments and can play a role with partners in providing complementary ways for the public to seek advice and help, especially given that it is used primarily by members of the public.



The NSPCC in Northern Ireland in conjunction with the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to ensure that the development and the profile of the helpline is taken forward in partnership with health and social care initiatives and that the helpline is developed in Northern Ireland in such a way that it complements and adds value to the work of health and social care.

Looking forward, we also anticipate changes to the provision of after-hours and emergency duty arrangements. It is hoped that the helpline will play an important part in providing the public with an accessible way to seek advice on child protection issues and, where appropriate, report concerns.

As part of the MOU, we will produce annual helpline management information which will complement the statistical information produced by the HSCB and the new Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland. We plan to run a series of awareness-raising seminars on the operation of the helpline in 2013.

# Conclusions

The helpline is an essential service for people who have concerns about the wellbeing and protection of children. It is a significant source of referrals, largely from adults who might otherwise contact no other agency. Most of the referrals made by the helpline concerned **neglect, physical abuse and sexual abuse**.

Many of the contacts to the helpline do not lead to referrals, and instead result in our counsellors providing child protection advice and guidance to members of the public. This suggests that the helpline has a crucial role to play in early intervention – ultimately relieving some of the burden on social services.

The yearly analysis of calls to and contacts to the NSPCC helpline complements material produced by both the HSCB and the DHSSPS on patterns of referrals.

A significant finding is that 21 per cent of callers, raising concerns that led to referrals, delayed seeking help by between one and six months. Approximately a third (32 per cent) waited more than six months. This delay may contribute to the undue distress and suffering of a child experiencing abuse or neglect. We would encourage anyone with information that may help safeguard a child to seek help earlier by contacting the helpline, local safeguarding services or the police.

This is an important message for policy makers to reinforce with the public in Northern Ireland and the NSPCC is undertaking work to raise awareness of the helpline and its services. Part of this will be to raise awareness among professionals, to encourage them to use the service as part of their own work as well as to promote the service with the families and communities they engage with.

The success of such work will be measured by comparing the data in future statistical reports on contacts to the helpline in Northern Ireland.

The MOU between the NSPCC and the HSCB will help to embed information about the helpline and establish a seamless interface with Gateway services. This will provide the public with a number of accessible channels, available around the clock, through which they can report, or seek advice on, child protection concerns.

The number of contacts the helpline currently receives from people in Northern Ireland indicates the important role it plays in the child protection system. Further promotion of the helpline to the public and professionals will enable us to continue to support those responding to the safeguarding needs of children and young people in Northern Ireland.



# How to contact the NSPCC

## Helpline services – advice and support whenever you need it

Anyone can contact the NSPCC whenever they are worried about a child by:

calling **0808 800 5000**

emailing **help@nspcc.org.uk**

texting **88858**

online **nspcc.org.uk/helpline**

Our trained helpline counsellors are here 24/7. It's free and you don't have to say who you are.



**DON'T WAIT UNTIL  
YOU'RE CERTAIN**

If you are worried about a child and need advice

**Call 0808 800 5000,  
text 88858 or email  
help@nspcc.org.uk**

**NSPCC**   
Cruelty to children must stop. **FULL STOP.**

Registered charity numbers 216401 and 9003717, 201299



# Northern Ireland child protection useful numbers

## Northern Ireland Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts – Gateway Services for Children’s Social Work

Belfast HSC Trust Telephone (for referral)

**028 9050 7000**

### Areas

Greater Belfast area

### Further contact details

(for ongoing professional liaison)

#### Greater Belfast Gateway Team

414 Ormeau Road  
Belfast  
BT7 3HY

#### Out of hours emergency service

(after 5pm each evening at weekends,  
and public/bank holidays)

**028 90565444**

**[www.belfasttrust.hscni.net](http://www.belfasttrust.hscni.net)**

South Eastern HSC Trust Telephone (for referral)

**0300 1000 300**

### Areas

Lisburn, Dunmurry, Moira, Hillsborough, Bangor, Newtownards, Ards Peninsula, Comber,  
Downpatrick, Newcastle and Ballynahinch

### Further contact details

(for ongoing professional liaison)

#### Greater Lisburn Gateway Team

Stewartstown Road Health Centre  
212 Stewartstown Road Dunmurry  
Belfast, BT17 0FG  
T: 028 90602705 F: 028 90629827

#### Down Gateway Team

Children’s Services  
81 Market Street  
Downpatrick, BT30 6LZ  
T: 028 44613511 F: 028 44615734

#### North Down Gateway Team

James Street  
Newtownards, BT23 4EP  
T: 028 91818518 F: 028 90564830

#### Out of hours emergency service

(after 5pm each evening at weekends,  
and public/bank holidays)

**028 90565444**

**[www.setrust.hscni.net](http://www.setrust.hscni.net)**

## Northern HSC Trust Telephone (for referral)

**0300 1234 333**

### Areas

Antrim, Carrickfergus, Newtownabbey, Larne, Ballymena, Cookstown, Magherafelt, Ballycastle, Ballymoney, Portrush and Coleraine

### Further contact details

(for ongoing professional liaison)

#### Central Gateway Team

Unit 5A, Toome Business Park  
Hillhead Road  
Toomebridge, BT41 3SF  
T: 028 7965 1020 F: 028 7965 1036

#### South Eastern Gateway Team

The Beeches  
76 Avondale Drive  
Ballyclare, BT39 9DB  
T: 028 93340165 F: 028 9334 2531

#### Northern Gateway Team

Coleraine Child Care  
Care Team  
7A Castlerock Road  
Coleraine, BT51 3HP  
T: 028 7032 5462 F: 028 7035 7614

#### Out of hours emergency service

(after 5pm each evening at weekends,  
and public/bank holidays)

**028 94468833**

**[www.northerntrust.hscni.net](http://www.northerntrust.hscni.net)**

## Southern HSC Trust Telephone (for referral)

**0800 7837 745**

### Areas

Craigavon, Banbridge, Dromore, Lurgan, Portadown, Gilford, Armagh, Coalisland, Dungannon, Fivemiletown, Markethill, Moy, Tandragee, Ballygawley, Newry City, Bessbrook, Annalong, Rathfriland, Warrenpoint, Crossmaglen, Kilkeel, Newtownhamilton

### Further contact details

(for ongoing professional liaison)

#### Craigavon/Banbridge Gateway Team

Brownlow H&SS Centre  
1 Legahory Centre  
Craigavon, BT65 5BE  
T: 028 38343011 F: 028 38324366

#### Newry/Mourne Gateway Team

Dromalane House  
Dromalane Road  
Newry, BT35 8AP  
T: 028 30825000 Option 1 F: 028 30825016

#### Armagh /Dungannon Gateway Team

E Floor South Tyrone Hospital  
Carland Road  
Dungannon, BT71 4AU  
T: 028 87713506 F: 028 87713671

#### Central Gateway Team

Gosford Place  
The Mall West  
Armagh, BT61 9AR  
T: 028 37415285 F: 028 37522544

#### Out of hours emergency service

(after 5pm each evening at weekends,  
and public/bank holidays)

**028 38334444**

**[www.southerntrust.hscni.net](http://www.southerntrust.hscni.net)**

Western HSC Trust Telephone (for referral)  
**028 7131 4090**

### Areas

Derry, Limavady, Strabane, Omagh and Enniskillen

### Further contact details

(for ongoing professional liaison)

#### **Derry Gateway Team**

Whitehill  
106 Irish Street  
Derry, BT47 2ND  
T: 028 71314090 F: 028 71314091

#### **Omagh Gateway Team**

Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital  
1 Donaghane Road  
Omagh, BT79 ONS  
T: 028 66344103 F: n/a

#### **Enniskillen Gateway Team**

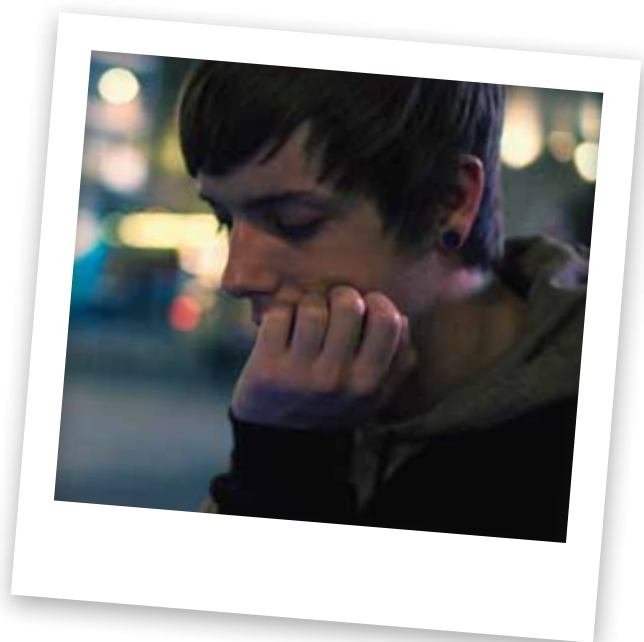
2 Coleshill Road  
Enniskillen, BT747HG  
T: 028 66344103 F: n/a

#### **Out of hours emergency service**

(after 5pm each evening at weekends,  
and public/bank holidays)

**028 71345171**

**[www.westerntrust.hscni.net](http://www.westerntrust.hscni.net)**



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Articles 50,62 and 63.

# Methodology Information

Contacts to the NSPCC are categorised either as 'advice' or 'referral'. Referrals are where concerns are serious enough to be passed on to the children's services and/or police and where identifying details for the child or family have been provided by the person contacting the NSPCC.

Contacts are categorised as 'advice' in three circumstances: the person contacting the NSPCC is only seeking guidance, there is insufficient information to make a referral, or the concerns do not meet the thresholds of seriousness.

Qualitative thematic analysis was carried out on a sample of 200 Northern Ireland referrals from April 2011 to March 2012. The quantitative data comes from data recorded about contacts to the helpline. Data has also been drawn from the work of NSPCC evaluation department which evaluated contacts to the NSPCC in 2010/11.

All quotes are from real people from Northern Ireland contacting the NSPCC but they have been edited to remove any potentially identifying factors and to increase clarity.

When we describe a year in the Helpline Highlight such as 2011/12, we are referring to the period from 1 April 2011 to 31 March 2012.

The case study reflects real calls to the NSPCC from Northern Ireland but has been created for the purpose of this report. To gain the invaluable insight of the helpline counsellors, a focus group and several interviews were conducted as part of the research for the helpline highlight series of reports.

## For more information please:

Telephone:  
**0808 800 5000**

Email:  
**help@nspcc.org.uk**

Researched and written by  
Margaret Gallagher, NSPCC

Published March 2013

# Notes





Anyone with concerns about a child should contact the NSPCC immediately. We're here 24/7. It's free and you don't have to say who you are.

**Call: 0808 800 5000**

**Email: [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk)**

**Text\*: 88858**

**Visit: [www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline)**

\*for Channel Islands 07786 200001. Standard network charges apply

**NSPCC**   
NORTHERN IRELAND  
**Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.**