



*Painéal Náisiúnta Athbhreithnithe*  
**NATIONAL REVIEW PANEL**

**Review undertaken in respect of the death of Martin,  
a young person who was known to the Child & Family Agency child  
protection services**

**Executive Summary**

**February 2017**

## **Introduction and background**

The young person who is the subject of this review, here called Martin, died when he was 13, at his home. The coroner certified his death as suicide because of the circumstances in which he was found. His family found it hard to believe that he took his own life and believe that his death was the result of a tragic accident. Martin has been described as a bright, chatty boy who was dearly loved by his parents and siblings and was particularly close to his mother. He was very reluctant to go to school, a problem which became more serious as he progressed to second level.

Martin and his family were known to their local Tusla social work department (SWD) at the time of his death. They had first been referred when Martin was 9 years old. His parents had separated and both were in new relationships. There was a past history of drug use and alleged domestic violence in the family and Martin's father had served a prison sentence. Initial reports to the SWD were made by Martin's father after the couple separated and mainly concerned allegations about his mother and her current partner's alleged drug use and alleged ill treatment of another sibling. A later report was made by a member of the public, raising concerns about Martin's treatment by his mother and partner. The review has noted Martin's father's dissatisfaction with the service from the SWD. He claimed that communication with him was poor, despite his legal guardianship of Martin. However, the review has found that the SWD responded to each of the reports made to it in a timely and child centred way, that it had contact with family members and that it gathered enough information to satisfy itself that Martin was well cared for within his family. Further support was offered to both Martin and his mother but declined by them. There was evidence of good interagency communication, although the absence of interagency meetings may have meant that opportunities to try and resolve Martin's school absenteeism were missed.

## **Findings**

The review has found no evidence that action or inaction on the part of the services involved with Martin had any bearing on his very tragic death, which was unexpected and a profound shock to everyone who knew him.

The review has noted that the main difficulty evident right through the involvement of the SWD was Martin's school attendance, which may have been impacted by factors in his home life, such as his very close attachment to his mother and his reluctance to leave her. The review found that while the SWD was very thorough in its collection of information about the family, the matter of Martin's school attendance did not receive the depth of examination that was warranted. While the school

principal was active in supporting and encouraging Martin's attendance, there is very little evidence of the involvement of the NEWB over the period during which this matter was a concern.

## Key learning

The most significant key learning point in this case relates to Martin's absenteeism from school. Persistent absenteeism is recognised to be symptomatic of deeper environmental problems<sup>1</sup> and needs to be taken seriously when conducting assessments and planning interventions. The child welfare and education literature illustrates that school can have a compensatory effect on vulnerable children, providing opportunities to raise self-confidence and self-esteem and promote resilience<sup>2</sup>. Children who are persistently absent miss out on those positive factors, but are also at much higher risk of poor educational outcomes, early school leaving, restricted choices, unemployment and other negative life experiences including criminal activity, drug use and imprisonment. It is also pointed out that absenteeism impacts not just on the child, but on their family and on the other pupils in their school as it can become a resource intensive issue and interferes with teachers' abilities to plan classes<sup>3</sup>. Some of the solutions suggested in the literature involve inter-disciplinary interventions and, preferably, co-location of truancy/ school attendance services and social services, so that a comprehensive, multi-agency response may be made<sup>4</sup>. In this case, the SWD offered a range of welfare services but had no leverage when it came to the family's engagement.

Opportunities for integrated responses currently exist within Tusla, which now encompasses a range of educational services. However, the level of required collaboration may need to be actively promoted and not assumed to come about naturally. A review was carried out by the DCYA in 2012 of the issues involved in integrating the NEWB with Tusla and has highlighted the challenges that need to be addressed<sup>5</sup>. The matter of adequate staffing in the NEWB is crucial if a cohesive service is

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<sup>1</sup> Thornton, M., Darmody, M. and McCoy, S. (2013) Persistent absenteeism among Irish primary school pupils, *Educational Review* 4: 488-501.

<sup>2</sup> Gilligan, Robbie (2006) Adversity, resilience and young people: the protective value of positive school and spare time experiences, *Children and Society*, 14:37-47

<sup>3</sup> Thornton et al, op cit.

<sup>4</sup> Kearney, C. (2008) *An interdisciplinary model of school absenteeism in youth to inform professional practice and public policy*. *Educ Psychol Review* 20:257-282

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/publications/NEWB\\_Review\\_2012.pdf](http://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/publications/NEWB_Review_2012.pdf)

to be achieved. An earlier review of the NEWB in 2002<sup>6</sup> recommended the recruitment of 300 Educational Welfare Officers nationally, and in 2005 the NEWB pre-budget submission identified as one of its targets the recruitment of sufficient EWOs to make a quota of 95 in frontline service delivery. At the time of writing, the number of EWOs still falls short of an interim target that was set eleven years ago and well short of the estimate of staffing needs conducted in 2002.

## **Recommendation**

The review recommends that Tusla revisits the 2012 review regarding the integration of the NEWB with Tusla to ascertain whether outstanding challenges have been addressed.

Dr. Helen Buckley

Chairperson, National Review Panel

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<sup>6</sup> Report on the Organisation and Staffing needs of the National Education Welfare Board by Dermot Rochford, Staff Relations Services – April 2002