



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Amateur Boxing: Sandy Row Amateur
Boxing Club

27 September 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)
Mr William Irwin (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr David Hilditch
Ms Rosaleen McCorley
Mr Michael McGimpsey
Mrs Karen McKeivitt
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Mr Ian McSorley	Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club
Mr David Thompson	Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club

The Chairperson: Good morning, Ian and David. You are very welcome to the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. Please introduce yourselves and then give us an opening statement, after which members will follow up with some questions.

Mr David Thompson (Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club): Hello. I am vice-chairman of Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club (SRABC). I apologise that our chairman, William Magee, is unavailable due to ill health. He would have been here.

Mr Ian McSorley (Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club): Hello. I am secretary of Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club. I thank the Committee for inviting us today to explain 'Northern Ireland Amateur Boxing: A Decade of Sectarian and Racial Abuse'. The SRABC was formed in 1998 in one of the most deprived areas of Belfast. We have a wide range of membership, so we decided to enter championships.

I will start with a quote. We have a young Chinese guy who comes to the gym. He was in St Kevin's Hall in February 2010. His quote is:

"I was really looking forward to see my mate's boxing fight, but it put me off cause I got a bottle chucked at me and people calling me an orange chink. I was really scared and I thought we weren't getting out of there."

That sums up a young man and all the young people who, at formative ages in their lives, have attended boxing championships in Belfast from 2000 to 2010. In the report, we have catalogued all

the different times that things have happened to the young people. It has been traumatic throughout their lives, and those young people are going to remember it and carry it with them. If anybody asks about the sport of boxing and what happened to them, they will speak about incidents of abuse; that is what happened to them when they took part in the sport. That is not good for the sport; it is not encouraging people or being inclusive. That is the way it looks, and that is the way it is.

In 2000, we were attacked in Twinbrook. In 2001, coincidentally, Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club hosted the County Antrim Championships. It was described as "magnificent", and there were no issues. In 2001, we were refused entry into the national club. There are other incidents. In 2002, at the Balmoral Hotel, young people were abused again.

The Chairperson: Sorry, Ian; do you mind if we go into closed session for a second?

The Committee went into closed session.

On resuming —

Mr McSorley: In March 2002, there were sectarian chants from a large hostile section in a crowd of approximately 400 people in the Balmoral Hotel. Imagine if your child had gone to that event. It would affect them for the rest of their lives. They would not forget it, especially as it happened during the formative age of their lives.

In 2002, there was an incident in the Dockers club. In April 2003, there was an incident in Grosvenor activity centre. In 2004, there was an incident in St Kevin's Hall. Coincidentally, in 2006, at another event, the same person challenged our boxer over whether he was the right age, but it was overruled after weeks of argument. Also, in 2006, a child was crying and had to leave the arena in the Holiday Inn, Belfast. In 2007, in St Kevin's Hall in the New Lodge, a young competitor, once again, was subjected to sectarian abuse and chanting. In 2009, in St Kevin's Hall, a young boxer suffered profoundly traumatising sectarian abuse.

In 2010, an incident in St Kevin's Hall was the final straw, and we said that enough was enough. It has to be remarked that we spoke to all the officers of the County Antrim Board after every incident. We sent them letters, but the abuse continued. The board said that it was sorry that the abuse had happened, but no meaningful steps were taken to stop it. Again, it has to be emphasised that the boxers were impressionable young men, and that this was what they were put through. We contacted the County Antrim Board a month after the event to give them time to come to us and we sent them a letter, which was hand delivered. However, we received no reply until April 2010.

It must be pointed out that everybody does child protection courses. The House of Sport put us through those courses, and we were given a book. The first point states that the right to happiness within childhood should be recognised and enhanced at all levels of sport. The second point states that adults should have some understanding of the emotional, physical and personal needs of young people. The third point states that the physical, emotional or sexual abuse or neglect of any kind or the threat of abuse is totally unacceptable within sport, as in society in general. The fifth point states that children's sport should be conducted in a safe, positive and encouraging atmosphere. The sixth point states that standards of excellence should be extended to all personal conduct. Finally, the seventh point states that all children should be valued and treated as equitable in a fair manner, regardless of ability, age, gender, religion, social or ethnic background or political persuasion.

The Sandy Row club has all sorts of people training in its gym, and, clearly, all of the above practices have been broken by what everybody has been put through. Even in the championships, the governing body did not adhere to those practices. Eventually, we met the board in June 2010, and we brought forward an eight-point plan, which was to make the sport inclusive for both sides of the community, and not just one side. You can read the eight points in the report. The aim is to make the sport open and inclusive throughout Northern Ireland and to bring in all sections of the community. It includes quite simple things, such as: neutrality of venues; neutral venue for championship tournaments; and neutral ground for training courses. Everything should be neutral. In this day and age, nobody can understand why that is not the case.

When we were in St Kevin's Hall, there was only one security man. We believe that proper security should be put in place with Security Industry Authority registered officials. There should be relevant child protection courses and choices of officials. Everything should be done to enhance the sport, especially when we have a boxing strategy going forward at the minute. We have sent letters to the

County Antrim Board, the Ulster Boxing Council and the Irish Amateur Boxing Association (IABA) in Dublin, but it has not responded to us. The IABA met us in February 2011, and our last contact was in September 2011 when we sent a letter asking for reaffiliation and asking what safeguards could be put in place to protect young people so that such incidents would not happen again. We have not had any correspondence since, despite the report being released in August. The IABA, the County Antrim Board or the Ulster Council have not contacted us or pursued it. The report was released on 16 August 2012. Everybody around the world has contacted us, but nobody from the relevant boxing authorities in Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland has come back to us regarding these terrible — I do not know the exact word to use to describe it.

People have to realise that these are young, impressionable teenagers between the ages of 12 and 16. This has happened to approximately six of them. One person who spoke to us regarding the report asked what a clinical psychologist would have to say about the effects and damages that these young men are carrying when you mention sport to them. Yes, it is a good community sport. Sometimes it is peddled, but behind the scenes, this is the reality of what has been happening to the young people of Sandy Row. There are approximately 22 or 23 nationalist clubs in Belfast and there are approximately six unionist clubs.

To go back to the events, I will just give you an idea of the sport: the child protection officer from the County Antrim Board sat in St Kevin's Hall and witnessed what happened to our young people. He said to me afterwards that it should have been stopped. That was his job. He came to me after the event, after I spoke to the president and the secretary, and he said that it should have been stopped. It was not stopped. It was quite OK for those young people to go through those traumatic events. A statement should have been sent out to the sport and to everybody who was latching on to it saying that no, this is not acceptable.

We have lost quite a lot of boxers over the years, and people have gone out of the sport simply because of the way that they have been treated. Who knows? We could have had gold, silver or bronze medals from south Belfast as well. Through the Good Friday Agreement, we should have the parity of esteem and equality that everybody respects throughout life. There does not seem to be any here, which is disappointing. I have also read that in the child protection principles.

We have not heard from anybody; the president has not contacted us, nobody has contacted us regarding these issues. Kate Hoey MP, who was the first lady sports Minister in the United Kingdom, met us on a recent visit and said that these events that have happened to our young people are terrible, and that the only way forward should be through funding for a new Northern Ireland amateur boxing association for everybody, where people have a choice to box for GB and Northern Ireland or Ireland. At the minute, there is no choice. Boris Johnson's office also contacted us and stated that this was a very serious matter, so, the public in general see what is going on and what is happening to our young people.

We have spoken to different Departments. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) is aware of the situation, the sports Minister is aware of the situation and the police have recorded it and are aware of the situation. The World Police and Fire Games are coming here in 2013, and the people who are running the sport need to really think about what is happening here in the future. We want to take the sport forward for everybody. There is a massive onus on us to get this sport cleaned up for everybody in Northern Ireland. Anything that has been said here today is only to enhance the sport and make it more inclusive for the entire community, not just certain elements of it.

It has to be said that a lot of boxing clubs have contacted and supported us. The County Antrim president, Billy McKee, came to visit us last February. He told us that everybody knows that this is going on, but that we are the only guys with the backbone to take this issue forward. Everybody knows, all the clubs have spoken to us and said that this is terrible. I have had nationalist clubs come to us and say that what is happening to us is terrible and ridiculous. We have also put in a letter from a boxing club in west Belfast, which came to see us before the Antrim Council. It came only days after the event and apologised to us and said how awful it was, but the County Antrim Board officials did not come.

We look forward to the day when the sport is brought forward and is open and inclusive to everybody in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, Ian. I cannot speak for everyone, but I feel that what you have outlined is unacceptable, particularly given where we are, where the sport is and the profile of the sport since the success around the Olympics. Obviously, steps have been taken in other sports,

particularly football, in order to drive out sectarianism and to make sure that it is a sport for all. Certainly, it was raised with the Ulster Provincial Boxing Council when its representatives came to speak to the Committee back in May. During that meeting, I raised issues around Sandy Row. Since you are now deemed to be unaffiliated, you are no longer regarded as a boxing club; essentially, you are a fitness gym. Will you outline the steps that were taken to get you to the stage of no longer being affiliated? Will you also outline your response to the fact that you are now called a fitness gym?

Mr McSorley: Sandy Row contacted the Ulster Council, the Antrim Board and the Irish ABA. Everybody in sport, in Northern Ireland and throughout the world, knows that everybody has to have child protection. In 2008, Sandy Row applied to Access Northern Ireland and had our own Access Northern Ireland register. So, when members came in, they were vetted, if they were working with the young people. In March or April 2010, we got a letter from the Ulster Council telling us to contact Paul McMahon or Paul Stephenson from the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) to show our Access Northern Ireland forms. We did that. Paul Stephenson came along to our gym and checked everybody's forms. We phoned Paul McMahon, the president, who was out of the country on boxing business at the time. Paul came along. We explained to him the issues that we had in the sport and why we were apprehensive about showing our papers to people.

In September, we were put out of the IABA, simply because Mr McMahon, the president of the Ulster Boxing Council, had not seen our Access Northern Ireland forms. However, it states in the letter that was sent to us that we had to contact Paul Stephenson. We did that. We believe that this was a stick to beat us, because we brought forward the complaints of the abuse.

You asked about us being called a fitness club. Basically, I think that we have been boycotted out of the sport. We have been ostracised. Other clubs will not come to train with us, because they are frightened to go out on a limb, and our young people have walked away from the sport because they cannot participate at boxing championships. Other clubs do come along and help us out. We have had a number of shows, and they have come along and trained. However, they have said that they do not want anyone to know that they are there, and we have not let on. Such clubs have been from both sides of the community, and they have been more than helpful. So, is it an achievement or a goal to say that we are a fitness club? Obviously, we have been pushed out of the sport, and attempts have been made to silence us. However, as the president said, we will take these issues on, and we are the only club to do that, despite it happening to other clubs. It is very unfair to say that we are a fitness club; we are a boxing club. Yes, we want to belong to and be affiliated to the boxing association, but we want to be affiliated to an association that is looking after young people and promoting the sport.

The Chairperson: You commented that all sorts of people train at your club. Will you outline the type of people who use your club?

Mr McSorley: We have people from all parts and sections of the community. We have people from Dublin and Cork training in the club; we have people from all faiths and culture; we have Japanese, Chinese, Hungarian and Australian people. We have all the nationalities; we have everybody. We are open and inclusive to everybody, and we treat everybody the same. On that, we received a sports award from the Belfast Media Group in 2010. Our members collected an award on behalf of Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club. We also had a guy from Dublin, Patrick O'Shea, who said:

"In October 2009 I visited Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club for the first time as a member of the Queen's university boxing team. I was somewhat apprehensive as, apart from the reputation of Sandy Row, I had never been in an Orange hall before. My initial concerns couldn't have been more wrong. From the beginning, I, like everyone else, was made to feel very welcome. We were all encouraged to come back, and did so. The Queen's University boxing club, which I co-founded the same year, moved its training entirely to Sandy Row, where we remain today. Apart from attending the university championships, there is little distinction between Queen's and Sandy Row, as we have trained together and students regularly box for Sandy Row. In the past, I have trained in several clubs in my native Dublin, and never have I been made to feel as welcome nor encouraged to get involved as I was in Sandy Row."

We have all nationalities in the club.

Mr D Bradley: Good morning, and thank you very much for coming along. It certainly is a very alarming catalogue of abuse that you have outlined in your report. I hope that no one would condone that type of behaviour in sport. I just have a couple of questions. The Department of Culture, Arts and

Leisure has been made aware of the incidents that you have recorded in your report. Have you had any contact from the Department or its officials on that issue?

Mr McSorley: We had a number of meetings with Colin Watson and the DCAL representatives, during which they were very supportive. In January 2012, they were surprised when we told them that we had asked to reaffiliate in August 2011. The Dublin Irish Amateur Boxing Association sent us back a letter — I think it is in the report. We asked for the safeguards to be put in place, and we were sent a letter saying that they were passing it on, they were glad to have us back and wanting to be reaffiliated, and they would contact the Ulster Council and the Antrim Board. Then, when we had a meeting in January we were able to produce the letter that we had sent. DCAL officials were working on the boxing strategy and with Dublin, and were surprised, so they sent a letter to Dublin saying that they had met with us and asking why they had not been in touch with us. We also had a meeting with the DCAL representatives in June, and again, nothing had moved forward regarding the IABA in Dublin. To be honest: nobody has contacted us since the report has been out. We have not heard from the IABA since September 2011.

Mr D Bradley: Prior to the meeting, I was looking up some of the media reports that followed the initial launch of your report. It said in one of those that the IABA was carrying out an investigation into the allegations that you had made. Has that proceeded?

Mr McSorley: We have had no contact whatsoever. The reason why we had to put the report together was because we were being totally ignored. Obviously, the IABA is doing the same again, as are the Ulster Council and the County Antrim Board. Nobody has contacted us whatsoever. Nobody has said that it is ridiculous, it should not have got to this stage or it should have been stopped. And, it should have been stopped, but nobody has contacted us whatsoever.

Mr D Bradley: In your presentation, you said that there were around 25 boxing clubs from nationalist areas and around six or seven from unionist areas, is that right?

Mr McSorley: Yes.

Mr D Bradley: Have other clubs from a Protestant/unionist background experienced the same level of abuse as the Sandy Row club has?

Mr McSorley: Yes, they have. They have all spoken to us. At some events, I witnessed them being attacked before we even go into the auditorium or into the ring. Elected representatives also know that they have been attacked. Billy McKee, the president of the Antrim Board, came to our gym in February 2012 and stated that we all know that happens, but that it was only us who have the backbone to take it forward.

It took us 10 years, because we did not know what to do or where to go. We hoped and trusted that this would be put out of the sport. We knew that, if we complained, exactly what happened to us would have happened. The other boxing clubs would be the same. For all boxing coaches and clubs, it is a big part of their lives. The time that is given freely to work in all sections of the community must be remembered. Any club, like us, would be ostracised. The numbers of our young people are dropping because we cannot get fights and we cannot go places and do things. Effectively, we are being closed. The other clubs have been getting this.

Mr D Bradley: Are you saying that the other clubs have the same experience but are unwilling, afraid or not prepared to come forward in the way that you have done to outline their complaints?

Mr McSorley: Yes. It has to be remembered that we did not do it for 10 years. We had no other way to address it; we had nowhere else to go. We knew that this would happen, and it is exactly what has happened.

Mr Ó hOisín: Thanks, gentlemen. I declare an interest as a patron of St Canice's ABC. Gentlemen, you talked about your members and coaches attending child protection courses. That is prudent right across the sport; it is common practice. Can you clarify whether, from 2008, your coaches, members and those who are involved in the club have been vetted by Access NI?

Mr McSorley: Yes.

Mr Ó hOisín: What is the difficulty in producing the papers to the governing bodies?

Mr McSorley: The last paragraph of the letter from the Ulster Provincial Council states:

"If you have any concerns about this process please contact either myself, Paul Mc Mahon ... or Paul Stephenson Child Protection in Sport Unit NSPCC".

We phoned Paul McMahon, who was out of the country at the time. As a unionist club, we find that all the problems that we have had have been in west or north Belfast. It must be reiterated that this is not against the people or the boxing clubs; everybody is hard working in all of our clubs. We find it very hard, given that everybody in west Belfast backs us. We phoned Paul McMahon, who was out of the country. We phoned Paul Stephenson, who came along and checked all our papers and information from Access Northern Ireland. It says in the letter to contact Paul Stephenson.

Mr Ó hOisín: Was the offer made to you at any time for you to submit the names of your vetted coaches and members and not include addresses, thus giving some protection to your members?

Mr McSorley: We had a meeting with the Ulster president, Paul McMahon; the secretary of the County Antrim Board, Malachy Scott; and the child protection officer of the County Antrim Board, Mr Sean Canavan. The meeting fell into a mess; the three men fell out with one another and started arguing in front of us. Before that, we agreed that this could be done, but it just went into a complete mess; they fell out with one another and started shouting at one other, saying, "Let me talk", "No, you shut up; I'm talking", and, "Don't you tell me to shut up". We cancelled the meeting; it was totally unacceptable.

Mr Ó hOisín: You say that some of the incidents that occurred have been reported to the PSNI. Do they have a record of all —

Mr McSorley: They have a record of the most recent one, which was February 2010. We contacted the police in 2000 and explained how our minibus was attacked — it would probably have been the RUC then — and how we had to go back for championships. The boxing authorities came within 24 hours and met us the next night, apologised for what happened and said that it was totally wrong. They wanted us to come back the next night, when we had some guys in the finals. We went back, and there was complete security and no trouble whatsoever.

Mr Ó hOisín: Have the PSNI taken any action on any of the incidents?

Mr McSorley: They have an incident report and stated it as sectarian and racial abuse.

Mr Ó hOisín: You said that things should be neutral in the boxing fraternity. It is my experience that, for the most part, they are. Are your premises neutral?

Mr McSorley: Our premises are in a Protestant working-class area, just like a lot of the other nationalist clubs are in their own areas. When we have people coming from Dublin and Cork to train in our club, obviously, they do not feel any threat by coming. You could say that our premises are bordering outside the unionist area; we are almost on Shaftesbury Square at the back of some of the nightclubs. The boxing events have all been held, apart from one, in nationalist areas. It must be remembered that we are trying to promote the sport. If the sport was moved to neutral venues where mothers and fathers can go and watch and feel comfortable, it will enhance the sport. Our eight-point plan is to make the sport better for everybody.

Mr Hilditch: A disappointing, if not shocking, catalogue of events has been unrolled before the Committee this morning. As a scrutiny Committee, we probably do not have a lot of questions for the delegation; we probably have questions to take up with DCAL, the Minister, Sport NI and the people who regulate sport in Northern Ireland. What has gone on is pretty shocking and damning. The Ulster Council was before us previously and, under some questioning from me, revealed that there were clear governance issues at that stage, and that has been manifested in the report. We will take those issues up centrally.

Ian, you said that somebody mentioned the potential for a Northern Ireland federation as a stepping stone to trying to get round certain issues if the other bodies are not reacting to them. Do you have

anything further to add on that or was that a suggestion from one of the people you communicated with?

Mr McSorley: Kate Hoey MP met us recently and stated that she can see that there are terrible problems in the sport. It is quite unacceptable that the governing bodies have not addressed them. They have not been in touch with us. A governing body should have been there straight away to get it resolved and allow us to move forward. None did; they have ignored us. Even since the report was issued, the governing body, the Irish Amateur Boxing Association in Dublin, has not made any contact since September 2011. The only way to enhance the sport must be through a Northern Ireland amateur boxing association. We have to start from scratch because everything seems to be covered up and swept under the carpet. This is about young people's lives.

Mr Hilditch: The Committee should take up those issues. That will do me for the moment.

The Chairperson: Mr Hilditch referred to the governance issues that were raised at that meeting, and, as you will be aware, a boxing strategy is being developed by DCAL, Sport NI and Belfast City Council. Has your club been approached by anyone to ask you to fit within that strategy?

Mr McSorley: Nobody has contacted us about any boxing strategy or any issues. We saw a letter that was sent from the IABA in Dublin to Mr Jim Allister MLA on 12 September. It says:

"Further to your recent letter in relation to the above boxing club, we note your comments and, as an association, we have at a number of meetings emphasised our wish to have Sandy Row Boxing Club affiliated. Regrettably, this has not happened. The IABA president, Tommy Murphy, and others continue to work to help to resolve the situation. The IABA would be pleased for Sandy Row to reaffiliate and play its part in shaping the future of boxing in Ireland."

Nobody has contacted us. That letter was sent in September 2012, and the last contact that we had from Dublin was in September 2011 to state that it would contact the Antrim Board and the Ulster Council to have us reaffiliated or to push this forward.

The Chairperson: It is regrettable that, if you are not affiliated during the process of the boxing strategy, you may then fall outside any funding that is available. Although you have worked hard for 14 years, you may be excluded. Again, we perhaps need to explore that on your behalf.

Mr McGimpsey: Thanks, Ian. As has been said, you have suffered a disgraceful catalogue of abuse over the years, and I understand that there is a cumulative effect and that we have reached the breaking point now. It is not just about the amateur boxing body and the Ulster Council; Sport Northern Ireland is in place here, and it is supposed to be looking after you. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, which funds the sport, is supposed to be looking after you and is supposed to ensure that funding streams go to sports that are properly governed and adhere to issues of equality and fair play. It is all carefully written out and was passed through referendum in the Belfast Agreement. What joy, if any, had you with Sport Northern Ireland, for example? How is it supporting you? How is it that it is allowing the club to now be described as a fitness club as opposed to a boxing club?

Mr McSorley: At the back of the report, there is, I think, a letter or an e-mail from Declan Steele of Sport NI, in which he asks whether he can facilitate a meeting between us and the County Antrim board. That happened around last Christmas. We think that it is absolutely unbelievable that Sport NI sent that, specifically given all the incidents and things that have happened. It asked for a meeting to facilitate negotiations between people who knew about that event and about all the other things over the years. Surely, when people do something wrong in their workplace, they are reprimanded or are taken out of their job.

Again, we had another letter from Sport NI on 7 September 2012. It stated:

"Thank you for a copy of the report which Sport NI received along with the wide range of individuals and organisations across the UK and Ireland."

It must be upset that we contacted everybody to let them know what happened. It went on to again ask whether it could set up negotiations between the County Antrim Board and us. I think that is absolutely unbelievable. Sport NI is a government body that looks after sport. It should be dealing

with the situation. The child protection officer — listen to this — sat and watched young people being abused and then turned round afterwards and said, "It should not have happened."

Mr McGimpsey: I agree; it is disgrace. I cannot understand where Sport NI is on this; it is supposed to be managing the issue. It also reports back to the Department. You have had discussions with the Department. Those appear to have produced a little bit of sympathy but no intervention or action.

Mr McSorley: Yes; correct. We believe that we had very positive meetings with Colin Watson and his colleagues from the Department. They did not see anything wrong with the eight-point plan and said that it was up to the Department to change the sport, as it had done with Irish football, which has been working hard and has done a good job, and that that was the only way forward for boxing. With that leadership, it has to be changed. They are saying tacitly, "Yes, this has happened", and they know it has happened.

Mr Thompson: People are asking us to enter into negotiations with people who we believe have been complicit in all this. They have sat and watched, from the first time that it happened right through to 2010, the harassment and provocation that youngsters have faced in these venues. Our opinion is that the County Antrim Board, the Ulster Board and the IABA are all complicit, either by not being proactive or by not even being reactive in sanctioning clubs where this has happened. They have never done that. They have sat back and watched young children being abused, and that is what it is — abuse. Those are the people we are expected to meet.

Mr McGimpsey: This is clearly an issue that we need to take up. We need Sport Northern Ireland in here as well as the Department. There is culpability here. Clearly, they are not performing in the way that they should. We as a Committee must look at those very serious issues, as well as the issues around how the sport is being run in Northern Ireland.

Mr Irwin: It is totally unacceptable that that sort of behaviour was allowed to continue. It is certainly unbelievable that, in this day and age, it was allowed to continue. Do you believe that it is a hooligan element, or is it wider than that? Are any other clubs having the same issues?

Mr Thompson: We do not believe that it is the boxing clubs. As Ian said, we have quite good working relationships with other boxing clubs. However, when you run a show or have a championship, people can pay at the door and walk in. Certainly, when we run a show, we are quite clear at the outset that anybody who verbally abuses any of the boxers, be it sectarian or other kinds of comments, will be ejected from the arena; it is simple. Other people do not seem to do that. It is not done at championships. When it does happen, they do not seem to react to it, even when they are sitting in the same room witnessing what is going on. That is one of the bigger issues for us. People who we believed would have been helping and supporting us in the overall projecting of the sport and for the benefits that it gives young people coming through sat by and witnessed and were complicit or just were not willing to help or do anything else. So, yes, there is the hooligan element, which you will get anywhere you go. Certainly, you expect to get booed, not at a championship but at a boxing competition. Let us be honest, you expect your boxer to get booed because he is fighting the wee lad from that area. You do not expect them to get racial or sectarian abuse.

Mrs McKevitt: Thank you very much for the report. It is very disappointing to learn about the allegations that your kids, and, of course, their mentors, have been suffering for the past 10 years. You said that you held your breath for probably 10 years and did not push the issue, although it was reported to the police. You said that other clubs would have liked to have done the same but were — I am not sure whether you used the word afraid but that was the impression you gave. You also stated that you knew this would happen, so I take it that that was the reaction. Did other clubs raise this matter with the board and get the same reaction or was it because the board was at venues and witnessed what was happening and did not do anything?

Mr McSorley: I saw a couple of incidents at other clubs. There was another club from a unionist area in St Kevin's Hall before us, and it got abuse. What was said to us is that they mention the issue and talk about it but it does not get anywhere. Every time you bring the matter up, you get lip service. Sometimes, the people who have been in authority said that such behaviour was disgraceful and deplorable, and quite rightly. However, it just goes back to the same thing. That is why it happened repeatedly. We are calling for neutral venues for both sides of the community.

It is hard enough, as you can imagine, for young boxers to keep their diet right, do their weigh-ins and get ready for a fight. That is why we are suggesting a neutral venue, such as Jordanstown, where the real boxing people can go along and spectate. It may be a wee bit of a distance but it is a good facility. There are changing rooms and showers, and they will do their boxing. Their achievement, hard work and performance will be valued, whereas when our guys train, they are apprehensive and nervous even before they leave the gym because they have heard the stories about what happened to boxers in bygone days. Then when they go in, it is like, "Oh dear, we are the only people from this area."

The feedback I get from the young people is that they would be much happier in a neutral venue. Their families, too, would be much happier, from both sides of the community. That is the only sensible way to promote the whole sport. The sport would be lifted.

Mrs McKeivitt: It is very sad when you do have a mixed community within your grounds that seem to work well and socialise well in training but, when they go outside your venue, they seem to be intimidated by others. First of all, I would like to praise your club for the great work that you are doing for all sections of the community. I myself have a great interest in boxing. I never boxed but I like to watch and see the developments, potential, courage and social skills that it gives children who may be heavy and who are going maybe to lose weight but, more importantly, for that social skill.

Your report summary recommends:

"The removal of those who have governed boxing in Northern Ireland over the last decade"

It goes on to call on the Executive to:

"acknowledge the seriousness of this issue which has for so long been ignored and ... to seize this issue and respond appropriately to it."

What actions would be acceptable to your club and that you would see as an appropriate response?

Mr McSorley: We would like to see, as would the club and the people who have contacted us, a new organisation set up. You have the World Police and Fire Games coming in 2013, and people involved in boxing are going to turn up and put their smiles on, yet they have effectively closed a club down and put it out of a sport. One of the people came to us, a person within the sport, and said, "Ian, you are not the first club this has happened to", and he named another club that was closed years ago. He said that they will move on to another one. A club that opened recently came to us and said that they saw us get all the abuse, so they know it is coming their way. The people in charge need to realise that these are people's lives and people's emotions.

What we are saying is that we want to enhance the sport. We are not coming here today to tell anybody in a nasty way that they should do this or should not do that. The DCAL officials who we met agreed with us that the intention is to push the sport forward and encourage everybody to be inclusive and join in; so, why have the people who have stood by and watched this happen never done anything about it? If anyone saw a child being hectorred or abused in the street, they would get out of their car and stop it. That did not happen.

Mrs McKeivitt: Just to get this clear in my mind: are you stating that you as a club feel that the County Antrim Board is forcing you to close because you have highlighted sectarian and racial abuse?

Mr McSorley: Yes; 100%.

Ms McCorley: It is depressing, and I suppose it confirms what we know: sectarianism is still rife in our society. This is another example of different sections of society and sectarian abuse. It is wrong and should not happen anywhere, and it especially should not happen to children. I think it is depressing to hear of that happening anywhere.

Do you feel that you could help your case by being more proactive? I notice that you refused a ministerial visit and you refused to attend the event here in Parliament Buildings. You have your reasons for that, and you are absolutely entitled to your views, but, in the general way that things work, sometimes you have to just get in there and be part of things. Have you tried to feed your ideas into the boxing strategy? If you are the one club that is experiencing sectarianism, your voice needs

to be included; it needs to be part of the strategy. Could you be more proactive in helping your case? What steps are you taking to being reaffiliated, or are you hoping to do that?

Mr McSorley: We have spoken about all the abuse for twelve and a half years now. We have been paid lip service; nothing has been done about it. Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club had to compile the report because we were totally ignored. We met the County Antrim Board in June 2010 after the incident in February 2010, so it was some months later, and we believed that we were wasting our time. We are not getting anywhere. We were not getting anywhere for 10 years, and now this has happened. We have just been ignored, so there would be no point wasting our time.

It was suggested that the Minister come along to the club, and we stated that we were not going to have a photo shoot until these issues were addressed. Things would just carry on for 10 years. We have no problems with anyone coming. Our gym is open to everybody. However, these issues need to be seen to be addressed and changed. Again, we could not visit Stormont for a boxing celebration; we could not celebrate boxing. We would be mingling with the people who have put us out of the sport, who have alienated us, who have boycotted us. These are the reasons why we did not go to these things or participate, but we sent letters, and, again, nothing has been done about the issues. Once these issues are addressed, we would certainly participate. It is only common sense about equality and life; if people from all denominations and backgrounds treat it properly and fairly just like we do at our gym, that is the answer. It has to be reiterated that the child protection officer sat and did nothing. That is a damning indictment.

Ms McCorley: Have you considered taking your case to the Equality Commission?

Mr McSorley: We are looking at a few other options behind the scenes.

Mr McMullan: Thank you for the presentation. I will try to play devil's advocate. Have child protection papers been lodged with the County Antrim Board?

Mr McSorley: We registered in 2008 with Access Northern Ireland, which means that, if a volunteer joins the club and would like to work with the young people, they are vetted. It has to be stated that we were formed as a group on 23 July 2008, but the Ulster Council was only formed and registered in 2010. So, we were two years in front of the governing bodies. When you join, we have two registered signatories who check your Access NI forms. If you have any offences that deem you inappropriate to work with young people, you will be refused.

Mr McMullan: In 2010, did you put your affiliations in to the County Antrim Board?

Mr McSorley: No, as I explained earlier, we got a letter from the Ulster Council stating that we could contact Paul McMahon or Paul Stephenson from the NSPCC. Paul Stephenson came along in June 2010 and checked our papers.

Mr McMullan: Was he happy with them?

Mr McSorley: Yes.

Mr McMullan: But, you have not physically sent them to the board?

Mr McSorley: No.

Mr McMullan: Would that not be a first step in getting registered?

Mr McSorley: No, because we have two signatories who are checked by Access Northern Ireland. This was a stick to beat us out of the sport. It has to be remembered that we have been above board since 2008. The County Antrim Board and the Ulster Council registered in 2010 to be a body, but our people were checked out well before that. We are a shining example, as you can see from our response to deplorable actions that have happened at boxing venues. We are stating everything, even going back to the manual that was given to us by the NSPCC. At St Kevin's Hall that night, the child protection book was thrown out the window, as I stated to the child protection officer.

Mr McMullan: On the night of the unfortunate incident in St Kevin's Hall, did the child protection officer compile a report on what he saw for his own organisation?

Mr McSorley: That organisation did not answer any of the letters we sent them until four months afterwards. An MLA, Jim Allister, has asked Dublin what actions it has taken, and they have come back —

Mr Thompson: To answer your question: we are not aware of whether he put in a report to the board.

Mr McMullan: So, you never asked him for his report.

Mr Thompson: We certainly were not copied into any correspondence about one or forwarded one.

Mr McMullan: So, he may have put in a report, but we do not know.

Mr Thompson: It would be worse if he did and we did not know about it, because we have a board sitting looking at what the child protection officer was doing on the night. We do not know whether he put in a report.

Mr McMullan: It would help your case if he had put in a report that was in line with what you are saying.

Mr Thompson: I understand that, but we are not aware of whether he put in an official report.

Mr McMullan: Are you happy with the way that the PSNI has handled all the incidents and allegations?

Mr McSorley: Yes.

Mr McMullan: In one of your reports, you say that there has been procrastination from individuals within the PSNI.

Mr McSorley: There was a paper mix-up, but it worked out OK. A guy was off work due to shifts and holidays.

Mr McMullan: I have been a big supporter of boxing. You talk about the revolving door of dinosaurs. That is a very worrying indictment of the sport of boxing. Have the six unionist clubs made any reports similar to yours?

Mr McSorley: No. They have spoken to us and the simple reason is that, as I explained to you, it took us 10 years before we came forward because we had no other redress. The country has moved on, society has moved on but this sport has not moved on because of the revolving door of dinosaurs. It is quite true. Those people have not changed. Society has moved forward, but those people have proved that they have not changed.

Mr McMullan: Do you think that the only way to do this is to have a Northern Ireland or Ireland amateur boxing association?

Mr McSorley: Yes. As you can hear from our evidence, the Irish Amateur Boxing Association has not contacted us for a year. When the report came out, it surely should have been in touch with us immediately. The County Antrim Board and the Ulster Council have not done anything. Are those organisations worthy of working with young people? A new group has to be set up to cover the whole of Northern Ireland.

Mr McMullan: Would it not be more beneficial for you to affiliate? If you are not affiliated, there is worry in the back of my head somewhere that you will not get a share of the pot of money for amateur boxing.

Mr Thompson: I will supplement what Ian said. The document and our recommendations were produced to stimulate a debate and to expose the sectarian nature of the harassment that our young

people went through. It is to expose a county board, a provincial board and an all-Ireland board that have totally ignored it for 10 years. They have witnessed it and done absolutely nothing. The affiliation is quite clear: the Irish Amateur Boxing Association is still quoting letters in September to us as "Sandy Row Boxing Club". It does not see us as a fitness club even though the County Antrim Board does, and that is another reflection on the County Antrim Board, which just ignores us.

People may ask us to join in and affiliate and take kids to championships to suffer the same abuse for the next five or six years while people sit on their hands and try to come up with a resolution — we are not prepared to do that. We did it for 10 years with the help and support of parents. Obviously, we did not take kids into those areas without their support, especially after the initial incident in Twinbrook where the bus was hit with bricks and kids could have come home with heads split open or, worse, could have been dead. It is as simple as that. That could have happened that night. We struggle with the question of affiliation big style at this moment.

Mr McSorley: We asked for affiliation in August 2011 when we sent a letter to Dublin. We got this reply:

"Thank you for your letter dated 5th August 2011. My apologies for not replying to you earlier this was due to the workload of the Association in the month of August. I am pleased to see that Sandy Row ABC intends to re-affiliate to the association for the 2011/2012 season."

In our letter in August 2011, we asked what safeguards it is putting in place. Our letter asked for:

"confirmation of what guarantees and safeguards will be put in place and would refer you to the attached list of 8 requirements".

The response in September 2011 says:

"The eight points that you raised have been brought to the attention of the Antrim and Ulster Presidents for their consideration and I will keep you informed of all developments in this matter. If I can be of any further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me."

This is September 2012, and we have had no response from the Irish Amateur Boxing Association, the County Antrim Board or the Ulster Council. We have asked to re-affiliate with our safeguards, and it is quite obvious that they do not want us. You can see that for yourself.

Mr McGimpsey: I want to clarify the point about a report by the child protection officer for the event in St Kevin's Hall. Is it possible that a child protection officer could write a report without talking to you and without talking to the victims of that abuse? I would have thought that it is seriously delinquent of a child protection officer to suddenly produce a report without even discussing it with Sandy Row Boxing Club.

Mr McSorley: We met the child protection officer in October 2010, and he mentioned nothing about a report. The Antrim Board did not send us a letter until June 2010 after the event in February despite us sending it a letter. I would like to think that he did but I would be surprised. Protocol meant that he should have done but he never mentioned that at our meeting.

Mr Thompson: We would have expected to be spoken to. Absolutely. But the answer to the question is that, honestly, we are unsure whether a report was produced.

Mr McGimpsey: Thank you for that. The other point is about Access Northern Ireland. Clearly, you were two years ahead of the game as far as that was concerned. The board asked you to demonstrate your registration by contacting one of three people on that list. The one you contacted was the NSPCC inspector and he duly authenticated your papers. That, again, is a non-issue as far as this is concerned.

Mr Thompson: We tried to reach Paul McMahon first; he was out of the country. He was the guy who then said that he had never seen them but he gave us another contact to do that through. All he had to do was go to Mr Stephenson and ask him the question.

Mr McSorley: We got a letter. We only knew that our affiliation was knocked back in September 2010 after paying our fee of £470 in May or June and our Access NI forms being checked. We then spoke

to the NSPCC guy and said, "Why did you not let us know? You checked the forms and we are sitting here three months later not knowing." Some of the guys and young people were training over the summer, so, effectively, did we have any insurance?

Mr Swann: Gentlemen, I commend you for still being there after 10 years working for the young people of Sandy Row and that area. It would have been so easy for volunteers, after seeing their heads knocked against a brick wall for 10 years, to give up and walk away. I commend you for continuing to work for the young people in that area and providing a facility, too.

With the moneys coming up and everything that has happened, it would be so easy for you to walk away from the principled stand that you have taken and to fall into the flashing lights of cameras, photocalls and all the rest. I hope that something will happen. You witnessed and put up with this for 10 years. You know that you have to take the stand now and I commend you for doing that. It takes a lot of determination and commitment to stand up against not just a government body but an Irish government body, Sport NI and the Department. Although departmental officials met you, they are not, from what I can see, taking proactive steps to rectify the matter.

However, you have not been sitting on your hands and just crying and wringing your hands. You have come forward with an eight-point strategy not just for training facilities but competition level boxing. There is nothing in that strategy that is not common sense or easily fixed. What really frustrates me is the reaction of the County Antrim Board. The argument is that they cannot meet in neutral venues because of cost. That is a nonsense in this day and age. There are neutral facilities the length and breadth of Belfast that could be used for next to no cost.

If the County Antrim Board was genuine in addressing some of your concerns on some of these issues, there are very easy steps, and that is the eight-point plan it could be following. Your plan has been well circulated and should be known about. What feedback have you got from other clubs in not just the Belfast area but in the greater Northern Ireland area?

Mr McSorley: The feedback that we have been getting from some of the clubs is that weigh-ins are taking place in the House of Sport. One guy said to me, "Ian, what a relief. It is great. You just go in and weigh-in and away you go." Previously, we had to go to the St Agnes Boxing Club in west Belfast on a Sunday morning. There is nothing wrong with that club or west Belfast, but it is intimidating for a unionist to go into west Belfast, as it would be for a nationalist going into a unionist area. That is one of the issues.

Now, apparently a lot of the weigh-ins are being held in the House of Sport. Apparently, there have been meetings. Apparently some of them have been moved from St Malachy's Social Club to the House of Sport as well. Those are very positive steps, and they are simple steps. It makes life easier for everybody. Nobody is under any stress. How can you participate in sport if you are under stress? It is stressful enough fighting and going to a weigh-in without being apprehensive about being safe. So far, those two things have been very positive.

Another person commented that they seemed to stop the young people from nationalist areas, some of whom wear the green, white and orange flag of the Irish Republic. That is the individual's choice; it is not a problem, but it should be neutral. It seems that they are working hard. I think that some of the championships told us that they have not seen that, so it seems to be going well. Proactive steps are being taken, and they should be commended.

Our report is an open-and-closed case; it gives you everything from start to finish.

The Chairperson: Finally, Mr Bradley — again.

Mr D Bradley: Mr McGimpsey had two goes. You outline 12 incidents, and you said that you reported one of them to the police.

Mr McSorley: Two.

Mr D Bradley: Why were the other incidents not reported to the police?

Mr McSorley: We reported them to the police in 2000. We reported to everybody the event that happened to us in 2000. I remind you of it: we had a minibus-load of young people coming from Saints Amateur Boxing Club tournament, and that was rough. A 15-year-old came to me inside and

said that there was going to be trouble. I saw it, and I said that it would be OK. Those guys are now men of 25, 26 and 27. One of them was crying; his father had to drive in, not being in the area, and take him home. He was that nervous and upset that he could not even box. We reported that to the police. From then onwards, we just contacted the board. We spoke to the police, and they advised us in 2000 not to go back to Twinbrook; they said that they could not guarantee our safety and advised us not to go back. The boxing people convinced us to come back. We took them at their word and went back, and we went in and out safely. Local people brought us in and took us out, and there was not an incident. However, it was forgotten about after that; it just went back to normal. They proved that they could do it, but, unfortunately, it just went back. As we changed venue, it followed suit.

Mr D Bradley: You said that the abuse came from spectators, fans and followers of other clubs but not the coaches or the boxers. I see that you received a letter from St Paul's ABC, which is very supportive. Have you had similar responses from other nationalist/Catholic-background boxing clubs?

Mr McSorley: St Paul's came to see us within a couple of days of the incident. We were delighted about that. Since then, obviously, we are probably seen as the bogeymen, but it must be emphasised that our eight-point plan is aimed at improving the sport. We have spoken to representatives of different clubs. Another nationalist club spoke to us on the phone and encouraged us.

Mr D Bradley: You mentioned that you are pleased that the weigh-ins are now held in the House of Sport, and the County Antrim Board meetings are held there as well. Obviously, those are some of the elements that you mentioned in the body of the report and the recommendations. You obviously look forward to the rest of the recommendations being given serious consideration.

Mr McSorley: Yes. Put yourself in the position of a 12-year-old who has trained hard, whose parents have encouraged him to go to the gym, who has kept himself fit and is looking forward to a boxing championship. By going to the House of Sport, he is being given more of his sport; he is feeling more that he is going to a real place instead of a local club just to do a weigh-in. He is going to think more that that is the real thing, and he will look forward to it. It is a good step forward. People agree that the House of Sport has to be the way forward for everybody.

The Chairperson: I have a final question. In your recommendations, you state that the choice of referee should reflect the make-up of Northern Ireland boxing. Is there an issue around refereeing?

Mr McSorley: A couple of clubs have mentioned, and we have found out for ourselves, that people are entrenched in Northern Ireland. There should be a make-up where, if one religion is fighting another religion — obviously, everybody knows the persuasion of each club or ought to know the persuasion — the referees and judges should be the same, so that it is equal for the fighters. Therefore, not all the referees and judges should be from one persuasion; it should be an equal balance for all the fights. The people who organise the championships know where the clubs are from, so it should be quite simple to arrange that to make it fair for everybody for those specific fights. Therefore, nobody from either side of the community could say that they lost because all the judges were from there or here.

The Chairperson: Are you implying that the referees are maybe not as neutral as they should be?

Mr McSorley: Yes, you can see that. That happens in all sports. We believe that our lad won the fight that night in St Kevin's Hall. We believe that he lost the fight because the crowd would lynch us going out. The other boxer's father spoke to us and said that our boy won the fight, and other people came over. The opposing club looked at us, put their heads down and walked out. We know that we lost purely to save trouble because the tension was so high.

The Chairperson: This will be the final question. It is from Mr McMullan.

Mr McMullan: Have we got the number of referees to referee religious fights? That is exactly what we are talking about here. I read somewhere in the report that the boxing association does not have the number of officials.

Mr McSorley: That is right. The boxing association said that, but I believe that it is very simple. It would take a couple of weeks to train people up. I do not think that is a good argument. It is common sense. I know all the referees and judges, so I think that would be quite easy to rectify.

Mr McMullan: How long would it take to train a referee?

Mr McSorley: Possibly two weeks at nights or weekends.

Mr McMullan: Would he be accredited after that?

Mr McSorley: Yes.

Mr McMullan: OK. Thank you, Chair.

The Chairperson: Ian and David, thank you for taking the time to come this morning. The report is incredibly serious, and the attitude of members has reflected the seriousness with which we now take it. I congratulate you on the work that you do, your commitment to the sport and the stand that you are taking. The Committee has some work to do and plenty of letters to write on your behalf, and we will be in touch about that. A number of members have indicated that they will call down to see you very shortly. We look forward to seeing your gym. It will be a second visit for me. Thank you.

Mr Thompson: Thank you.