



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Investigation into Consistency in Child
Protection across the CAL Remit: Libraries
NI Briefing

21 February 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

Investigation into Consistency in Child Protection across the CAL Remit: Libraries NI
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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
Mr William Humphrey
Ms Rosaleen McCorley
Mrs Karen McKeivitt
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

Witnesses:

Ms Irene Knox	Libraries NI
Ms Helen Osborn	Libraries NI
Ms Trisha Ward	Libraries NI

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for joining us. We are going to look at our investigation into gaps in child protection and safeguarding across the culture, arts and leisure remit. Irene, are you going to lead off on this one?

Ms Irene Knox (Libraries NI): I am, Chair, and I am going to look to my colleagues throughout.

Thank you for the opportunity to brief the Committee today and to contribute to your investigation into gaps in child protection arrangements across the culture, arts and leisure sector. Your work is very important. It is very timely and appropriate, and we are very pleased to be here today. We look forward to the outcome of your investigation because we want to make sure that our policies and procedures reflect best practice and any suggestions that you might make.

We have submitted a briefing paper for your consideration, and we are happy to try to clarify anything in that today.

I will make some introductory remarks. I know that you are specifically interested in the area of internet access, so I will say a few words about that as well.

Trisha is with me today. Trisha is an assistant director with Libraries NI, and she is responsible for libraries in the northern part of Northern Ireland. One of the reasons she is here is that she has been seconded to the e2 project team for the past year and has been working on the design and procurement process for that system. So, she is particularly au fait with the issues around the new

system, which, I think, have an impact on your discussions on internet access. I am relying on her expertise for that today.

As I think that I said in our briefing paper, more than 117,000 children and young adults use libraries on a regular basis. They are active users of the service and make up about 40% of our total active membership of libraries. They visit libraries with their parents or carers, with friends, in school class groups and, sometimes, on their own to borrow books and other resources. They also come along to participate in a whole range of events and activities that take place in libraries. They come to do their homework, to study, to socialise with friends and to use the internet. We are committed to ensuring that libraries are welcoming, secure, caring and supportive environments, where children's safety and welfare is the paramount consideration. That overrides all other concerns.

Library staff are in positions of trust. It is important, therefore, that they recognise and accept their responsibilities in relation to safeguarding. Also, because of the very regular contact that they have with many children, library staff are in a position to notice, for example, if a child or young person is showing signs or symptoms of abuse or neglect. If staff members have a particular concern about any child or young person, they must know what to do about it. Staff members need to understand that it is not their role to investigate any possible instances of abuse, but it is very definitely their role — indeed, it is their statutory responsibility — to protect children from abuse, to take seriously any concerns of suspected or actual abuse and to report those concerns through the recognised channels immediately.

We have a number of policies and procedures relevant to child protection. The overarching one is our safeguarding children and vulnerable adults policy. The policy and the associated procedures have been quality assured by Volunteer Now, with which we have a signed partnership, and their implementation was subject to inspection by the Education and Training Inspectorate, which found them to be operating satisfactorily.

We have detailed guidelines for staff to help them, for example, to recognise the signs and symptoms of abuse or neglect and to know how, and to whom, concerns should be reported. The guidelines also cover such things as dealing with unsupervised children in libraries and obtaining written parental consent if a photograph is going to be taken of a child. We have checklists for library staff, when they are organising events that involve children, to make sure that they have checked that everything that needs to happen has happened.

Obviously, having detailed policies and procedures is only the start of the process: we have to make sure that they operate effectively. In our view, that is dependent on a number of factors. First, we need to make sure that our HR procedures are appropriate. Since our establishment, Libraries NI has had registered body status with Access NI, and all potential employees are vetted in accordance with Access NI procedures prior to appointment. We carry out enhanced checks on staff who work on the front line in branch libraries, on our mobile libraries, in our home-call service, and so on. That includes caretaking staff and cleaning staff as well as temporary staff. Any long-term volunteers who will work with the public also have enhanced checks carried out.

Secondly, we need to make sure that all staff know and understand the policy and procedures — that is a key aspect — and that they know and understand their responsibilities in relation to safeguarding as well as how to conduct themselves when dealing with children and vulnerable adults. Child protection is part of the induction programme for all new staff, and regular refresher training is provided on an ongoing basis. We also have a code of conduct for staff when dealing with children and vulnerable adults.

The third aspect is ensuring that there is a well understood and effective system for dealing with any concerns about suspected or actual child abuse, including any allegations that are made against staff. We have 19 staff at middle-management level in the organisation, who, as part of their responsibilities, are designated officers for child protection and safeguarding vulnerable adults. One of them is a lead designated officer. All our designated officers have received more detailed training on safeguarding issues. Their role is to act as a source of advice and support to front line staff, in particular, although that is available to anyone who needs assistance or advice on child protection issues. Where required, those designated officers will liaise or make referrals to relevant organisations if there are any particular concerns. The designated officers are located across Northern Ireland. At all times when libraries are open, including late nights and on Saturdays, there is always at least one designated officer on duty. All staff are aware of who the designated officer on duty is at any particular time. The lead designated officer has a co-ordinating role, and she also sits on the child protection co-

ordinating group in one of the education and library boards to make sure that we have a broader awareness of child protection issues.

The fourth aspect of our process is making sure that we maintain appropriate records of all concerns and any follow-up action that has been taken, including ensuring that any lessons learned from incidents are communicated across the system and that, as an organisation, we learn, adapt, review and revise our processes and systems. The lead designated officer provides me, on a quarterly basis, with a report detailing any incidents that there have been in libraries, including the action that has been taken. I report that to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), and safeguarding is one of the issues on the agenda at my regular accountability meeting with the Department. So, we have a process of making sure that everyone who needs to know about things is informed.

The final part from our perspective is the need to monitor and audit the operation of our policy and procedures to make sure that they are operating effectively. In that context, our internal audit section, for example, when undertaking audits of our branch and mobile libraries, checks that staff have been trained and that they understand the policies and procedures in order to make sure that the system is operating. This year, our internal audit section will also be carrying out a more strategic audit of safeguarding arrangements generally in the organisation to make sure that things are operating as they should be.

I have spoken about our systems generally. However, I know that you have a particular interest, as far as your investigation is concerned, in children's internet access. As you know, we provide free internet access for all library members, including children. The internet offers tremendous benefits — educational, social and entertainment — but it also presents tremendous risks for children. We are very clear about our responsibilities in relation to that: as far as it is possible to do so, to make sure that children are not exposed to harmful or inappropriate material while using our library computers. Children under the age of eight are not permitted to use the internet in libraries unless they are accompanied by a parent or guardian, who must remain with them while they are using the computer. For that reason, permanent access to the internet is not available to children under the age of eight. Our staff have to activate it every time a child goes on, so that we know that the parent or guardian is with the child. Children between the ages of nine and 16 must have the express written permission of their parent or guardian before they are allowed to use the internet.

All access to the internet is filtered — for adults and children — but, obviously, the level of filtering that we provide for children is much tighter, and it excludes access to, for example, the well-known social media sites. Therefore, children under the age of 16 cannot access social media sites through library computers. However, no system of filtering is totally foolproof, and a plethora of new sites comes on stream daily. Staff know that they must be vigilant, and they monitor children's use of the computers. If staff become aware of anything that is not appropriate, they must immediately step in and stop the session. We also have a system in place to immediately block any sites that are deemed inappropriate by our designated officers for child protection — any sites that are not automatically blocked by the filtering system — as soon as we become aware of them.

We have a policy on conditions of use of computers for both adults and children, which sets out clearly what users are allowed and not allowed to do on computers. We have a procedure for suspending the use of computers if those conditions of use are breached in any way. If staff have a concern about any incident, or about the use of a computer by any individual — adult or child — and they think that it constitutes a child protection issue, they must follow the safeguarding procedures. That is part of the training that our staff are given.

In an increasingly digital world, however, it is our view that e-safety needs to strike the right balance between protecting children from totally inappropriate internet sites and empowering them to make responsible and informed decisions. We believe that e-safety is part of a much wider remit of teaching basic information literacy skills, so that children know when and why they need information, where and how to find it, how to differentiate between the good and the bad, and — most importantly — what to do if there are any problems with that.

One of the ways that we do that is through our class visits programme, which we offer to all year 4 and year 6 primary-school children. The programme has been quality assured by the Education and Training Inspectorate and complements the Northern Ireland curriculum. It consists of three visits to a library. The third visit deals specifically with computers and the internet and includes information on safe use of the internet. We have brought with us some of the kinds of information that children are given when they come to libraries, and we will leave those for you. We appreciate that, although many children are confident in using the technology — often more confident than their parents in doing

so — they are still developing their critical evaluation skills, and they need to be helped to make wise decisions. Part of the role of our staff who are involved in the class visits programme is to help children to see how to use the internet safely and to know what is safe and not safe about the internet.

We are also very conscious that there is a generational digital divide, which means that some parents do not necessarily feel equipped to help their children in those kinds of areas. As part of our ICT learning programme for adults, we provide advice on safe and appropriate use of the internet. Again, we have some information on that with us, which you are welcome to take with you if you so wish. For example, we recently introduced classes for adults on how to use Facebook and Twitter. Part of that is about making them aware of some of the difficulties and issues that exist. We know that we can do an awful lot more on that. It is a resource-intensive area for us, but there are tremendous opportunities for the library service to help adults and children to understand internet safety issues.

Finally — we have already talked about this — we are introducing a new IT system that will include greatly improved internet access, including pervasive wireless technology, Wi-Fi, in all our libraries. That will present a different set of challenges for us in how people access the internet. As part of the process, we are looking at much improved filtering and monitoring arrangements. Trisha has been looking carefully at that, and, hopefully, she will be able to answer your questions on it.

I hope that what I have said gives you a flavour of our approach to safeguarding issues and to internet access. We are happy to try to answer any questions that you may have.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. You mentioned that your designated officers maintain records of any incidents. Do you have many incidents?

Ms Knox: I had a look at that just before we came here, and I think that we have had about eight incidents since Libraries NI was established. We do not have very many. Since Libraries NI was established, no allegations of inappropriate behaviour have been made against any member of staff. Occasionally, we have such things as unsupervised children in the library at closing time; and what do you do with an unsupervised child at closing time? Our staff have guidance on how to deal with that. We have had a few incidents where there has perhaps been inappropriate use of a computer, which, again, was dealt with through the channels.

Libraries are public buildings, so we get people of all kinds coming into them. The important thing is that our staff are vigilant and make sure that safeguarding is the first consideration in all cases, but we have not had a major number of incidents.

The Chairperson: The end of your presentation focused on computer access and associated issues. You said that you have class visits programmes for year 4 and year 6 pupils. Is that taken up by most primary schools?

Ms Knox: No. It is taken up by a considerable number of primary schools, mainly in town areas. That brings us back to the issue of rural communities that we talked about earlier. The fact is that schools in rural communities have to hire a bus in order to visit their local library, which becomes expensive. Some schools try to combine a visit to the library with a visit to the swimming pool or something like that. However, it is much more difficult for them. Currently, about 80% of our libraries would have visits from at least some local schools, but some schools just find it very difficult to get to libraries because of financial issues.

The Chairperson: Does the schools library service do something similar to your work on that programme?

Ms Knox: Not to that degree, as far as I am aware. Trisha knows more about this than me, but the schools library service tends to provide more in the way of ongoing support.

Ms Trisha Ward (Libraries NI): It is more a support for teachers, so it tends not to interact as much with pupils. There will be occasional visits to do storytelling, maybe to raise awareness of literacy, or it has literacy festivals. However, much less of its interaction is with pupils themselves. It does, though, work with school librarians, especially in post-primary schools, to raise their awareness of what is happening and of best practice. It has introduced self-evaluation to support school librarians and to raise the image of school libraries within post-primary schools, which I am aware from previous experience is an issue in some areas. With diminishing budgets, schools have to look at where they make cuts.

The Chairperson: OK. Given that you have the programme in place, have you had any discussions with the Department of Education about taking it into schools?

Ms Knox: We have not had any discussions about going into schools. We have to be careful not to step on the schools library service's toes. We are trying to encourage children to come to their libraries. We work with schools and do storytelling, but we have never taken the programme into schools.

The Chairperson: Could that programme be shared with schools library service?

Ms Knox: Absolutely. There is no reason why it could not. It has been developed by our staff, and we are happy to share it with anyone who will find it useful.

The Chairperson: I am conscious that you have a programme sitting there that is tailored to year 4 and year 6. You are essentially waiting for schools to come to you to access it, when it is such an important programme that should be shared.

Ms Knox: Absolutely. We have no difficulty with that, and we have not copyrighted it. We are happy to take it out —

The Chairperson: I am also conscious that your focus is on year 4 and year 6, yet a large cohort of pupils in post-primary schools is now probably in need of information on that and on cyberbullying. Do you have any thoughts about developing it for post-primary schools?

Ms Ward: We are aware that the Department of Education has issued its own guidance to schools instructing them, effectively, that they should be looking at that area. We have previously organised pilots for parents and children because we thought that that was an appropriate way to work. To be honest, they were not very successful, and some of that is because teenagers — I speak as a mother of teenagers — believe that they know everything and do not need to be told anything. We have found that working with the parents on their own is more successful. The social media classes that Irene mentioned are much more successful because parents come and say, "I do not know about Facebook; explain it". We are able to work with them and give them some information. However, you are right: there are huge gaps. We honestly do not have the resources to be able to deal with everybody who needs that kind of support. More joined-up thinking would maybe support that.

The Chairperson: That is a theme that we have heard, and it is very much about educating parents and making them aware of the latest fad or the latest download that is available. What has been the uptake of your adult social media awareness programme?

Ms Knox: We only started to pilot it this year, so it is on a fairly small basis at the moment. We needed to test it out and see how it would go. There has been a lot of interest in it, and, for our business plan for next year, we are proposing to extend it quite considerably.

Ms Ward: We have had 27 classes in the past two months, all of which have been fully booked. We are already developing waiting lists in some of our libraries. People are very interested.

The Chairperson: That is useful. It is also a good tool for you to get people into and using the libraries.

Mr D Bradley: Paragraph 2.5 states:

"The Safeguarding policy is supplemented by detailed procedures and information and guidance for staff covering such matters as:"

It then gives a comprehensive list of various situations. The last one on that list is:

"Visiting vulnerable adults in their homes or in a care situation."

Is that when library staff go out and offer loans of books to people in their own homes or in care homes?

Ms Knox: That is the kind of provision that we talked about earlier with our home call service, where a member of staff in a van visits an adult with difficulties or whatever in their own home. There is the opportunity there, and we have to make sure that staff understand their responsibilities in those situations.

Mr D Bradley: Do you have a programme of continuous training and updating of procedures?

Ms Knox: Yes.

Mr D Bradley: Could you explain how frequent that is?

Ms Ward: Over the past two to three years, we have had an ongoing programme, and our designated officers have been delivering it to all their staff. In addition, we are running, for example, a new programme on equality, and, as part of that, we are talking to staff about ensuring that they are aware of those issues, because they affect people with disabilities in different ways than they affect other people. We are trying to draw it into other training opportunities.

Mr D Bradley: The internet and social media can change very rapidly, and there is maybe a need for more frequent updating in that area.

Ms Ward: In that context, we have been running classes for our staff as part of developing and delivering the Got IT? and Go ON courses. That has been part of all staff appraisals this year. We are conscious that it changes so much. I know that a number of members use social media, and you will be aware that things are changing on a daily basis. There are new parts of Facebook, which we are all quite familiar with, and Twitter. New social media sites are coming online day and daily. We find that children move so much faster than us. To keep our staff up to date, we need to keep up to date ourselves. So, we are working with other partners to make sure that we are aware of how Twitter and other social media can be used. We are encouraging staff to use that as a marketing tool for our own libraries.

Mr D Bradley: Do you have staff who are expert in those areas?

Ms Ward: I guarantee that none of us would call ourself an expert, because none of us is an IT nerd. However, a lot of us are very fond of IT and use it frequently. We are working very closely with the people who are now our preferred bidder to identify issues. That is one of the advantages of the procurement process that we had. We were able to talk to them about what we saw as the issues.

Mr D Bradley: So, you have external advisers who advise you on these things.

Ms Ward: Well, they will be our suppliers, hopefully.

Ms Knox: They will be the suppliers for our new contract, and we are talking to them at the moment.

Ms Ward: One of their roles will be to advise us on filtering, for example.

Mr Ó hOisín: Trisha, you are right to say that teenagers think that they know everything, but it is not just teenagers who take that position. Political representatives sometimes think that they know everything. I was shocked to realise, during a recent Assembly debate, that Moshi Monsters are not just as benevolent as they were initially made out to be. They have been coming into my house through my 11-year-old's iPad for quite some time, but I had not realised the dangers that were behind that. There is quite a lack of knowledge right across the board.

It is very welcome that you are taking on board things like cyberbullying and internet access, which is becoming increasingly difficult to filter. I refer you to a BBC News report from this morning, which states that it is reckoned that somewhere in the region of 8 billion hackers are going into the system each day. That is more than one for every person in the world. God knows what exactly that could lead to at some point down the line. Outside your own system, how do you tie in with the like of social services or the PSNI on this matter?

Ms Ward: On child protection?

Mr Ó hOisín: Yes.

Ms Ward: The lead designated officer sits on the North Eastern Education and Library Board's child protection committee. A representative from the PSNI or health and social services will generally attend those committee meetings and inform them. You will have heard evidence on the theme that we are not particularly good at making sure that we are always up to date with what is happening in child protection. However, we have had advice from Volunteer Now, and our partnership has ensured that we are at least up to date with what it knows about it. People from Volunteer Now tend to be experts in this field.

Ms Knox: I was very interested to read the briefing on child protection that DCAL gave you. DCAL talked about re-forming a strategic group within the Department to look at child protection issues. I think that that would be very important, even if it were only about sharing best practice and ideas and designated officers being able to learn from people in other organisations who may have different experiences. We would very much welcome it if, as DCAL has talked about, that group were set up again. Designated officers and people who are leading on child protection need to have the contacts. We have those contacts through the North Eastern Board. It will all change when the Education and Skills Authority comes, so it is even more important that DCAL has some sort of strategic group.

Mr Ó hOisín: Many parents have little or no interest in what their children are doing online. How do you envisage engaging with those hard-to-reach parents?

Ms Ward: We talk about internet safety as part of the Go ON programme that Irene referred to. If I am honest, I am not sure that I would sign up for a course like that. However, I would definitely sign up for a course that talked about online shopping or travel, because those are things that I am interested in. We are trying to encourage people to look at those things.

As you will be aware, some people do not want to come into a library. I find it hard to believe, but some people find libraries intimidating. So, through the e2 programme, we are looking at being able to take that service out to community centres. The use of 3G-enabled tablets will allow us to deliver these kinds of courses in other settings and open up that world for anybody. There is always the danger that people see you as preachy when you do something on internet safety, so we try to roll it into all the programmes that we do. It can even be on basic things like setting up an e-mail account. We talk about the importance of not revealing too much personal detail, or phishing, and we make people aware of the kind of scams that can happen. That is how we try to deal with it.

Ms McCorley: Thank you for the presentation. You talked about filtering. Given the ever-changing nature of websites and all the new stuff that comes online, how do you stay updated? How do you ensure that you are on top of things? I know that it is difficult to ever say that you are on top of something like that.

Ms Ward: It is almost impossible to say that we are on top of it. We can filter out known websites, but if you are a sex offender or a paedophile, there will be unknown websites. Jim Gamble referred to that as the greatest danger that he saw. In library use, the way we deal with it is our Websense product, which is updated on a very regular basis, every two or three hours.

Websense is an international organisation that ensures that we are aware of all the illegal sites. That is constantly updated. We are constantly adding to that, and our staff are very vigilant. In the past year, we have blocked eight sites, none of which were pornographic sites. All were social media sites, chatrooms or games — maybe inappropriately violent games. Those are the kinds of things that we are having difficulty with now. Our filter seems to be working much better in terms of porn.

In the longer term, we know that there is going to be an issue — and it is an issue, I suspect, for the whole community and not just for us — around wireless access. More and more children have access to wireless-enabled phones. We will be able to filter our wireless access, because we can filter what we provide, but we cannot stop a 12-year-old coming in with their smartphone who is accessing the internet via his own network. That is not filtered, and that is a bigger issue for government than it is for libraries.

Ms McCorley: How do you monitor? What way do you physically monitor? You said that your staff monitor when children and young people are using the internet. What actually happens there?

Ms Ward: There is Websense, which is a bit of software which filters it. We also have staff who are physically there; our children's computers tend to have the screens facing desks, and are very often quite close to desks. You very quickly become aware if a child or a teenager is up to something, because they turn the screen away or turn it off when you come. You know then to go back and check. We look out for those signs, such as two or three children gathered round a computer giggling. We are aware of that kind of thing. It is the adults in the corner with smartphones I would be much more worried about.

Mr Hilditch: I just want to move sideways from the internet situation. There are usually areas for hire within public libraries for the likes of art clubs, photographic exhibitions, classes — various things like that. Those are obviously being hired out to third parties. Is there a requirement for those parties to present policy documents for hiring out facilities?

Ms Ward: There is a requirement for them to have a child protection policy.

Mr Hilditch: So there is, then? So that is all checked as part of the hire?

Ms Ward: Yes.

Mr McMullan: The title of your written briefing is "Safeguarding Children and Vulnerable Adults". There are vulnerable children. The use of the word "vulnerable" takes in disability and special needs. If we are to change that perception, we need to start using the right language. "Safeguarding children and vulnerable adults" says that we are not including the children. I know that you mean well with it, but disability and special needs are forms of vulnerability. If we are to get the public to accept this more and pay more attention, we have to change the language. That is something that has come out of this whole inquiry from groups other than yourselves. They have admitted that to us in sessions.

Ms Knox: Our view is that our term "children" is all children, whether they are able-bodied or have disabilities. We take our responsibilities to all children very seriously, regardless of their level of need. One of the things that it says in our safeguarding policy is that children are entitled to a service regardless of gender, disability or anything else. "Vulnerable adults" was added because there is now a specific requirement in law to look at how you deal with vulnerable adults. I take your point that it may be a use of language but I just want to confirm that all children, regardless of ability or disability, are included in our safeguarding arrangements.

Mr McMullan: I am saying that because sometimes staff are not trained to deal with specific conditions in children. A child could have autism, or something like that there, and you cannot mitigate that. That is why I would like to see that language being used more. Other groups are starting to use it more because it gets over that barrier and creates more help and brings in more help. It brings in more outside groups to help.

I understand what you say about the law but if you look at what "vulnerable adult" means, you will see where I am coming from on that. That is why more and more people are starting to use "disability" and "special needs". Those are words that people shy away from, but in fact they have a big bearing. They are two separate issues with two sets of problems and difficulties and everything else. Staff have told me that when they can understand and accept that, it goes a long way in helping them and makes them more aware.

Ms Knox: Thank you for that.

Mr McMullan: Your policies are very good.

Ms Knox: Thank you.

The Chairperson: Obviously the Committee is going to be making recommendations around gaps in child protection and safeguarding. What recommendations do you think we should include?

Ms Knox: There would be great benefit in the culture, arts and leisure sector for the various arm's-length bodies to have an opportunity to come together with the Department. That is something that we could all benefit from. From our perspective, there is one issue that we need to be thinking about.

We do Access NI and enhanced checks, but in order to be able to have that facility, you have to have at least 20 applications going through annually.

Currently, we are fine because we are still recruiting some staff. However, that may not always be the case. There may be an opportunity for DCAL to look at how it brings its organisations together to be able to facilitate those Access NI checks across the culture, arts and leisure sector. With the facilities and the reach that we have, there are opportunities as well for us particularly to look at how we can help adult volunteers to gain the skills that they require in areas such as social media, because we are doing it for members of the public anyway. I would be happy for us to be involved in that kind of thing. Those are the kinds of things I personally think would be useful.

There is a big issue around making sure that children and their parents understand the dangers that exist. It is about getting the balance right between empowering them and protecting them.

The Chairperson: That is very useful. Thank you very much. Thank you for your presentation.

Ms Knox: We will leave this stuff with the Committee Clerk.

The Chairperson: OK, thank you very much.