



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Investigation into Consistency in Child
Protection across the CAL Remit:
Foras na Gaeilge Briefing

21 February 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

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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
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

Witnesses:

Mr Ferdie Mac an Fhailigh	Foras na Gaeilge
Mr Éamonn Ó hArgáin	Foras na Gaeilge

The Chairperson: This briefing with Foras na Gaeilge is in respect of child protection issues in the first instance, and will be recorded by Hansard. We welcome Ferdie Mac an Fhailigh, the chief executive, and Éamonn Ó hArgáin, director of development services. Gentlemen, you are very welcome. Apologies for the delay, but we had a number of issues that we needed to look at with Libraries NI.

In the first instance, we will look at the issues around our investigation into child protection. If you would like to make an opening statement, members will follow up with some questions.

Mr Ferdie Mac an Fhailigh (Foras na Gaeilge): Thank you, Chair. Our staff and officers have no direct regular contact with vulnerable groups. We are a grant-giving body; it is the grantees that have regular contact. That said, all our staff are vetted by the authorities in the appropriate jurisdiction, whether it is Access NI or an Garda Síochána. We ask that all our grantees that have contact with children have a policy, and that it is not one that sits in a drawer somewhere — that it is active and that everyone knows exactly what is in it and the steps that they should take. We also ask that people who are dealing with children — who take our summer camp scheme and our youth event scheme — the people who are working on those have to be vetted by Access NI or an Garda Síochána, and we have to be provided with proof of that.

We have a policy for the organisation, and we also have a code of practice that we share with grantees. We provide advice to organisations, if they want it. The code of practice and the policy are available to download from our website. We provide training to groups, if they ask for it. It consists mainly of the dos and don'ts: what you should and should not do, what is appropriate and what is not, and what you should have in place. The one area that we are worried about at the minute is that in

our policy, and in the code of practice, there is a section on internet use. It is to do mainly with grooming. However, in light of what happened in County Donegal and the very sad circumstances in the past wee while, we need to look at that whole area of our policy again and update it. We will be in contact with the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), Volunteer Now and the National Youth Council of Ireland about what should be in our policy.

I should say that the policy is not only Foras na Gaeilge's policy; it is the language body policy. It was prepared by the NSPCC in conjunction with the Ulster-Scots Agency so that we have a joint policy and code of practice for the language board.

The Chairperson: How often are your policies updated?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: Twice a year. Well, we look at it twice a year. We are also in regular contact with the NSPCC and the National Youth Council of Ireland. If there is a change in legislation or a change that they think is best practice, they contact us and say that we should look at it.

The Chairperson: When was the internet use policy last updated?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: May last year.

The Chairperson: So, it is quite recent.

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: Yes.

The Chairperson: It is not something that has been lying around for any particular length of time.

How often do you monitor the activity and child protection policies of the groups that receive grants?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: When they send in applications, they have to send their policy as part of the application process. We do not visit all the summer camps; we visit them on a rolling basis. If we have a new camp somewhere this year, it will be visited. One that was visited last year will not be visited. The Education and Training Inspectorate undertook an evaluation and visit of the summer camps last year. It did not produce a report because it did not visit enough camps. It is going to do that again this summer, and it will be producing a report on —

The Chairperson: How many camps does it have to visit for there to be a report?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: It managed to visit only two camps last year. It wants to visit six or seven before it would even start to write a report.

The Chairperson: If there were any issues in those two camps, then you would not be made aware of that?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: Sorry, we had a meeting with it. If there were issues, it would have told us about them. It did not raise any concerns.

The Chairperson: Is there a reporting mechanism in place for the groups that you grant aid, so that, if there are any issues, they can come back directly to Foras?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: Yes. We have a designated officer and a deputy designated officer; one in Dublin and one in Belfast. They are in contact with the groups. If there were any issues, the groups should be reporting them to our officers.

The Chairperson: Have many incidents been reported over the past number of years?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: None.

The Chairperson: There have never been any incidents at all, through any of the groups that you have funded?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: To our knowledge, no. No one has ever reported that there was a problem.

The Chairperson: That is not to say that there was not a problem.

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: We do not know. We take it that there were no problems, since everyone has to have the policy and the code of practice.

The Chairperson: Has the fact that you operate in two jurisdictions created any challenges for you?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: When we were drawing up the policy and the code of practice, we took whatever was the best practice from whichever jurisdiction. That is what is in the policy and the code of practice.

The Chairperson: Grand.

I will open it up to questions from members.

Mr D Bradley: Tá fáilte romhaibh, agus go raibh maith agaibh as an pháipéar a chuir sibh chugainn. I have just a couple of questions. Your reference to the advice on the use of the internet — you said that you give clear advice on the dos and don'ts of internet use with young people, and the procedures should a breach of those rules occur. I mentioned to the previous group who were here the nature of the internet and the digital world, and how quickly it changes. Surely, a list of dos and don'ts is quite a static thing. Is that continually updated to ensure that it keeps up with the changing nature of that area?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: As I said, we review the policy on a biannual base with our sister organisation, the Ulster-Scots Agency. We are undertaking a review of the internet, given the very sad circumstances of what happened in Ballybofey. We try to keep it as up to date as is possible. However, as you said, multimedia is changing so fast. As the people from Libraries NI said, it is not the kids at the computer, it is the people with the smartphones, be they adults or children. It is very hard to police what they are accessing and doing online. We are, to a large extent, dependent on the grantees and the steps that they take to ensure safety.

Mr D Bradley: You did say that you require your grantees to have a policy on child protection and safeguarding. Does that policy require them to undergo training in child protection and safeguarding?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: I would have to go and read all the policies that they have sent in, Dominic. Off the top of my head, I do not know. I can tell you that a lot of the people working at the summer camps are teachers. They would have that training on an ongoing basis, as part of their normal work.

Mr D Bradley: That is correct, but there are also people working at the summer camps who are not teachers and would not have had that training. I would like you to check out the extent to which grantees undergo training in child protection and safeguarding. There have been a number of incidents at Irish language summer colleges, and so on, down through the years. Obviously that is something that we do not want a recurrence of.

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: Absolutely not.

Mr D Bradley: In her closing remarks, Mrs Knox mentioned that she thought it might be useful for the organisations under the remit of DCAL to come together in a forum of some kind to share good practice and valuable experience in the area of child protection and safeguarding. Would Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency welcome that type of initiative?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: That type of initiative would be very useful for everyone, because none of us is perfect, and any expertise that we can share and any extra knowledge that we can gain from such a forum would be more than welcome.

Mr D Bradley: You said that, occasionally, members of your staff visit your grantee organisations, summer camps and so on but that you were told by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and Volunteer Now that vetting for those members of staff is not necessary because their roles do not involve regular contact with children. Do those staff have any type of

inspection role to see that child protection and safeguarding procedures are being adhered to in those schemes?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: The three specific members of staff who visit camps provide the training to the rest of our staff. When they visit, they look at what is happening in the home, and safeguarding is part of that.

Mr D Bradley: Is there a requirement that the people who are not teachers but who work in the summer camps and in the other schemes that you fund be vetted?

Mr Ó hArgáin: Yes.

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: Yes, and we have to see the proof that they have been vetted. That is all on the file.

Mr D Bradley: An-mhaith. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: Go raibh maith agat féin.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. Go raibh maith agaibh as an chur i láthair. What do you perceive to have been the gaps in policy that led to the Donegal incident that you referred to, and what gaps needed to be filled?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: As I said, the policy actually says that it is geared to keeping young people safe online. It is geared towards the type of stuff that they would be viewing, and it is geared to guard against people who would come in to groom. There is nothing in it about cyberbullying, which is becoming a major problem, so we will move to address that.

Ms McCorley: At the Coláistí Samhraidh, do you work with local communities to prevent the sorts of incidents that were happening in Loch an Lúir? I heard about that area, where local rivalries between young people ended up in an incident where some kids had to be taken home. Do you work with local communities to try to circumvent that sort of stuff?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: We have nothing to do with the summer colleges apart from the fact that we provide funding, through grantee scholarship schemes, to some of the colleges. We are working with local communities through our Scéim Phobail Gaeilge, or Irish in the Community scheme, where we have development officers in 19 communities throughout the island. They work with their local communities to promote the language and are not specifically geared towards faction fighting, if you want to call it that. What happened in Loch an Lúir was sad in that there was a divide between some of the community and the college. That is more for the college to address than for ourselves.

Ms McCorley: Given that Foras na Gaeilge is probably the main body in Ireland with responsibility for promoting the Irish language and that Gaeltachtaí and summer colleges are concepts that we want to see flourish, you do have some responsibility. I do not think that you can wash your hands of anything.

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: I am not trying to wash my hands of it in any way. Subsequent to what happened in Loch an Lúir, the college and the local community were working to try to ensure that it never happened again. That having been said, it is something that has been happening for many, many years. I remember events happening when I was going to summer colleges all of those years ago. Sometimes, there is a resentment from the local people towards people who are coming in from the outside, if you like. I thought that that had disappeared. Unfortunately, what happened in the college shows that it can still raise its ugly head, but, as I said, I know that the college and the local community were working to try to ensure that it never happened again.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. Tá fáilte romhaibh chuig an Choiste arís. I want to follow on from Dominic's question. Thankfully, and rightfully, quite a number of naiscoileanna, bunscoileanna and Gaelscoileanna have been established right across the North, particularly in the past 20 years. In areas, you will find not only the Gaelscoil and the bunscoil, but a club eachtra or a club iarscoile and, perhaps, a branch of Glór or a club na n-óg. All those bodies are there at a certain

level. Are you sure that the ceannairí in those bodies are vetted and passed to deal with children in those situations?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: We fund a number of cumainn óige and cumainn iarscoile under our youth events scheme. Generally, those organisations are run by the leader from the naíscoil or one of the teachers from the Gaelscoil, and they have been vetted. Anyone over 16 who is working in any of the clubs that we fund has to be vetted, and we have to have the proof.

Mr Ó hOisín: So, there is no grey area. What about the relationship with the NSPCC and the National Youth Council? Are they there in an advisory capacity, more than anything else, in respect of legislation or changes in policies?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: Yes. They are the recognised authorities, and they advise us on what should be in our policy. They also keep us abreast of any changes in legislation and so on.

The Chairperson: If there are any changes in your policy, and, obviously, there will be in relation to internet use, will you take that as an opportunity to go out to all of those groups that you fund and carry out training in relation to that policy? I note that you said in your presentation that you give training to groups that ask for training, rather than go out proactively and train.

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: When the policy is changed, we will be contacting all of our groups to tell them that there is a new policy and that it is an area that we are addressing. We will tell those groups that we will come to talk to them about it, or, better still, we could bring a group of them together in various areas and do it that way.

The Chairperson: OK. It is just that I am conscious that this is something that is very current. This Committee is very concerned about the idea of internet safety, cyberbullying and so on, and the consequences of that. You fund a wide range of organisations, and the number of people related to or associated with those groups is also considerable. It is about spreading the message as widely as possible.

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: Yes.

The Chairperson: If groups that you do not directly fund approach you and ask for training, will you give them that training?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: Yes.

The Chairperson: Finally, I know that you are very positive towards the recommendations that were made by Irene in the previous presentation. Have you considered anything that you think the Committee should include in its report going forward?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: It would be useful if the Department of Education, as well as the DCAL groups, were to make improvements in sharing best practice and expertise for protection and safeguarding. We also need to raise awareness. How we will do that, I do not know. However, I do know that, as Dominic said, people who are not Irish teachers and who have not been vetted are teaching Irish classes. People who have not been vetted are doing various things. I think that we need to raise awareness among those groups that they should be doing it and that it is for their own good. How we raise that awareness, I do not know, but it is something that we need to look at.

The Chairperson: That is a common theme that has come out in relation to piano teachers and all sorts of classes that are held in people's homes. It is about protecting the deliverer of the service as much as the child who goes there.

Mr Mac an Fhailigh: You mentioned piano classes. People who are not teachers or who are retired teachers are giving language grinds for oral exams. They need to be protected as well.

The Chairperson: Thank you for sharing that with us and contributing to this aspect of our investigation.