



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Investigation into Consistency in Child  
Protection across the CAL Remit:  
Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland  
Briefing

28 February 2013

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

### Investigation into Consistency in Child Protection across the CAL Remit: Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland Briefing

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)  
Mr William Irwin (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr William Humphrey  
Ms Rosaleen McCorley  
Mr Michael McGimpsey  
Mrs Karen McKeivitt  
Mr Oliver McMullan  
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

**Witnesses:**

Ms Sharon Beattie	Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland
Mr Hugh Connor	Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland

**The Chairperson:** I welcome the following officials to our meeting: Hugh Connor, chair of the Safeguarding Board Northern Ireland (SBNI); and Sharon Beattie, director of operations. First of all, I apologise profusely for the delay this morning. Unfortunately, these things tend to run over, so I am sorry.

**Mr Hugh Connor (Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland):** That is OK.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you for coming. I ask you to make an opening statement, and then we will follow up with some questions.

**Mr Connor:** Thank you very much for meeting us. The way we will do our presentation is that Sharon will do the first bit, which sets out the context for SBNI and its roles and functions, and I will do the remainder, which is more about the particular issue that you are investigating.

**Ms Sharon Beattie (Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland):** Thank you for the invite to the Committee this morning. I am Sharon Beattie, director of operations for the Safeguarding Board. You are probably all aware that the Safeguarding Board was established in statute by the Safeguarding Board Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. It was formally launched in September last year by three Ministers: Mr Poots, Mr O'Dowd and Mr Ford. That really does show Government's commitment to child protection and safeguarding.

SBNI was set up in the face of financial constraints, and as such, we have a very small team. Apart from me, we have another professional officer and three admin staff. That is the extent of the Safeguarding Board.

Like the safeguarding boards in England, SBNI was created in the belief that more could and should be done to protect vulnerable children. The decision to proceed with the safeguarding boards in England and here follows recommendations from Lord Laming in the Victoria Climbié and the Baby Peter cases. Those cases highlighted that senior staff in the organisations were too distant and too removed from the experiences of front line staff and that, if improvements were to be made, there had to be support from senior staff to drive those changes forward.

The objective of the Safeguarding Board, if you do not know, is to co-ordinate and ensure the effectiveness of what is done by member agencies to protect the welfare of children in Northern Ireland. We have a number of functions, including taking into account children and young people's views on what makes effective arrangements; the development of policies and procedures within safeguarding; and undertaking case management reviews in cases that have gone terribly wrong or cases that have shown good practice and to learn from them. We will also undertake the review of child deaths in Northern Ireland, although the legislation for that is not yet in operation.

SBNI membership is cited in legislation, and only very senior personnel, either the number one or the number two in those organisations, sit on the SBNI board. That includes police, education, health and social services, probation, youth justice, the Health and Social Care Board, the Public Health Agency, and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), and up to five other voluntary organisations.

SBNI can facilitate, co-ordinate, challenge and provide leadership, but what we cannot do is get involved in the operational accountability of those organisations. We are developing our three-year strategic plan, which will go out to consultation. We will include four key objectives in that. We will protect children by responding to new and emerging concerns, including sexual exploitation and risks from digital technology. We will drive improvements in child protection systems, and those things will come out of the lessons learnt from case management reviews. We will provide leadership and set direction, and we will work in partnership with others to ensure that children and young people are living in safety and with stability.

I will pass over to Hugh, who will comment on the areas to be addressed by the investigation. Thank you.

**Mr Connor:** Thank you very much, Sharon. My presentation is slightly different from the paper you received. The first thing I want to do is commend the Committee for undertaking this investigation. I think that it is very important. You will know better than I that the number of children the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) comes into contact with is second only to that for the Education Department.

Children and young people's engagement in sports, arts and leisure has the potential to make a significant positive impact on their well-being and development, providing them with opportunities to grow socially, emotionally, physically and spiritually. Engagement in activities in the culture, arts and leisure arena can play a significant role in building self-esteem and personal confidence to overcome new challenges and developing trust in others.

It is a paradox that when children are abused, it is those very same qualities that impact on them into their adult life. So, it is quite clear that the very thing that we believe sport or culture can offer is the very thing that can be jeopardised if children are abused. I think that puts the issue into some context.

Despite our role in looking at safeguarding children, we recognise that there is a balance to be struck between a robust system that protects children and one that becomes so bureaucratic and overly regulated that volunteers become disenchanted and children lose the opportunity to benefit from sport.

Having recognised that, however, I think that it is all the more important that the organisations themselves seek to embed the philosophy, values and soul of protecting children. I want to talk about some historical things to try to put your work into a slightly different context. History has shown that any child protection system, to be effective, must be everybody's responsibility, and I think that is important. The protection of children is obviously not solely the responsibility of DCAL. However, DCAL must play a definite role in the protection of children; it should be a departmental priority. Unfortunately, history also shows that there is no silver bullet answer to protecting children. There are

not one, two or three things that the Committee can do that will mean children will be safe in every situation. However, there is a clear need to put some things in place. Every society wrestles with the same problem and has done so for generations.

Given the number of people involved in sport, arts and leisure, it is almost certain that some of those working in this area today have malicious intent. That is one of the realities of our work. I believe that Departments must do what you are doing, which is provide leadership by looking at how things are regulated and governed and seeking to improve on them. That task is one of continuous improvement.

Experience shows us that there are building blocks that need to be put in place. Our impression of the sorts of things that you have in place for recruitment and selection, effective management, the reporting of concerns, the code of behaviour and the sharing of information are the building blocks. We believe that a lot of significant progress is made in the sports sector through the child protection in sport unit. The arts sector is also seeking to put in place similar building blocks, and that is the right thing to do. The reality is that policies and procedures alone, no matter how good, will not protect children. As I said earlier, you need to regularly review such policies and procedures for large organisations. You must look at the facts — the data that you receive — and be able to say that you are doing that. Look critically at the training needs and at who is responsible for managing these processes when concerns are raised. Ask how concerns have been handled, what the feedback has been and continually seek to improve.

I believe there to be a couple of other principles that the Committee should hear about and understand. First, when you look at the child protection picture in the wider context with which it is usually associated — that is, health, social services, education and police — you find that one of the central themes of case management reviews is that staff tend to lose focus on children. People become preoccupied with adults and adult systems. I know that others have previously suggested to you that one of the key issues is ensuring children's rights, and I know that is easier said than done, and we may discuss that in a few moments. The reality is that, for this system to be sound, you need to build in the principle of allowing the voice of children to be heard rather than drowned out by adults or professional issues.

Secondly, I put to you a version of caveat emptor, buyer beware: let the parent beware. I believe that parents should always be encouraged to become involved, to question and to challenge. We should not create a culture that seeks to diminish or falsely reassure parents that the actions that professionals or Departments take automatically mean that we have cracked this and that children are safe in every circumstance. That is not true. Vigilance is always needed.

The third principle is, again, something with which you will be familiar, which is whistle-blowing. We need to ensure, however it is done, that there are people who clearly will look, be aware, and know what to do and where to get support if they have concerns. Their concerns are generally not specific; they may often be just gut feeling or intuition. Certainly, those three things are three of the core issues as you seek to wrestle with some of the policy and procedural issues.

Sharon said that we are basically a very small organisation, and we are. We have the potential, in this coming year, to receive some further money from our sponsoring Department, and, hopefully, we will be able to extend our professional role and responsibility. However, I think it is very important that I say from the outset that we are still a small organisation and outline what we can and cannot do. We have been set up to co-ordinate and ensure, and that is to seek to use all the member agencies, which are not all small — because virtually all the organisations that care for children are here. So what we have been tasked to do is work with them. We have already started to try to build some links with other groups. One of the most obvious groups is faith communities, given some of the issues that there have been. We have a process in place to work with faith communities to see how we can help, support and advise them. We might be able to help them with training, or they may just want to come for some sort of discussion. We would be very happy to do something similar with DCAL, with regard to offering advice or, so to speak, knowing a man who knows the answer to a problem.

One of the other things that Sharon said is that we are about to go out to consultation on a three-year strategic plan. There are three things in that. As it is about to go out for consultation, the plan may be changed, but there are three specific things in it which may well be of interest to the Committee. One of the first things that we are looking at is the whole question, as I said, of trying to raise the awareness of children, how they can protect themselves and how they may be helped and supported. What we are seeking to do is to develop a range of information for children, families and communities.

This is not new. It is not a silver bullet. It is a concept of having a process in place that continues to reach out into communities and keep the message constantly repeated.

Secondly, through our education and training committee, we seek to produce a strategy for multidisciplinary child protection training in the Province. We want to set standards, not about the number of days that people will be in training but about the competencies and skills associated with that. Again, we will not be in a position to enforce that. We will be coming to our member agencies who have agreed to it and, indeed, to the Departments that sponsor our member agencies, to ask whether they will sign up to this particular process.

The third thing that Sharon touched on, and which we know is of interest to you, is the whole question of e-safety. We have had some early discussions with the junior Ministers in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), and we are trying to look at how we can work together. What we are looking to do on their behalf — and, again, we will need to check that this is precisely what they wish us to do — is to co-ordinate an effective member agency to help children who are at risk of becoming criminalised for online activity, being bullied through cyber activity or being sexually abused through sexting or online exploitation.

The final thing is that we know that one of the issues that you have been discussing from time to time has been the question of the role of councils and education and others, which may have facilities available, and how they should play their role in ensuring that the system is a bit more protected. We have both education and councils. The chief executives of Ards Borough Council and Banbridge District Council are members of SBNI, and we have a duty, under section 12 of our legislation, to carry out an annual review with our members of their internal governance arrangements. Certainly, one of the questions that we would be very happy to ask of education and councils is how they deliver on this aspect of their role, if that would be of advantage to the Committee.

I close my remarks by saying that I really commend what you are doing. I think it is vital. This is not DCAL's responsibility, but nor can DCAL not have a responsibility here. DCAL must be around, looking at the policies, procedures and governance arrangements, and they are critically important. However, they will not keep children safe, and there needs to be an underlying culture or value system that makes things safer for more children.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you for that, and I thank you for your kind remarks in relation to the work of the Committee. I suppose that I can send them back to you, in relation to the work that you do. I do not think that we should underestimate the magnitude of the task ahead of you. I am surprised at the small size of your organisation, but clearly there is a reason for that, as there is for everything. I will be interested to see the work that you are planning to do in relation to your three-year strategic plan.

Since we started this piece of work, DCAL has made very positive responses and has now started to revisit a lot of the work that it had been doing and which had fallen by the wayside. Part of that is to make contact with your organisation. I appreciate that it is in its infancy —

**Mr Connor:** Yes, it is.

**The Chairperson:** — and that there is a lot of work to be done, but, obviously, we look forward to the outworkings of the discussions that DCAL has with you.

I found quite interesting some of the things in your paper, which followed on our own initial thoughts and on the conversations that we have had to date in relation to the lack of an overarching governance framework. The child protection in sport unit is a very positive development, and the work that it does with the NSPCC is vital. What we are looking at is whether that can be replicated throughout the rest of the culture and arts sector. I want your comments in relation to how that possibly could come to fruition. Then, could we move on to the comments that you made on the vetting and barring scheme, and the difficulties that there are around individual tutors? Also, you made a comment to the effect that you recognise that there is a gap, and that you hope that that will be addressed in the future. How do you see that happening?

**Mr Connor:** As regards the first issue, obviously sports, with its infrastructure and governing body, faces different issues to those faced by the arts and culture sectors. However, I think that the principles are exactly the same. The idea of having some group that could work on this, try to develop policies and procedures and, most importantly, take the responsibility for providing advice, guidance and support, is important. You need to think about how you would structure such a group. However,

that seems to us to be an important further building block. Having looked at what the Arts Council has said, we think that it is on the right path and looking at the right issues, but the question now is how that is going to be delivered and built upon. I think you need to have someone who will have responsibility for taking that and pushing it on a day-to-day basis.

As to the governance arrangements, governance grows over time. There are a lot of problems with governance arrangements, even in organisations that have had a long-term responsibility for the protection of children. So, governance is something that needs to be continually reviewed and renewed. It is clearly important that there are systems in place to ensure that governing bodies and organisations have this regularly on their agenda. I made reference to our section 12 duties. One of the things that we are very conscious of is the sense that we need to look at what governance arrangements each organisation currently has, but then, more importantly, we need to see how they work in practice. When they have worked in practice, we need to see where the report goes, and, when we know where that goes to, we need to know what the action plan is and how it is delivered. So, again, it is not an event, it is a process. I am sure that I am teaching my granny how to suck eggs.

The other thing that you asked about was vetting and barring. There seemed to be some legal lacunas, which, basically, mean that those who tutor, perhaps, are not yet subject to vetting or barring or do not necessarily do that because they do not work in an organisation setting. My understanding, without being totally clear on that, Chair, is that the Department is going to bring in measures to fill that lacuna in 2014. That would put an obligation on people to actually ensure that they are vetted and checked.

**The Chairperson:** Obviously, it would be for the protection of tutors as well as for children or young people who use their services. It, obviously, works both ways.

**Mr Connor:** Absolutely. As things stand, we believe it to be the case that the duty then goes back to the parent. The parent can, basically, ask, "Are you vetted?" The person may say, "No, I did not have an Access NI check." The parent may then ask, "Will you supply it to me when you get it?" The person may say, "No, I will not. I am not applying for it." Then, the responsibility is on the parent to decide whether to remove his or her child from that activity and look elsewhere. That is the lacuna that the Department will seek to fill.

**The Chairperson:** You mentioned the need for parents to be vigilant. Parents also need to be educated on child protection issues for children who go to organisations and also on issues of cyberbullying and e-safety. That came across very strongly in some of our previous presentations.

**Ms Beattie:** I visited Ballyclare High School with OFMDFM on its internet safety day. It was interesting that one of the questions that the junior Minister asked the pupils was how many of them were aware of the safety implications of being online. The majority of them were. The second question was, "How many of your parents are aware?" Very few actually put up their hands. As the parent of a 10-year-old who wants to start doing things online, I would ask how aware are parents of the need to set parental controls? Actually, in any work that SBNI seeks to take forward, it will work on a parent-education system. We feel that there is a lack of a co-ordinated, consistent approach in Northern Ireland to education, particularly for parents.

**Mr Connor:** We have a concept for all the pieces of work that we are going to try to undertake, which is that you have almost got two continua. You have, obviously, the child, the parent and professionals. Then, you have information-giving, awareness-raising, education, training and protocols for handling situations when they go wrong, so that you ensure that you have sound arrangements between those who investigate matters. That will be a sort of mental pro forma that we will use for all our work.

**Mr McMullan:** Thank you for your presentation. As the Chair says, your organisation is in its infancy. We are all very interested in anything that relates to child protection.

I want to make two or three observations. When you talk about council representation, have you taken into consideration the reduction in the number of councils to 11 through the review of public administration (RPA)? Will councils be rotated? I did 20-odd years in council. In my time, you had people on the same committee of the same organisation for 15 or 20 years. If there is representation from councils, there should be rotation of those councils on your committee. It can only be a good thing to bring in fresh ideas.

I am a wee bit taken aback that there is no mention of disability or special needs in the programme. I looked through it carefully. Vulnerable children are mentioned. That could mean without disability. Are three independent members to be elected?

**Ms Beattie:** They have already been elected.

**Mr McMullan:** I would have liked somebody from Disability Sports to have been among them on that governing body, so that you get its views. We are the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. There is an absence of sport. Disability is not in your report at all. Disability and special needs must be mentioned as a category of its own because, as you said, children must have their voice. Children in that particular part of society cannot speak for themselves.

**Mr Connor:** Absolutely. The first thing, Mr McMullan, is that the three lay members of the board were selected by public appointments. So, an advertisement was placed, and then we went through due process. I certainly accept the point that you are making about rotation and fresh ideas. We have two chief executives on the SBNI board and a committee system in each of the trust areas. We have representatives of the councils in each of those areas. We take disability seriously, albeit that we did not mention it here.

I talked a wee bit about principles. One of principles that we know is that of inclusion. Our society has changed dramatically in 30 or 40 years. In one stage of my life, I had the responsibility of managing a large psychiatric hospital. One thing that we did there was, basically, recognise the real impact that arts, dance and music could make upon the care of people who were disabled by their mental health. We believe passionately that DCAL will have to look at how it increasingly embraces the opportunities for disabled people. What that will bring with it is a range of different needs. Quite clearly, it is the level of adjustment that is needed to allow and support people to engage in that area. For some, that level is more limited than it is for others who, perhaps, have challenging behaviours. However, those people who have challenging behaviours will no less enjoy sporting or leisure activity. We believe that. The corollary of that is how you then train and support your volunteers and staff to do that. That is a different level and would certainly require a different input. We would endeavour to try to address those particular matters as we develop our education and training strategy.

**Mr McMullan:** I do not have a problem with that. The only thing — I would say this to most of them — is that those words need to be in your report because that gives parents confidence in the organisation. Training volunteers is at a different level; I agree with you on that. However, to have that stated in there gives massive confidence to the people who are in that category and their carers.

**Ms Beattie:** Earlier, we mentioned that we are in consultation on our strategic plan. Yesterday, as part of that strategic plan and our section 75 commitment, we launched our equality audit. That really focuses on the protection of children who are disabled. We recognise that disabled children are often in need of more protection. That is a real part of our strategic plan. It is integral to it. It may not have been mentioned in that paper, but it really is in the ethos of our work.

**Mr McMullan:** Disability and special needs are two different categories. I need not tell you that. Thank you very much.

**Ms McCorley:** Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. Thank you very much. Page 4 of the submission states:

*"Lord Laming concluded that senior staff within those organisations ... were too distant from the experience of frontline staff and service users."*

That was something that he wanted to put right. What steps were taken to remedy that? How confident are you that the gap has closed?

**Mr Connor:** I think that what Lord Laming recognised in the case of Victoria Climbié and Baby Peter Connelly, particularly that of Victoria, was that although the press actually vilified the front line staff, the bigger problem rested with how the organisation was run, how front line staff were trained, supported and monitored and their competency to do the job. What I believe Lord Laming said is that the way to make progress on child protection is to look less at individual faults and failing — although it is important that people are held to account; I am not trying to diminish that — and more at the

systems that operate in organisations. I imagine that it is exactly the same for DCAL. It is a systems approach.

The Health Department ensured that it took a robust view that the top-of-office staff would be on the Safeguarding Board. It believed that that was the way to ensure that there would be a strategic view and that the individuals had the power to make decisions and changes. So, you cannot sit on the Safeguarding Board unless you are a number one or a number two. You cannot sit on it unless you are the chief executive, the Chief Constable, the Assistant Chief Constable, the chief executive of the library board or the director. Everyone who sits on the board is a number one or number two of their member agencies. That has enormous advantages. It creates other issues as regards getting to these people regularly and being able to focus, but it is our job to try to work our way around that. The Department has given us the opportunity to use that system better.

**Mr Irwin:** It will be difficult to make child protection foolproof.

**Mr Connor:** Yes, that is what I am trying to say.

**Mr Irwin:** What measures are in place in relation to protecting children online? That could be quite difficult, as these activities can happen under the radar. It may need to be looked at and dealt with by government. What is your feeling? What have you in place to deal with that?

**Mr Connor:** I will start, and I am sure that Sharon will want to add to what I say.

The very first thing to say is that you are absolutely right. This is about putting the issue into a strategic and governmental policy context. It is really important that Departments provide that sense of leadership. I certainly do not think that it is the role for a body like the Safeguarding Board to take on that responsibility. I believe that it is up to government to do it. On the other hand, I believe that, around our table, we have a lot of very skilled and experienced people who are working on a wide range of settings. For example, we have the Department of Education, which clearly has lots of knowledge of cyberbullying and online safety. We also have the police, and, through the police, we can work with the criminal exploitation online service. That is why I said that experience has sometimes shown that, when cases have not gone as well as they might, it is often because there is a confusion between the agencies as to what to do in these very extreme circumstances.

There is lots of information out there. There is no paucity of information, certainly for kids. What there has not been is any review of what works and what is likely to work. One of the first things that we want to do is a wee bit of scoping to see what does work. We believe that there is a shortage of information for parents. As Sharon will mention, we met Jim Gamble and a young lad who set up a website. They told us that the key audience of that website was parents. We also believe that you have to get to professionals. Children being sexually abused and bullied is not a new thing. This is just a new method of doing it. It is about trying to raise awareness as to how that is done.

**Ms Beattie:** We, as adults, must listen to what children want. We must communicate using the methods that they use.

Hugh mentioned that we brought in a young lad who had set up an online helpline after seeing his friends getting cyberbullied. The majority of hits on that site came from parents who wanted advice on how to protect their children. He said, "We do not want focus groups or adults coming to talk to us. We want you to think about things like an app for our phones to make us safer. Those are the sorts of mechanisms that we want to use. You, as adults, need to consider that." It is really important that we listen to the voice of the child or teenager about the sort of mechanisms that they want.

As Hugh said, we will look at the continuum from the education messages right up to online exploitation. We do a whole raft of things. The first thing that we need to do is scope who is doing what and who is leading on these areas and whether what they are doing is effective. That will be our starting point, and it will be in our strategic plan over the next three years.

**Mr Connor:** We will share the strategic plan with all Departments. We believe that this is everybody's business. We believe that everybody should have the opportunity to make comments about it. We are keen to get support and buy-in for what we are doing. However, we cannot do everything. We have tried to pick some of the issues that we believe are important. We need to look at new issues and emerging trends, but we also need to look back at where things have gone wrong in the past and how you might put those right.



Secondly, when we brought in the lad, Ryan, he told us that his website had 2,800 hits in three weeks. He believed that 2,000-plus of those hits came from parents. What were parents worried about? They were worried about bullying. There is an enormous appetite for it among parents. We do not know how representative a measure that is, but it shows that parents have a lot of concern about bullying.

**Mr Humphrey:** Thank you both very much for your presentation. I see from the list of organisations on the SBNI board that you have five representatives from the voluntary sector. How are those representatives chosen?

**Mr Connor:** Mr Humphrey, under our guidance, we were required to have between three and five, and we chose to have five. We went out and advertised to the community sector and the voluntary sector. We tried to do it through NICVA to make sure that people realise what we are about. We had some 14 responses from organisations that indicated that they wanted to have a role on the Safeguarding Board. As we could have only five, we had to go through some sort of procedure. We went through that procedure. We were unable to offer a place to some organisations, but we brought those organisations onto our committees. We have education and training committees and communication committees. We wanted to try to tap into those organisations' interest, so we brought them onto our committees. The voluntary groups will be on the board for a period of three to four years. The reason for that is that we want them to rotate so that we keep some stability. That is the process that we used.

**Mr Humphrey:** I am pleased to hear that you went out for application. Sometimes, people are just appointed because they happen to be in the in-crowd, as it were. I speak as someone who is —

**The Chairperson:** In the in-crowd?

**Mr Humphrey:** Not for some time. *[Laughter.]* I speak as someone who was involved in one of the state youth organisations, the Scout Association. Did the scouts, the guides, the Boys' Brigade, the Girls' Brigade or any of those organisations apply?

**Mr Connor:** They did not. Although we had the best of intent, it may be that we did not reach them. We tried to find a way of reaching as wide an audience as possible, but maybe we did not reach them.

**Mr Humphrey:** I can speak only for the Scout Association, which now has in excess of 10,000 members in Northern Ireland. I am not saying that you have overlooked them in this case. It went out to application, and, therefore, the onus is on the applicant. Quite often, the state youth organisations are left out or overlooked, yet, compared with many other organisations, they are working with multiples of people.

**Ms Beattie:** Hugh said in our presentation that we are about building relationships, and we are doing that with the faith organisations. We believe that we need to build relationships with other organisations that play a role in some of our committee structures, and we will certainly do that.

**Mrs McKeivitt:** Thanks for your presentation. I apologise that I had to take a call in the middle of it. I also apologise if this question has been asked, but I need to ask it. As part of your strategic plan, one of the objectives is to provide leadership in setting that direction. Obviously, communication is part of that direction, and I understand that you communicate with the junior Ministers. Do you have a timescale for the communication to come back from the junior Ministers?

**Mr Connor:** We are at the stage where we will bring our strategic plan to our next meeting at the end of March, and we imagine and hope that that meeting will allow us, maybe with some amendments, to sign the plan off and get it out to consultation. We will share the plan with the junior Ministers from OFMDFM to ask them whether what we are offering is what they want. We must feed into the overarching strategy and policy, and that must be an interdepartmental policy. We want to make sure that what we are delivering on is what OFMDFM thinks is valuable.

**Mrs McKeivitt:** Is there a timescale in which to get that done?

**Mr Connor:** The consultation period will be three months. We hope to go out to consultation in early April, and the consultation period will be over somewhere around June. We are having ongoing

discussions with that Department, and we want some early feedback on whether we are on the right course.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** I apologise; I had to do a radio interview on job losses in my constituency.

I listened with care to your presentation, and Hugh said that you recognise the centrality, particularly in sporting organisations, of the Clubmark. In GAA, the Club Maith schemes were excellent and were far more than just a box-ticking exercise. They have given real value to sporting clubs. The Committee has recognised that the other organisations perhaps do not have that same level of governance. How can you see that working in practice if organisations do not have a governing body per se? What about the individuals who are doing the one-on-one teaching? I am not sure how the practicalities of that will work out. Have you thought about that?

**Mr Connor:** I will say a couple of things to that, and what I will say is a bit speculative. To be honest, it is a couple of ideas. The problem that you face here is very significant. This is never an event; this is always a process. You guys and we will be considering the issue in five and 10 years, because child protection matters will change, evolve and develop, and we will need to look at new solutions. You definitely want a structure in place that allows you to use a group such as the child protection in sport unit to build and develop that. It is a slow process, because it is about building trust and confidence. That process needs to be there, and it will take time.

The other thing that I will say is a bit speculative. When I thought about your invitation, I tried to think about our roles and responsibilities and what your invitation meant to us. I have a background in health and social services and worked in it for 40 years, and I believe that, collectively, as a society, we are now trying to make a cultural change in protecting children. No longer are we prepared to say that we will not listen to children. No longer will those with power be able to, basically, do what they want with children, whether that is in residential children's homes, their own homes or in something like the Savile case.

You have changed some dramatic things here. You have changed the way that we look at people who are driving when drunk and you have changed smoking in bars. Those have been huge cultural changes. We need a similar cultural change in this area, and I think that you have more of the tools to make that culture change than the Health Department does. Why do I say that? Because, I believe that you have two of the best sporting outlets in this Province in Ulster Rugby and the GAA. You also have the arts and theatre where people go for entertainment. This might be nonsense, but I think that there is an opportunity to link in a more co-ordinated fashion for a limited short-term programme over three years, and try to promote some sort of messages about children and sport and children and child protection. A number of the messages that are put out by the Health Department or us will always come against an audience that will not be sensitive to them. However, when you put it into the context of what people enjoy, it may hold a different capacity. That may be nonsense, but it is just a thought.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** The other thing, which Oliver McMullan touched on, is the challenges that RPA and any shake up in the education and library boards will create. Are you satisfied that those will be covered in your three-year strategic plan?

**Mr Connor:** Where the work that we are trying to do falls within education, I have no doubt that it will be made more difficult by reorganisation. That is the reality. Equally, I have no doubt that we have the right person on the board, given her future role in the Education and Skills Authority. There is continuity. The person who is on the board is an acting chief executive — that is the current requirement. Hopefully, in the new world, she will fulfil the role of having a responsibility for safeguarding and child protection. We have continuity in the policy, but rolling out our work plan will become more difficult as things change.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** Thank you. I wish you all the best.

**Mr Connor:** Thank you very much indeed.

**The Chairperson:** During your presentation, you mentioned the councils and the fact that the board has representatives from Ards Borough Council and Banbridge District Council. I am a former member of Ards Borough Council, so I am very aware of the chief executive there. It would be very helpful if you could give us some feedback from the councils about their issues with child protection and about those who hire halls, and so on. Also, if you have any further information about faith

groups, how they try to administer the use of their halls and all the checks they put in place, that would be invaluable.

**Mr Connor:** We will certainly do that. It might take a little bit of time, but we will do it. We would hope to have something back to you in, say, two to three months.

**The Committee Clerk:** Chair, we really want to try to make recommendations to the Assembly and the Department by the end of April. If there is any way —

**Mr Connor:** I will certainly try to accelerate that process. Will you do me one favour? Will you write formally to me? That will allow me to say that giving you that information is part of our section 12 duty.

**Mrs McKevitt:** I forgot to raise one thing. I raised the issue of communication, but have you communicated with the Children's Commissioner on any of this?

**Mr Connor:** Regularly.

**Mrs McKevitt:** OK.

**Ms Beattie:** We have a memorandum of understanding with the Children's Commissioner. As part of that, we have regular update meetings with her. We are also looking at taking forward joint pieces of work.

**The Chairperson:** On behalf of the Committee, I thank you for your time. I apologise again for the wait.

**Mr Connor:** Thank you very much. Thank you for inviting us.