



Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

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

21 March 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

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

21 March 2013

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)

Mr Dominic Bradley

Mr David Hilditch

Ms Rosaleen McCorley

Mr Michael McGimpsey

Mr Oliver McMullan

Witnesses:

Deputy Chief Inspector Iain Hall Police Service of Northern Ireland

Detective Supt Alan Skelton Police Service of Northern Ireland

The Chairperson: Good morning. Thank you very much for attending today. I apologise for the small number of members. We seem to have been hit by sickness and various other things today. You are very welcome and we look forward to hearing the contribution that you will make to our investigation. If you would like to make an opening statement then members will follow up with some questions.

Detective Superintendent Alan Skelton (Police Service of Northern Ireland): I am the detective superintendent in charge of public protection, Police Service Northern Ireland (PSNI), and this is Deputy Chief Inspector Iain Hall. I thank you for the opportunity to provide evidence to the Committee on the extensive measures that the PSNI now has in place to ensure that children and other vulnerable people are protected from those in society who wish to do them harm.

Protecting and safeguarding our children is everyone's responsibility. However it is also one of the most important priorities of the Police Service. We robustly investigate all reports of abuse, either in person or, as is more common now, in the online or virtual world where our children conduct so much of their lives. We carry out very detailed and complex enhanced checks for Access NI to ensure that people who might do harm to children and other vulnerable people do not gain access to them. Through the public protection arrangements Northern Ireland, we work with our partners to strictly manage registered sex and violent offenders living in the community and to ensure that they are unable to continue their offending, either in person or online. Where they fail to comply with conditions imposed on them by the courts we enforce those conditions, and on many occasions they are returned to prison to serve the remainder of their sentences. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, we work closely with our partners in other official agencies, private companies and the third sector to ensure that the threat posed to our children is reduced and our children and their carers know how they can protect themselves from those threats. Although I appreciate that your inquiry is specific to issues in relation to children in the sporting, arts and culture arenas, we do not distinguish between sectors. A

general outline of the extensive child protection measures we provide may be of assistance. I will then attempt to deal with some of the more specific issues in the terms of reference.

First, we have established eight public protection units (PPUs), one in each of our eight policing districts. A PPU is made up of 4 elements, namely: the child abuse investigation unit, staffed by trained child abuse detectives; missing and vulnerable persons officers; domestic abuse officers; and, finally, management of offenders officers. The PPUs deal with the vast majority of child protection related offences and protection issues. They have a heavy workload, which is increasing, partly due to the heightened awareness of child abuse through the Jimmy Savile abuse inquiry and, more locally, through historical cases being revealed through the ongoing historical institutional abuse inquiry.

The nature of abuse is also changing. The increased use of technology by our children from very young ages opens up many positive opportunities for them to learn and communicate with their friends, but it also makes them more vulnerable to abuse, ranging from bullying through to very serious online sexual abuse.

Serious sexual crimes, such as sexual assault and rape, committed against children by strangers — of which, thankfully, there are few — are dealt with by our rape crime unit. Major human exploitation of children is dealt with by our organised crime branch, and major investigation of abusive images of children by our child protection internet team. We are also working with our partners to open a world leading sexual assault referral centre (SARC), which will ensure that investigations are to the highest standard, but also that the facilities are conducive to minimising the trauma that the medical examinations of those victims can induce.

We also have a crime prevention branch, which works closely with our partners to ensure that the best prevention advice is provided regarding all crimes, including child protection issues. I know that you have had a briefing from Peter Davies from the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Centre, which is a world leader in that field. The resources that it has developed are excellent and freely available, and we would certainly recommend them, especially the 'Think You Know' website, which is of a very high standard.

However, it is also important to emphasise that child protection is not solely the role of our specialist units but rather it is a fundamental part of all police officers' and police staff duties. Our local community and response police officers play an important role, from dealing with complaints of bullying to helping to manage offenders in the community, and by providing information regarding online threats to school children.

It is also important to mention some of the more strategic partnerships that we are engaged in to tackle those issues. One of the most significant strategic developments in promoting safeguarding is the establishment of the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI). That has brought together the expertise from a variety of bodies, including the Police Service, to co-ordinate efforts and to adopt a common purpose to protect children. My Assistant Chief Constable, George Hamilton, represents the PSNI on that and has responsibility for child protection issues within the PSNI. We are also working with the SBNI at the moment to help address all aspects of child abuse, but particularly the growing online threats.

The public protection arrangements for Northern Ireland are critical to our work and, through that body, we work with our partners, both official agencies and third-sector bodies, to manage the risk around sexual and violent offenders. We have a dedicated full-time public protection team comprising PSNI officers, Probation Board officials and trust social workers. That team protects children and other vulnerable people by managing the highest-risk offenders living in the community.

A vital strand in the protection of children is to ensure that potential offenders do not have access to children in circumstances where they can befriend them and build relationships that can then be abused. As you will be aware, PSNI criminal records office works closely with Access NI to ensure effective vetting by providing enhanced checks. I know that you have had a paper from Access NI in relation to that, so I will not go into the detail of the checks. In the case of potential disclosure of information we have a complex and difficult process to follow, which balances the rights of the applicant against the rights of the vulnerable persons they might be working with. Because of the high impact of those disclosures on individuals, that is an area subject to regular judicial review, and we continually develop our procedures to ensure an effective but fair process is in place. Obviously, those additional requirements for our process extend the time period that it takes us to carry out those checks, but they are critical in order to get them right.

Online child abuse has developed in volume and nature over the past few years. We work closely with our colleagues in CEOP to ensure that we can deal with the international aspects of this crime and are aware of the trends in this type of abuse, which change regularly as a result of technology. We also work to ensure that we are effective in dealing with what has become a global threat to children, carried out by criminals who sometimes reside in countries many thousands of miles from their victims. We combat that threat through investigation and promoting prevention messages.

There remains a gap in the knowledge of the victims of online abuse and, as importantly, in the knowledge of the carers of the victims. We are actively addressing that issue with our partners. The child internet protection team had 102 cases reported to it in the 2012-13 financial year, predominately channelled through CEOP and other UK-wide services. That is an increase of 40% on the same period last year, so it is a growing area for us.

The child internet protection team undertakes all major internet sexual offending cases, including live cases of grooming. Colleagues in public protection units and districts continue to investigate the less complex cases, for example school-age children taking photographs of themselves and where indecent images are found during investigation of other offences, if they are of a less serious nature.

Our crime prevention unit is proactive in providing support to the vulnerable. We recently worked in partnership with the Get Safe Online campaign and brought that campaign and its promotional bus to Belfast, which was quite successful. We are also working closely with CEOP and other organisations to ensure that the growing online threat is addressed. However, I am sure that more can be done to help our children to protect themselves.

Bullying is also an important aspect of child protection and can, in extreme cases, lead to serious consequences for the victim. All reports of bullying against children and young people will, in the first instance, be viewed as potential criminal offences, and will be recorded and investigated accordingly. Bullying itself is not an offence, so it could be assault or various other things but they are investigated. Full consideration is given to a partnership response to the incident, involving other relevant and appropriate agencies that may be able to provide other support and intervention in respect of the victim and the situation, for example, education, social services, youth services or a voluntary or community based organisation. Police may become aware of bullying from a variety of sources, including clubs, schools and residential settings.

Bullying, including cyberbullying, may be defined as deliberately hurtful behaviour usually repeated over a period of time where it is difficult for those bullied to defend themselves. It can take many forms but the main types are physical, verbal and emotional. The damage inflicted by bullying can frequently be underestimated. It can cause distress to children to the extent that it affects their health and development or, at the extreme, causes them significant harm, including self-harm. Again, rapid developments in technology ensure that this is a fluid situation where opportunities for learning also provide opportunities for abuse. Education regarding those issues is of paramount importance.

A scheme called 'Leisurewatch' has been in place in Northern Ireland since 2005 and empowers responsible groups in the community, in particular the leisure industry, to contribute towards public protection and help to prevent anyone, particularly children and vulnerable adults, from becoming a victim of sexual offending. The Derwent Initiative has worked in partnership with the PSNI to roll the scheme out to 21 local councils and 102 leisure centres so far. Funding support was provided by the PSNI, the Department of Justice and, more recently, local councils.

It is an important scheme and is working well. It has three parts. First, an audit is carried out of sites and settings to assess the vulnerability to misuse by sex offenders, and comments and recommendations are reported back.

Secondly, there is training. At least 80% of all staff who have contact with the public, and particularly contact with children and vulnerable adults, receive a three-hour standard training course to increase their understanding of sexual offending and give them skills to assess and manage risk in that area. Managers receive an additional one-hour session as they are the main points of contact between the site and police and are key to the successful implementation of the scheme. Following the training, clear and distinct on-site signage and branding is provided to show that the site is a member of the scheme. That helps to deter potential offenders and reassure customers.

Thirdly, safe and effective information-sharing arrangements are put in place with local police public protection units for the reporting of relevant information and any concerning behaviour that is observed.

In conclusion, we continue to protect the vulnerable by investigating all complaints thoroughly and working with our partners where appropriate. We will support an effective vetting scheme to prevent those intent on causing harm from gaining access to children. We work with partners to manage registered offenders who reside in the community. Finally, we work with our partners to help fill the gap in knowledge and help to educate potential victims and their carers regarding the threat and what measures they can take to protect themselves from those wishing to do them harm, be that low-level bullying or the highest levels of sexual abuse.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. I am not sure if you are aware of the comments this morning from Colin Reid from the NSPCC. He said that there is a delay in the reporting of abuse, sometimes by up to six months. Do you have any understanding as to why that may be?

Detective Superintendent Skelton: There are probably two aspects to that: there are delays in reporting suspicions and there are delays in the victims themselves reporting abuse. With historical institutional abuse, there are people coming forward who have not reported abuse in the last 20 or 30 years. There are individual reasons for that, including personal circumstances. People may not have felt it was right for them at the time to report the abuse and something might have changed that they now feel they should be reporting it.

People may have information, but sometimes there are issues around how sure they are of their information, whether they feel comfortable reporting it and whether they feel that they are reporting something that is not important. Our stance is that people should report as soon as they can, because we can then assess that with other information. It may be that it is not anything important, but if it is not reported we do not get the opportunity to build on other information. There are very personal reasons in each case, and it is difficult to tie down exact reasons.

The Chairperson: Sometimes, that suspicion could identify a trend that could lead to something more. In the paper, you mention the gap in the knowledge of the victims of online abuse and of their carers. What is being done in relation to that, and whose responsibility is that?

Detective Superintendent Skelton: As I said, it is everybody's responsibility to provide protection for children, whether it is the parents, officials or institutions. There are many organisations doing that. We have our own crime prevention officers, and we have information on our website. We have worked with Get Safe Online and we have schools officers and CEOP-trained ambassadors. So, we are doing a lot. There is third sector work on that, and I am quite sure that education bodies and various other bodies are doing a lot as well. We are working with the SBNI to try to pull that together and have a more co-ordinated response.

There is a lot of work being done, but there is high lack of knowledge as well. The children themselves do not know the risks, particularly when you look at the age of the kids who are coming into contact with technology and how powerful that technology is. A lot of parents do not realise the risk that children are at when they receive a phone that has internet connectivity. Also, some children do not really understand the risk of sending photographs to their friends and the potential dangers of doing that. Primarily, the parents and the carers are not aware of the risks involved.

The Chairperson: We received a briefing from Wayne Denner in the early part of our investigation, which was quite powerful on the whole issue of cyberbullying and the fact that children now have the bully in their pockets and are not even aware of the dangers. Part of that leads to the lack of education for parents, who may not be au fait with the latest trend and the associated dangers.

Detective Superintendent Skelton: Also, they may not be au fait with the different trends in the actual offending. Online grooming used to be a precursor to a meeting that could potentially be physical. We are finding now that more is completed online, and somebody from another country could send out messages to 200 potential victims at a time and carry out strong acts to make the children do something. It is completed online, that is it finished, and there is no physical contact. So, the actual offences are changing as well.

The Chairperson: I am interested in Leisurewatch and the number of councils that have taken it up. Not all councils have taken it up, obviously, but you said that 102 leisure sites have. Are those leisure centres and community areas that are owned by councils? Do you know what the definition of leisure sites is?

Detective Superintendent Skelton: I think that most of those are leisure centres, but I am not sure of the exact definition. I can find that out for you.

The Chairperson: OK. More recently, it has been funded by local councils. This may be something that we need to follow up. Is that specific to just councils' own properties, or do they give the training, or allow for the training to be rolled out, to church groups and so on as well?

Detective Superintendent Skelton: I am not sure of the detail of that. I think that it is primarily for leisure centres and leisure centre staff. I am not sure whether there are circumstances in which they can roll it out to other groups, but I can certainly find that out.

The Chairperson: The model that is there obviously has very distinct parts. You have the audit, the training and the information-sharing. That might be something that could be transported to what we are looking at in relation to culture and the arts and the facilities associated with those activities. Obviously, that is where our primary concern is, and that is where we see the gap. If you have more information on that, we would really appreciate it. It might be useful for our own recommendations. You have seen the terms of reference of our investigation. Can you advise us of any recommendations in which you think there may be gaps?

Detective Superintendent Skelton: We are obviously not aware of the detail of all the organisations in the sector. We are well aware of Access NI, and that is our particular focus with regard to vetting, checks, etc, in that whole arena. There are more generic gaps in providing that information to the vulnerable and their carers. That seems to us to be the main area in which there is a need for more information. It would be very effective if that information were put across to children and carers. We are not really that aware of the specifics of how the groups etc in this area are managed.

Mr D Bradley: Good morning, gentlemen. Thanks very much for the presentation. I will go back to the report from the NSPCC this morning, which the Chair mentioned. It has a dedicated telephone line that adults, who have suspicions that a young person or child may be the subject of abuse, can ring. Apparently, 717 people used that line last year. However, as the Chair said, one third of them delayed for up to six months. That is obviously very concerning, because that is a period in which further abuse and crime of this type can take place. You said earlier that part of your remit is crime prevention. This is a problem that could impinge on the inquiry that we are carrying out. Can you offer us, either now or when you have had a chance to reflect, any concrete proposals for us to take action or suggest actions to ensure that people who are suspicious of sexual crime or sexual abuse can be urged to act more quickly than they do at the moment?

Detective Superintendent Skelton: The publication of the NSPCC report and the publicity surrounding it is, itself, a very useful way of encouraging support. We continually try to encourage people to report information to us if they have suspicions or to go through the NSPCC, Crimestoppers or anything like that. The only other way to do it is to have a specific promotional campaign. There is probably a very useful opportunity to use that report to promote this issue, because people get a lot of messages from different groups.

Mr D Bradley: When such reports come out, there is usually a deep intake of breath and bit of hand-wringing for a while, but the subject can very quickly fade into oblivion again. You mentioned a promotional campaign. Maybe we could take that on board and suggest it to some of the agencies that DCAL has responsibility for. Perhaps the PSNI could provide further advice on that.

Detective Superintendent Skelton: Yes.

Mr McMullan: Thank you for your presentation. There are a few things here. Are there any ways in which we can speed up the process of Access NI looking at people's characters?

Deputy Chief Inspector Iain Hall (Police Service of Northern Ireland): That is my job. The standard and basic checks are the responsibility of Access NI. There was a recent case heard by the Master of the Rolls, T v the Home Office and a number of chief constables, about the default disclosure of historical criminal convictions. This is not about the process of dealing with children; it is not an enhanced disclosure. However, a disclosure to allow you to work in the bank, for example, may be affected by a decision made by the Master of the Rolls, whereby a current criminal database is now to be considered private. The default disclosure process for Access NI, the Disclosure and

Barring Service and Disclosure Scotland, as it currently stands, may fall into disrepair. That is almost the easy bit.

You asked about timings. Mr Hilditch has just left us, but he would appreciate this point in relation to Carrickfergus. We say that the linesman's flag is better late and right than early and wrong. Access NI changed its process. It sends us an inquiry in relation to someone who is making an application for an enhanced disclosure certificate only when that person is on what is called the PLX database, although I do not want to be too technical. It alerts Access NI to the fact that the police in Northern Ireland have information. That might be relevant to a person who is a victim or a witness. They are on our database. It is only in those circumstances, or if it is an at-home or a childminder occupation, that Access NI sends us that inquiry. In theory, that change should have shortened the process.

However, you may be aware that Sunita Mason did a review into the disclosure of criminality. One of her recommendations is that police should articulate why we feel that the applicant may be a risk in relation to the particular role. Sometimes a blind man on a galloping horse could see the risk. For example, it might be easy to identify the risk if a person involved in the supply of drugs wants to work with the Brownies, but articulating that in a defensible position is not just so easy.

A number of recent judicial decisions in Northern Ireland and the UK have affected the disclosure process. What is called the representations process has had an effect. I, as the chief officer delegate, decide, on behalf of the Chief Constable, that I have information that may be relevant and ought to be disclosed. I then afford you the opportunity of saying, "No. That is not me. You are wrong. I do not agree." There is a process in which you might ask me to not mention a certain fact. For example, if we have articulated that you were involved in a fight, used a weapon and caused an injury, you may ask us to temper the words around that. All of this has to be taken against the balance of protecting the individual or group to whom the person may have access and balancing the rights of the applicant. Those are competing interests, and I am advised by Lord Neuberger in the case of L v Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis that I cannot put a greater balance on the protection of a child or the protection of a vulnerable adult in a care home than I can put to the applicant and the impact on theirs. There is, at some stage, a tipping point, so a default disclosure process that may have existed in the past to say that this is obviously relevant and that I feel as chief officer it should be disclosed — I have to consider the implications and the impact that that may have against that person's article 8 right to privacy.

I am challenged day and daily on the applications that we used to make. Almost by default, it is a much higher test. The legislation in Northern Ireland has not moved for me to say "reasonably believed". I am still in the "might be relevant". GB has moved to "reasonably believed", but I have already moved that test because it will come with the legislation. So, there is a raft of issues, and it is a dynamic environment. Historically, the disclosure certificate just used to go to the employer, who, on foot of that, decided that that was fine and employed or did not employ. The certificate now goes to the applicant and the employer or the registered body at the same time, but the legislation put in place for me in relation to a recent judicial guidance is that I should not disclose that information, if that person finds it offending, until they say so. That means that their disclosure certificate is parked, so, if I have a disclosure certificate on which I want to disclose information on drugs, violence, sexual activity or paramilitarism, I will hold that in abeyance. Even though I have a statutory guidance from the Secretary of State to disclose that information, Justice Treacy has said that I should not disclose it until the certificate sits.

So, there is a raft of issues in terms of what is deemed relevant, and considerations are made around whether it is an aged accusation, the gravity of that information and the impact and relevance that it might have in the field. Does that take a while to do? It absolutely does. It takes time to research to ensure that the information that we have is right and relevant, is not an abuse of an applicant and that we are not just disclosing this because we think that it is important. Because I am challenged so regularly, I have, in many respects, put a lot of safeguards in place to make sure that the information that I have fulfils the required tests, so that, if someone asks whether I really thought that that was the case, I am in a position to say to a judicial review that I am absolutely confident in the information. Would I like to take it a bit quicker? Absolutely. Do I need a bit more resource to do that? Yes, I do.

For the benefit of the Committee, the protection of freedoms, hopefully, if passed by this House, will bring in an independent monitor position where someone who challenges my potential disclosure text goes to an independent body outside the police and outside Access NI. The independent monitor can demand that the Chief Constable remove the information. It cannot ask him to amend, but it can remove certain sections of the text and provide a clear certificate. The independent monitor then manages that risk in that, if I say that I think that the person is a potential sex offender, the

independent monitor can say it that does not agree, and the independent monitor then carries the risk if that person goes on to abuse children or abuse elderly people in care homes.

Mr McMullan: It is more complicated as it goes on. It is harder.

Detective Superintendent Skelton: The other thing is that the unit was set up before the majority of these things came up through judicial reviews and various things, so the process has become much more complicated than it was before. We are in discussions with Access NI. There are obviously only two solutions. You can either put more resources in or extend the time that it takes. We are in discussions with Access NI to see how we can do something about it, but our priority has to be to make sure these decisions are right. If we have information that says that a person may be a threat to whatever environment they work in, we want to make sure that that is put out. Judicially, we have to make sure that we comply with all those things.

Deputy Chief Inspector Hall: From my point of view, it is about giving the employer as much information to allow them to say, "I can see that there is a risk. This person has two cautions for theft, and they are relatively recent, but I am content as an employer in a care home scenario to mitigate that risk because I will make sure that Mr or Mrs such-and-such does not have access to private property". That is primarily where I balance my proportionality in terms of that disclosure.

Mr McMullan: OK. I could talk to you for longer about that —

Deputy Chief Inspector Hall: Sorry.

Detective Superintendent Skelton: Sorry.

Mr McMullan: No. I appreciate that.

You talked about the emotional side of things and about cyberbullying isolating an individual from their activities and the social acceptance of their peer group. What exactly does that mean, that emotional side of isolating them?

Detective Superintendent Skelton: I suppose it is bullying in relation to their relationships with others. We have had instances where their Facebook account has been taken over and things have been put on their Facebook page that seem to be from them but are not — it may be abusive towards some of their friends. Things like that are happening, and that can obviously damage their reputation or whatever within their peer group. So there is new —

Mr McMullan: That is the peer group that we are talking about?

Detective Superintendent Skelton: Yes. It is instances like that where it is actually purported to have come from them.

Mr McMullan: We talk about the considerable distress to children and we reach out to their groups, you know, or whatever. There is no mention in here of disabilities or special needs, just vulnerable adults. Special needs is a whole raft of itself, you know, because of the complexities of it. Have you factored that in to your forward plan as well?

Detective Superintendent Skelton: When we talk about vulnerable people here, we mean all types of vulnerable people, not just vulnerable adults. I just did not want to be specific.

Mr McMullan: No, I understand.

Detective Superintendent Skelton: We look at all aspects of vulnerability, and each of those will have their own individual circumstances.

Mr McMullan: That leads on to my next question, and I will be very quick on this. You said that 21 councils have come back to you. RPA is coming in next year, which will bring you down to 11 councils. I think that that will make it easier for you to get round all the councils. Have you spoken to NILGA in this sense here?

You talked about 80% of staff getting a "standard" three-hour training course, and managers only getting an hour. How often is that followed up? One of the things that we are looking at here is the fact that a lot of the groups going in to train or whatever do not have a great background, so although a three-hour standard training programme at the start is fine, how often is that followed up, or how often can it be followed up?

Detective Superintendent Skelton: From my understanding, I do not think that it is followed up with follow-up instructions. I could be wrong on that, but I do not think so. This is, more or less, for people who are coming in to get this training. Obviously, if there were a large turnover, you would get more training. That training is given, but I do not think that there is follow-up for each individual. It certainly would be good to have that, but, again, there would be financial implications if you were to give people further training. Again, I suppose that it is about what added value that extra training would give. This is to raise awareness; to give people that extra awareness of what to look for, and, hopefully once that is trained they will know what to look for and be able to spot the signs. There may be changes in how people do these things, but, in that setting, it probably has not changed too much.

Mr McMullan: Councils have disability champions within elected reps, and I would like to see providers of sports venues and that have the same. They may have them in a different name, but they should be the same. Some children have such complex disorders that nobody in there can understand them. We had a case one time where a lady came and said, can you do something with that disruptive child that we had in a disability group. Well, we tried to explain that the child had a complex disorder, but it got us nowhere. That is where I think NILGA should be instructing councils, now that we are going into RPA.

Detective Superintendent Skelton: We would certainly support that. The more broadly that this can be put out to groups, the better for us. For councils to be able to provide more support would be a good thing. Certainly, we would be supportive of that. If there can be an extra —

Mr McMullan: Will you take that to NILGA?

Detective Superintendent Skelton: We can, but coming from here as well it may have a slightly better impact.

The Chairperson: Mr McMullan, just for your information, we have NILGA coming to us next week, so there are a number of issues that we can raise. So you will probably enjoy that session.

Mr McMullan: There we are; told off again. Thank you very much.

Mr D Bradley: Resident NILGA expert.

The Chairperson: We will warn Derek before he arrives.

Ms McCorley: I will try to be brief. Do you maintain records of the types of people that children make their first revelation to if they have been abused? You know, is it likely to be a parent, a friend, a teacher, a youth leader, so that you can maybe design your strategy?

Detective Superintendent Skelton: We would not keep records like that. We are primarily, obviously, investigating an offence. If it is reported, we will investigate. Even from knowledge who they report to, it would vary so much. We really would not have records of who it is first reported to. What we want is that report. Whoever they report it to, it does not matter; we then work with social services to investigate it.

Ms McCorley: I was just thinking that if, say, a certain group of people were the most likely to be identified as confidants, it might be useful to focus on, say, teachers or parents, as to how to make themselves more open.

Detective Superintendent Skelton: Part of the problem is it is such individual circumstances in each of these. It is going to depend on what has happened to them and who they trust and the circumstances that they are in. There is a raft of —

Ms McCorley: Finally, with reference to the whole Savile revelations, do you feel that you have kind of got those gaps covered so that abuse like that would be unlikely? I know that nothing is foolproof and that that was a different era. Are current standards sufficient to ensure, as far as can be possible, that those kinds of abuses are not possible?

Detective Superintendent Skelton: The starting point for all of our involvement is primarily somebody coming to us with information about something that has happened or the victim coming to us in person. We can encourage as much as we like, but victims will make their own choice on what they do with that information. I know that it is very difficult for them. We can try to encourage them to have the confidence that we will deal with that in a most professional manner with our partners, and we will continue to do that. Whether all victims still come forward is where the SARC is also very important, because it provides premises where they can come forward with confidence that they will be dealt with properly, and not suffer more trauma. We can do all of that and work with our partners to do all of that, but can we be sure that all these victims are going to come forward? I do not think that we can. Savile is a very specific case of someone with a very strong personality and power over people and an attraction to people. You could not say that that definitely would not happen again. However, things have certainly changed dramatically since then, and I suggest that it is much less likely that it would be hidden.

Deputy Chief Inspector Hall: The preventative bit is where Access NI is key, ensuring that the groups who have responsibility for children or vulnerable adults — people who work with them in that regulated activity — are properly checked. Huntley and the case of Holly and Jess is the one with which everyone is familiar when it comes to the passing of information not just within a police force but between forces. We are now involved with the police national database, where I can harvest information, from various sites, on someone who has migrated throughout the United Kingdom.

With Huntley, his incidents and reports against him were important, but not sufficient to warrant an investigation and real concern. However, when added together, it was one of those cases of, "Look at the clues, detective." It lined itself up. A very clear manifestation of risk was there, presented by a series of concerns. Reporting was referred to earlier. It is difficult to ask people to report when they see kids going into someone's house and they are not sure whether it is their uncle or not, and for us to then draw a conclusion that that man is abusing children, when he might actually be their uncle or familial carer in some scenarios. We are then recording suspicion against that person erroneously. Yes, we will proactively investigate that information. We are better to have it and be able to discard it, than not know it and then, at some stage, end up with a worst-case scenario. From my point of view, it is about adding information that maybe of itself — one incident — is not that serious, but when added together, provides me with a picture of whether that person is violent, a potential abuser or potential drug dealer, and how that would be relevant to an occupation. Is it possible to say whether someone who is a potential abuser of the Brownies will not be able to abuse the Brownies? I cannot say that, because their mindset might change once they get into the Brownies. The opportunity is there. However, if we have not got that picture from reporting, we cannot draw on it.

Ms McCorley: Can I just check one thing that you said? You said that if children went into somebody's house, it might just be their uncle's house. You would not just assume that, because somebody is their uncle, it is OK.

Deputy Chief Inspector Hall: No, absolutely not. That is why I said that we would investigate it proactively, but it is —

Detective Superintendent Skelton: Somebody might not report it because of that.

Ms McCorley: You mean that somebody else might perceive it to be OK? Right. I know that uncles are a bit of a high-risk category.

Deputy Chief Inspector Hall: Unfortunately, I see quite a few of those cases.

Detective Superintendent Skelton: It is very much about working on the information that we have. It is not just members of the public who can report things; other organisations share information as well. There are issues there. There is all of the information that each organisation has shared with us.

Ms McCorley: I appreciate that it is a very difficult job. Go raibh maith agat.

The Chairperson: You have mentioned that the police will proactively investigate a report. Say, for example, if your officers see that an organisation or group has been set up in their area or on their beat, do they have the power to go in and ask about Access NI checks or give advice on the spot to organisations?

Detective Superintendent Skelton: What you find, with the number of neighbourhood officers that we have, you would be surprised if they did not make contact with a new group that has set up. They will, probably, do that anyway. As for asking specifically about Access NI checks, etc, probably not, because they are pretty clear on who needs to do that. We do not really make checks like that on behalf of Access NI or in addition to that. There are no powers. They could provide advice. I would certainly say that they would provide advice to those who work with children or vulnerable groups. They say, have you gone through the proper checks. As for us specifically inspecting, we do not, because it is not —

Mr McMullan: Have you the power to go to, say, a local authority and ask to see its list of which groups are registered with it?

Deputy Chief Inspector Hall: The only legislative requirement for people who deal with and look after children and vulnerable adults is that they are not on the barred list. There is a barred list, which is a derivative of the old list 99, the schoolteachers' list, protection of vulnerable adults and protection of children lists, which were amalgamated by what was the Independent Safeguarding Authority and has now become the Disclosure and Barring Service. The only legislation is that you will not have someone in a position of care for children or vulnerable adults who is on that barred list. Access NI checks are still just good practice. There is no law to say that if you have not got Brown Owl — I keep referring to the Brownies — vetted, she must not be Brown Owl. The Guide Association will have that in place. However, for any youth group, youth club or care home, whether it be adult dementia care, there is no other legislation in place. The only legislation is that the person is not on the barred list.

Mr McMullan: The barred list. Right. That is interesting.

The Chairperson: Thank you for the time that you have spent with us today and, in particular, the detail that you have gone into about Access NI. That, in itself, has been invaluable as an explanation. Thank you very much for coming to speak to us today.