



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

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

11 April 2013

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

### Investigation into Consistency in Child Protection across the CAL Remit: Local Government Briefing

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

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)  
Mr William Irwin (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr David Hilditch  
Mr William Humphrey  
Ms Rosaleen McCorley  
Mr Basil McCrea  
Mrs Karen McKeivitt  
Mr Oliver McMullan  
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

**Witnesses:**

Mr Liam Hannaway	Society of Local Authority Chief Executives
Mr Brendan Courtney	Lisburn City Council
Mr Derek McCallan	Northern Ireland Local Government Association

**The Chairperson:** I welcome you to our Committee meeting this morning. As you know, we are undertaking an investigation into child protection across the remit of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. If you are content, please give us an opening statement, and members will follow up with some questions.

**Mr Derek McCallan (Northern Ireland Local Government Association):** Thanks very much, Chair, for your Committee's invitation to give evidence. As you know, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) responded to your request in early February, and we are still in the process of putting together a collation document containing recommendations related to the investigation, which councils certainly support.

In order to materially advance matters today, my senior practitioner colleagues Liam Hannaway, chair of the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE), and Brendan Courtney, who represents chief leisure officers, will concisely comment on two specific issues that are very relevant to the investigation. The first is the strategic, statutory integrated body: the Safeguarding Board. We then want to give some indication, again concisely, of the responses that we received about the operation of Leisurewatch in councils. If that is OK, I will hand over to Liam, who will deal with the Safeguarding Board.

**Mr Liam Hannaway (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives):** I just want to highlight a couple of points. First, as you will be aware, SOLACE is represented on the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, which represents the public sector's integrated approach to looking at the whole issue of

safeguarding. Local government is represented on the board, which includes other representatives of the various public sector bodies, along with private practitioners such as GPs and children's organisations such as Children in Northern Ireland, Barnardo's, etc. We also have two senior managers who sit on the local panels at the regional level. So local government is very much plugged into the whole safeguarding policy and strategy in Northern Ireland.

Secondly, local government takes its commitment to safeguarding extremely seriously. Right across the sector, whether it is leisure, community services or community safety, we have a lot of involvement with children. Our safeguarding policy is, therefore, extremely important in our organisations, and we look at various policies to ensure that safeguarding measures are in place.

I can speak only on behalf of Banbridge District Council, of which I am the chief executive. We are a member of Leisurewatch. Indeed, I think that the vast majority of councils — Brendan will pick up on this and give you some detail later — are tied into Leisurewatch. Irrespective of whether councils are involved in Leisurewatch, they will have regard for safeguarding and have safeguarding policies in place.

The third thing that I really want to highlight is the hiring of council facilities. A number of councils have followed Banbridge District Council's example, because it is very good practice. When a group hires a facility, we check its child protection policy, which it must provide. It must also ensure that coaches and the people using the facilities have been subject to Access NI checks. Indeed, when we enter into a lease for extended use of our facilities, we will follow up on things such as insurance and child protection policies to ensure that the people using our facilities have those in place.

That is that all I want to say at this stage. I will pass over to Brendan, who will pick up on the specifics of Leisurewatch.

**Mr Brendan Courtney (Lisburn City Council):** I will give some brief background on Leisurewatch and our role in it. Lisburn City Council has carried out some research across councils. At the minute, we have received 16 replies to our initial questionnaire and, of those 16, 13 councils have informed us that they are members of Leisurewatch.

One of the key elements of Leisurewatch is that there is training for 80% of front line staff, year on year. There is also an external mystery visit, which is very important. During a mystery visit, someone will come to a centre and behave in what would be viewed as a slightly unusual manner. What that person wants to see is our staff challenging and asking them what they are there for and what they are doing, and if we have any concerns, we will refer them to Leisurewatch. That is very positive from our perspective because it keeps staff on their toes and makes sure that they are vigilant at all times. It also helps us to build public confidence in how we handle such situations. The fact that the PR and the posters for Leisurewatch are up around our buildings means that people know that the council takes the issue seriously.

There is also on-site training for managers, through the Derwent Initiative, on how to deal with issues, and there is a straight referral mechanism to the PSNI. That can have a very positive effect. Northern Ireland is a very small country: there have been occasions in our centres when a member of the public has had concerns about a visitor who may be suspected of having a past record of inappropriate behaviour, and the rumour mill can start very quickly. We can then quickly make a phone call. Both the cases that arose in Lisburn were unfounded, but the referral system helps to deal with that and nips it in the bud, which is very important for us. It is a positive experience all round: it helps to build confidence among staff, and especially among our customers.

**Mr McCallan:** From our perspective, we wanted to make sure that the role of local government and its buy-in to the strategic body was mentioned today. We also wanted to convey some of the constructive elements of the Leisurewatch programme. I had hoped to get the collation document by the end of last month, but it will now be the end of this month simply because of the detail provided by councils, which is an indication of how importantly they treat this issue. There have been 18 replies, and two were received this morning, so I would prefer to tell that to you rather than Brendan.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you for that. We look forward to seeing that response, because I think that it will be really useful in our inquiry. We received a presentation on Leisurewatch from the PSNI, which provided detail on the scheme. That was very useful considering that we are now faced with some of its practitioners. It is interesting that not all the councils have signed up to it. That is not to say that

those that have not signed up do not have very good child protection policies in place, but is there a reason why not all councils have signed up?

**Mr Courtney:** Some reasons were given in answer to the questionnaire that was sent out by Jim Rose, the chairman of the Chief Leisure Officers Association. Some councils feel that they already have a very robust system in place, and that the cost of being a member of Leisurewatch, which is based on a multiplier that depends on the number of facilities, was not offset by the benefits gained over and above those of their own systems. That appears to be the only concern that has been raised by a council that is not currently a member of Leisurewatch.

**The Chairperson:** As council representatives, have you had a number of complaints made in relation to child protection issues at any particular time?

**Mr Hannaway:** We have really had only one child protection issue raised in our organisation, which was around the use of a photograph of a child in publicising archery. We were able to deal with that very quickly by removing it and updating the policy on the use of photographs. Child protection is an evolving thing. Five years ago, the use of a child's photograph may not have been a problem, but now it is, and parents are more and more concerned about permission for use of photographs. Our policies develop in accordance with that.

**The Chairperson:** I was a councillor — I was with Derek on Ards Borough Council for a number of years — and I found that, generally, the public thought that the council had responsibility for many aspects outside its remit. I suppose they thought that it had oversight of a particular geographical area and would go to the council about leisure facilities not owned by the council. I am thinking particularly of church facilities, and so on. Would the council have a dedicated officer who may go out to give advice to the likes of church groups about who they subsequently hire their facilities to, just to give some advice around child protection?

**Mr Hannaway:** There are two issues there from a culture and sports development point of view, and Brendan might want to pick up on those. As part of our sports development programme, we run child protection sessions and impart the training that is provided through Leisurewatch to other sporting organisations. The responsible body for child protection is the health sector, so if people want child protection training, we normally inform them of the trust, which would provide specialist trainers on child protection. We do not have the primary responsibility for child protection for other community organisations.

**The Chairperson:** I understand that, but the council is sometimes the first place that people will go to for advice and signposting.

**Mr McCallan:** I suppose your key point, Chair, is about whether there is a dedicated officer. There is an anticipatory role for specific officers, and a reactive one. You referred to church groups, and I am aware that a number of councils have good-relations officers who work with them and flag those issues up, not from the point of view that an incident has occurred, but to signpost them to where, as Mr Hannaway said, the responsibility lies or where to get direction. Brendan wants to give specific illustration in answer to your query.

**Mr Courtney:** I will pick up on two points. The last question was on the number of referrals. Lagan Valley LeisurePlex in Lisburn gets roughly a million customers through its doors every year. We make around between two and four referrals a year to Leisurewatch on concerns that customers or our staff have picked up.

I will move on to the issue of training. Through the Leisurewatch scheme and through a scheme with the local trust, a number of staff are trained up as child protection trainers. As part of that training, they have to give a commitment to train at least 50 individuals in child protection throughout the year. That is rolled out across the voluntary and statutory sector. Although it is a leisure initiative, it is not confined to sports clubs. Church groups and anybody else can get involved in that. That is based on the Leisurewatch training and is very well received among the community.

**The Chairperson:** My last question is personal observation more than anything else. There seems to be a move towards communal changing facilities in new leisure complexes. Is that an economic decision or is there some other reason why that is seen as the way forward?

**Mr McCallan:** I have to defer to the people who design those facilities, but it is an important point. I am a user of the Robinson Centre in Castlereagh. It is a contemporary approach, and we can maybe look at what the officers said in planning those facilities.

**Mr Courtney:** In our facilities, it is about the best use of space when planning. Concerns have been raised by members of the public about communal changing, or village changing as we call it, and we have had to make certain adaptations, most of which have come about as a result of child protection concerns. However, we are hopefully now at the stage where the adaptations that have been made following the initial installation have minimised the opportunity for concerns about that design programme.

**The Chairperson:** It is a bugbear of mine, and I raised the issue — Mr McCallan is smiling — while I was a councillor at Ards Borough Council. I had the director out to see the village changing at Ards Leisure Centre. In many ways, it is disappointing that it is about the best use of space as opposed to any other reason. I see it as a potential child protection problem, particularly given the cubicles and the use of mobile devices, and so on.

**Mr Courtney:** To clarify, the best use of space is one of the reasons, not the only reason. It is part of the design profile, and it certainly seems to be more prevalent now than it was in the past.

**The Chairperson:** When you go to a private gym, there are separate changing facilities.

**Mr Hilditch:** Gentlemen, you are very welcome this morning. During the inquiry, an organisation that formulates policy in conjunction with local councils showed some concern about inconsistency in child protection across the 26 councils. I know that you are now proactively seeking responses and taking various actions on that front. On the back of that, is there anything else that NILGA could perhaps do? Are you worried about that statement?

**Mr McCallan:** I would not be worried. There are inconsistencies, but one underpinning factor is that, corporately, the organisations are doing good things in different ways. With regard to what could happen, some would consider RPA to be the elephant in the room. The emergence of 11 councils and a performance framework, which may or may not be specified in the reorganisation Bill that many of you will be getting shortly, gives us an opportunity to encourage consistency and core performance. I respectfully suggest that homogeneity would not be a good way forward, except in certain matters such as child safety. Homogeneity starts to undermine individual circumstances, whether it is in 11 areas, or 22 in Wales, etc. You have raised a key point, and it certainly gives us an opportunity through the elephant in the room — RPA.

**Mr Hilditch:** With regard to the Leisurewatch scheme, some councils are involved in it only at their leisure facilities, but we all know that a lot of the community development facilities out there are probably as well used nowadays as leisure centres. Would NILGA encourage an extension of Leisurewatch to other council facilities? It relates to only a few, but is that something that you could proactively pursue?

**Mr McCallan:** There is certainly an option to do that. On its completion, the collation document will not just serve the good work of the Committee. There would also have to be some internal analysis to see whether the scheme could be expanded. Again, my practitioner colleagues may want to develop that point.

**Mr Hannaway:** We recognise that all our centres, whether it is our leisure centres or community centres, involve some element of leisure. Indeed, they would be all tied into Leisurewatch.

**Mr Hilditch:** Yes. I see that Banbridge has a leisure centre and a couple of community centres, although others on the list do not go as far as that.

**Mr Hannaway:** They are all tied into Leisurewatch. When the organisation buys into Leisurewatch, there is complex in-depth training with the Derwent Initiative and that is applicable to the council. Therefore, it would be very remiss not to use that for all people involved in the centres, and we do that.

**Mrs McKeivitt:** I was going to ask a question about RPA and, of course, it had to come up before my name was called. I notice that some of the councils that are not on the list have a coastal area as a big part of their leisure facilities. Down District Council is an example, which includes the Newcastle

promenade. Is there an opportunity to explore the use of the Leisurewatch scheme for the likes of our beaches or will it be confined to buildings? I am thinking of the Tollymore Outdoor Centre and such places where a lot of outdoor activity happens.

**Mr Courtney:** I am not an expert on the scheme but, as far as I am aware, our child protection officers, through the council, liaise on a day-to-day basis with the Derwent Initiative. However, I am not aware that there are any constraints on where it can be rolled out. I think that it is a matter of where a number of measures can be put in place to help reduce risk, and if that can be managed in such a process, an area could be included. It depends on the way in which they are staffed. For instance, if the council has lifeguards on the beach, that is fine, but an open space is much harder to deal with.

**Mrs McKeivitt:** I noticed that mystery visits are part of your remit. Have there been any instances when you have been unhappy with that scheme or the training that was put in place?

**Mr Courtney:** Obviously, if there were mystery visits and all was well every time, you would be somewhat concerned that things were not being picked up. We have had nothing too serious, but we have had to adapt our normal operating procedures on the back of something that has been raised by a mystery visitor. That is one of the benefits of it. We find that quite challenging, but it is a good thing.

**Mrs McKeivitt:** A lot of our local councils are investing in community centres through providing funding, but they do not actually run them. Is there an opportunity for that training to be expanded through NILGA for private community centres?

**Mr Hannaway:** When we give a capital support grant to sports clubs or other centres, we actually seek their child protection policy, in the same way that we would with any of the other policies. That is a critical piece of information that we require from community or sporting organisations when we are investing money.

**Mr Irwin:** Thank you for your presentation. Child protection is becoming a very big issue. It is very good that Leisurewatch seems to be working. I see that 72% of the staff think that the training is excellent, so that is very good. In recent times, we have become more aware of child abuse online. Is there anything that you are able to do in relation to that?

**Mr McCallan:** I would ask for responses about that at practitioner level.

**Mr Hannaway:** In respect of role and responsibility, the Health and Education Departments and the PSNI are the main lead organisations on that matter, and because we are represented on the Safeguarding Board, local government will pick up on issues. Indeed, part of the role of the Safeguarding Board is checking that each of the public sector bodies adheres to the child protection policies and the statutory requirements on child protection, but also in dissemination and looking at serious cases where there have been child deaths or major child abuse. The learning experience from that has transferred and cascaded out to all the public sector bodies so that they can learn from that. In every council, there is a designated officer with responsibility for child protection, but, in my experience, it is only part of a person's job because they have other responsibilities in a full-time job. If there is an issue with the internet, there is a point of reference within the council, as is the case with any other public sector or, indeed, community body.

**Mr McMullan:** Thank you for your presentation. Is information sent out to the councils from the PSNI or anybody else to warn of potential dangers in your area? Does that information circulate?

**Mr McCallan:** That is the case, yes.

**Mr Courtney:** If there are concerns about individuals, we would be made aware of those, within the confines of data protection procedures. Sometimes that comes through the PSNI, sometimes through the general public, when they may have concerns, or, indeed, through a member of staff. At that stage, we refer it to Leisurewatch, which then follows its procedures. We then act on whatever information is forthcoming.

**Mr McMullan:** The training is done by the Safeguarding Board. How much training is given on disability and special needs awareness and being able to spot problems with children who may not look out of place but have special needs?

**Mr Hannaway:** The Safeguarding Board does not do training; it identifies issues and highlights them for the relevant bodies. Leisurewatch does carry out training for front line staff. I do not know whether it deals with disabilities.

**Mr Courtney:** It is generic training. There are elements that deal with concerns relating to certain parts of the population, but it is generic. There is not a separate training session for people with disabilities.

**Mr McMullan:** Do you not think that that is a gap if you are encouraging people with special needs into your centres? The centres that I have been to have excellent facilities, but is there a gap in training specific to that need?

**Mr McCallan:** I return to a comment that Liam made earlier. There is evolution in all of this. Mr McMullan has raised a good point. I am aware that there are very good examples of training that is specific to certain areas because of usage by certain elements of the population. We should take the opportunity to provide that training as comprehensively as possible. I am aware of training that is taking place, coincidentally, in the Banbridge area, which is excellent in that regard. Mr McMullan's point is about making sure that, where there are any gaps, those are closed as quickly as possible.

**Mr Hannaway:** I think that there are two issues here. There is the issue of child protection, and there are issues to look for in relation to the intense child protection training that is provided by Leisurewatch, which is fairly generic and covers all staff. That is not to say that specific work is not being done. Our council runs a number of summer schemes and other schemes during the year that are particularly targeted at children with disabilities. Our staff who work with those children are given specialist integrated training. That is done separately from child protection training.

**Mr McMullan:** As a councillor of 22 years, I know that that does not happen in practice in most councils. It is the minority rather than the majority of councils.

Councillors are appointed as disability champions but they are not being given a specific role. Their role is very vague, and the majority of them do not know their exact role. Councils are not giving them the role that they are supposed to have. In some councils, the matter is dealt with by the human resources department and it is a little disjointed because of that.

The role of the disability champion needs to be firmed up and made more specific. Instead of just being given a title, the elected people who have those positions should be told what their role is and they should be advised of the responsibilities that go along with it. When I was a disability champion for my council, I had to fight for a long time to find out exactly the role entailed.

There is still a huge gap in the local authorities around the whole issue of disability and special needs.

**Mr McCallan:** For the record, if the Committee is minded, I can certainly raise the issue through the association, particularly with regard to the roles of elected members who are disability champions. We certainly want to eliminate gaps across the board and, as Mr McMullan has highlighted, emphasise those roles and responsibilities and the fact that the title of disability champion is more than just a label.

**Mr McMullan:** The training is delivered once and does not seem to be done again after that. Quite a lot of councils do not have any yearly follow-up, or refresher courses, if you want to call them that. It seems to be done once so that the council can say that it has done it. That could be the situation for a number of years and, while everything else moves on, the training stops.

**Mr McCallan:** I will follow through on that issue.

**Ms McCorley:** Go raibh maith agat. Thank you for your presentation. The Chair raised concerns about communal village-type changing facilities, and I share those concerns. Have similar concerns been raised by members of the public? Have there been any complaints, and have any child protection incidents or issues arisen? Has anyone raised concerns about issues that might not necessarily be about child protection? Has a greater volume of concerns been raised about communal facilities as opposed to separate facilities?

**Mr Hannaway:** The wet side at Banbridge Leisure Centre has communal changing facilities. I know that issues were raised four or five years ago, but I am not aware that any issues have been raised since. The customer satisfaction levels at Banbridge Leisure Centre are running at about 80% to 90%. We have Quest accreditation, which is a national accreditation for leisure centres, and all our centres have been accredited in that way.

As a parent, I find the village changing on the wet side to be quite good, because if you are bringing kids — a few boys and girls — you can manage things in a much better way than you could if there were separate changing rooms, especially if you are managing six- and seven-year-olds. I appreciate that some people do not like it and that there are adults who have issues with it. I can only use the example of our own council. Two or three years ago, we made some adaptations to our changing room facilities, which made things better. However, it is still village or communal changing on our wet side as opposed to our dry side. For the gym and the sports halls, there are male and female changing rooms. That gives us two types of facilities, which is much better for the customer.

**Mr McCallan:** To answer the question directly, I am not aware of any trends that show greater proportionate child protection issues from communal changing. However, one of the values of discussions like this is to make sure that analysis is carried out so that there is a definitive response. There have certainly been no trends to suggest such an issue.

**Mr Courtney:** Our experience reflects that of Banbridge. However, it would be wrong to say that concerns have not been raised in Lisburn. When a concern is raised, we try to deal with it as best we can. There are certain adaptations that have been made to the changing areas, but the general consensus is that the positives far outweigh the negatives when it comes to families having the ability to come along and change together. The main concern that we have is an under-provision of family changing, which we are looking at as part of a potential capital refurbishment.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you for your presentation. I look forward to receiving the response from each of councils because it will be very useful as we work to complete our report. If you could forward the responses to us as soon as possible, we would really appreciate it. Thank you for your time this morning.