



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Investigation into Consistency in Child
Protection across the CAL Remit: Ulster-
Scots Agency Briefing

11 April 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

Investigation into Consistency in Child Protection across the CAL Remit: Ulster-Scots Agency 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 David McCallum	Ulster-Scots Agency
Ms Jane Wallace	Ulster-Scots Agency

The Chairperson: We will now hear from the Ulster-Scots Agency's education officer, Jane Wallace, and its director of corporate services, David McCallum. Good morning. You are welcome to the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure for what I believe is your first time with us. I hope that it will not be too daunting for you. As you are aware, we are carrying out an investigation into child protection issues across the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's remit. We have your paper, but I invite you to make an opening statement, and members will follow up with some questions.

Mr David McCallum (Ulster-Scots Agency): I am the newly appointed director of corporate services, and I thank the Committee for inviting us to talk about child protection. Jim Millar, our director of education and language and designated child protection officer, sends his apologies. He is on leave until the end of the month.

The Ulster-Scots Agency is fully committed to child protection and takes the issue very seriously. We are committed to the delivery of a quality service that promotes good practice in protecting children and young people from harm. The agency also ensures that the correct procedures are in place to safeguard staff and the organisation from any potential allegations of abuse. My colleague Jane Wallace is the deputy child protection officer, and she will update you on the current position of the North/South Language Body's child protection policy.

Ms Jane Wallace (Ulster-Scots Agency): In 2009, the agency approached its sister organisation, Foras na Gaeilge, and invited it to come together with us to develop a revised child protection policy for the whole of the language body. Following procurement, the two organisations appointed the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) to develop robust safeguarding

policies and procedures, along with which there was a community code of practice. The initial policy was finalised in November 2009 and reviewed by the NSPCC in January 2011. Those documents are on our website for the community to download, and all staff have copies for their own reference. As part of that procurement, staff also received training from the NSPCC. That was delivered in 2010, and the intention is to renew it this year. In addition, last year, the agencies designated child protection officers and deputy child protection officers — Jim and I undertake those roles in the agency — and we completed specific NSPCC-delivered training for the posts.

As well as agreeing the joint policy, the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge formed a subcommittee that meets at least twice a year. As part of those meetings, the policy is reviewed to ensure that we remain compliant with new legislation and best practice. The committee comprises the designated officers and their deputies for Foras and us.

The agency's current policies and procedures include guidance on cyberbullying and social media. However, at our recent subcommittee meeting, we agreed to seek guidance to review the current policy and procedures to ensure that we continue to comply with and adopt best practice, given recent legislative changes and upcoming recommendations from the British and Irish Parliaments. Therefore, we will initiate the procurement process shortly and will invite the appropriate bodies from both jurisdictions to tender to update our policy and code of conduct.

The agency's staff have limited direct regular contact with vulnerable groups. However, the Ulster-Scots Agency carries out appropriate vetting procedures — mostly, enhanced disclosure checks — for any staff and service providers who have regular contact with children, young people or vulnerable adults. As a precautionary measure, all members of the education in the community team are vetted, which we find to be what schools expect even though we do not have direct and regular contact.

We signpost community groups to organisations such as the NSPCC and Volunteer Now, which are better equipped to provide advice. The Ulster-Scots Agency also signposts the community to the Ulster-Scots Community Network, which is one of our core-funded organisations that is registered as an Access NI umbrella body. We are not registered, which is largely due to the fact that some 200-plus applications come in for music and dance alone, as we do not have that responsibility and the time constraints of putting perhaps two tutors through from each organisation. With music and dance, there could be 500 applications alone, so we signpost them to the Ulster-Scots Community Network, which is the registered umbrella body.

Community and voluntary groups that apply for funding must not only provide evidence that their organisation is fully committed to safeguarding children and vulnerable adults but submit a copy of their own safeguarding and child protection policy. This policy must include the names and contact numbers of two appointed designated and trained safeguarding officers. In the community music and dance tuition applications and the summer scheme applications, community groups must confirm that, at a minimum, they will provide us with a copy of their policy and that the policy is appropriate to their organisation's work and the project that they are asking us to fund. They also confirm that they review their own policy at least once a year and do a rigorous recruitment and selection process for staff and volunteers who are involved in regulated activity and who work with children and young people and vulnerable adults, including a criminal record check. They must take up references. They must also confirm that they will update that check every three years to confirm that they follow statutory or best practice guidance on appropriate ratios of staff to volunteers. They must also confirm that they provide training to all their staff and volunteers. Anyone who fails to do that, unfortunately, does not get funding. It is a mandatory requirement.

Our current child protection procedures have been audited by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) on behalf of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. An overview and inspection was carried out of the peripatetic music programme that the agency offers and on the community summer scheme funding programmes. In the three aspects of the report, the Education and Training Inspectorate gave a positive report.

I turn to the future. As I said, we are about to initiate the procurement process to review our current policy and to ensure that we are up to date with recent legislation changes in the British and Irish Parliaments. Quite a few recommendations are changing in the Irish Parliament, so, on it in particular, we want to ensure that we are working as a cross-border body, particularly on cyberbullying and social media.

We want to maintain and develop our current operating practices on safeguarding and make use of expertise such as is available in the NSPCC and in other relevant organisations.

The Chairperson: Jane, thank you for your comments. You have reassured members, particularly on the groups that you are grant funding. From listening to what you said, it appears that you are quite robust in your approach and are proactive on updating the policies, and so on. I congratulate you for that. That said, do you find that the fact that you cover two jurisdictions causes you any issue?

Ms Wallace: Access NI is definitely the higher bar to reach currently, so our groups in Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal have to reach the same bar as the Northern applications. When we have jointly with Foras na Gaeilge approached an Garda Síochána, it has said that it wants registrations from larger umbrella bodies and that we do not have enough groups working in the three counties for it to start to deal with applications with its equivalent vetting and barring. We will deal with that when we revise our policy. Between us and Foras na Gaeilge, an Garda Síochána will have to take us on board, hopefully.

The Chairperson: Will you explain how you have delegated some authority to the Ulster-Scots Community Network in relation to Access NI?

Ms Wallace: It is one of our core-funded groups. We had discussions and said that we physically cannot be a umbrella organisation, so it agreed to take it on. It runs roadshows, so perhaps it would have a meeting in Lisburn and invite community groups to bring in their applications, as well as their forms of ID, so that it can be properly and honestly verified that a person is who they say they are in their application.

The verification documents were the problem for us. A community group meeting in Tyrone would have to come to us to verify who they are. It would not be a paper exercise; somebody would have to visit the group physically to confirm the ID. The Ulster-Scots Community Network took that on and held a series of roadshows, which have been very successful.

The Chairperson: Would that assistance also go to groups that consider themselves Ulster-Scots groups but do not receive any funding via the agency or the Ulster-Scots Community Network?

Ms Wallace: The Ulster-Scots Community Network does not give out funding but is happy to be contacted by any of the Ulster-Scots groups, so it has a wider remit than us.

The Chairperson: In relation to its contact?

Ms Wallace: Yes.

Mr Ó hOisín: Thank you for your presentation. I will tease that issue out further. Are the community and voluntary groups that apply for funding checked by the Ulster-Scots Agency solely and not through any other organisation, such as the NSPCC? Are there occasions on which organisations that are not being funded and may come under the wider umbrella proceed with events and occasions and do not have to submit to the normal requirements and provide names and contact numbers?

Ms Wallace: Sorry, could you repeat the question? Are you asking whether such groups are checked by the NSPCC?

Mr Ó hOisín: Do all the organisations that apply for funding through the Ulster-Scots Agency do so directly and commit to the child protection safeguarding policies through the Ulster-Scots Agency, or can they be OK'd, as in the case of Donegal groups as well as elsewhere, through a third party such as the NSPCC?

Ms Wallace: The only reason that the agency used the NSPCC was because of the tender with Foras na Gaeilge. It does not have to be the NSPCC. When we go to tender again, it may not be the NSPCC but whoever wins the contract. However, the new tender may be a mixture. It may be by the National Youth Council of Ireland and the NSPCC or perhaps somebody will decide to form a partnership.

We have not yet developed the tender. We met only last week to agree that we will do it formally. However, it will be in the tender that it must be one body or a collection of bodies that are totally familiar with the Northern and Southern requirements. We are predicting that it may be a partnership.

Mr Ó hOisín: Are there organisations that go through solely the Ulster-Scots Agency for vetting for events and funding?

Ms Wallace: That go through solely the Ulster-Scots Agency? If they provide the evidence to us, and we are happy with it, that is OK, and we can give them some funding. However, if we are not happy, we will recommend that they go to the NSPCC or the National Youth Council of Ireland for guidance.

Mr Ó hOisín: Are there organisations that are not being funded or that do not apply for funding for a certain occasion that do not have to go through the safeguarding measures?

Ms Wallace: If children and vulnerable adults will be present, it is a mandatory requirement that such organisations meet our minimum standards.

Mr Ó hOisín: You would be aware of such occasions.

Ms Wallace: Yes.

Mr Irwin: Have there been any issues with the Ulster-Scots Agency regarding child protection? Have there been any incidents?

Ms Wallace: No, we have not had any incidents. When we monitor groups, we also ensure that there is compliance and that they are being active, for example, about the policy being displayed. With summer schemes in particular, the ETI recommended that when parents were registering their children, there be a tick box to indicate that they wanted to see a copy of the child protection policy. That is one change that we will make. However, when we monitor, we make sure that there is full adherence, and we have not had any incidents.

The Chairperson: What was the policy before 2009 because it seems that you have been proactive since then?

Ms Wallace: We had a previous policy, but it did not have the depth that it has now. It was developed through an organisation — possibly Volunteer Now. Before that, the designated officer was a director who is not with us now. Since then, a child protection officer and a deputy child protection officer have been included. Training has been much more robust.

The Chairperson: So there was no particular reason that stimulated the change in direction?

Ms Wallace: No, there was just the reappointment of the officers, who took the issue on board and decided that the policy should be more robust.

The Chairperson: With regard to our recommendations and to assist you in your work, is there anything that you feel that we should include in our report?

Ms Wallace: Perhaps the recommendations could include further communication and sharing of best practice.

The Chairperson: From the Department?

Ms Wallace: Yes, and even in arm's-length bodies.

Mrs McKeivitt: On the back of the Chair's question, I notice that the current policy and procedures include guidance on cyberbullying and social media and that after recent legislative changes, and so on, you agreed to seek guidance to review the policy?

Ms Wallace: Yes.

Mrs McKeivitt: How could the Committee help you in that review of child protection? How could you move forward on that with your difficulties?

Ms Wallace: As I said, perhaps that could be done through the sharing of best practice. We are working with Foras na Gaeilge to try to ensure that we are being as robust as possible. Perhaps a best practice template or guidance could be given out, or we could be directed to bodies to ensure that we include them in our tender.

The Chairperson: I thank both of you for coming to the Committee this morning and for your presentation and input to our investigation. Thank you.