



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Investigation into Consistency in Child
Protection across the CAL Remit:
Armagh Planetarium

25 April 2013

I am going to test your astronomical knowledge. That is your starter for 10. I normally do not have this teeny-weeny person; I have a much bigger one. Now, I have a big one and this one. Which constellation are we talking about here? That is your test.

The Chairperson: I just see Tatty Teddies.

Dr Mason: That is cool. That is the start that we would take with the kids. What do you want to call this? Well, here is Tatty Teddy in the sky. Of course, we are talking about the Great Bear and the Little Bear, which are both up there in the sky, along with a host of other animals: birds, whales, and so on. One thing that is hugely useful is to give the kids their head. If I show them a lot of dots, they can make anything out of them. We have done exercises in which we have had trains and cars and heaven knows what. That is fine. As long as they are looking up and learning.

The other thing that I want to mention to you, with a further prop, is that NASA, the American space agency, has just sent a robotic geologist to Mars. I am a geologist, and that makes me weep inside. I know that any human geologist would be better. Unfortunately, we need to be fed and watered, whereas the robot will just keep going. NASA's other Rovers, which were meant to last for three years, have been running for nearly 12 years. Engineering is part of it as well. We get lots of kids in here who I am quite sure will go on to be engineers. In the context of Northern Ireland, there are lots of exciting new developments in the aerospace industry. We are keen to use that. Of course, I am very keen to get into their back pockets to make sure that we get some benefit from their use so that we can stimulate the engineers of the future.

I have just had a request from John Hunter at the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) about the First Minister and the deputy First Minister going to China in the near future. He wants to know whether there are any connections to be made. In December 2012, I stopped being the president of the International Planetarium Society. I have been to Beijing. I know the guy who runs the planetarium there — lovely place for a photo opportunity. Of course, the Chinese are a spacefaring nation. If they go to the planetarium and ask to speak to him, they can mention that Belfast makes all these fancy things, like little manoeuvre rockets for spacecraft. It is an industry that is growing as we speak. Those guys are not seeing any recession.

Therefore, I think that this is hugely important. Our job, although it is very difficult to quantify it, is to make sure that all those little kids coming in are scientists and engineers when they are in primary school. It is a sort of Jesuitical thing. I firmly believe that if you catch them young, you have caught them for life. What we cannot do, however, is say that all those people were inspired by the planetarium. That is probably not true. However, they will have been inspired by a place and a person. I have in my notes the words "inspirational places" and "mentors". Those are hugely important. We give mentors an opportunity to come along and do stuff that is very difficult to do in schools. You will be aware that in schools now it is very difficult to do even some of the basic experiments that were done when I was a kid because of health and safety. We try to do things like that. It is one of those gee whiz moments, where the kids are sitting with open mouths. We use that for our advertising material.

The final two things that I want to show you are practical things. I mentioned that I am fully expecting that they will find life on Mars. If I hold this little piece of rock that way, I hope that you can see little bumpy, wiggly bits. That is an algal-bacterial community that was living on what is now the border between Swaziland and South Africa 3.2 billion years ago. We figure that Mars's development froze at around that time. If there is life on Mars — there is abundant evidence of water — we might find something like that. As I said, I am worried that the Rover will trundle past the stuff that I or another geologist would spot and bump it into the ground. To bring it closer to home, this is the same thing from County Fermanagh, up the back of Derrygonnelly on the Knockmore mountain. These things are evidence that, 300-plus million years ago, Fermanagh was a subtropical paradise. It would have been 60 degrees centigrade on the surface and have had an air temperature like Dubai or Qatar now. Of course, that is the sort of stuff that produces oil. Have you heard about fracking? I rest my case. We do that as part of our public education.

These are my samples of meteorites. We hand them out in schools. They are very magnetic because they are nickel-iron meteorites. There is a difficulty with getting people to come to Armagh. We are aware that we have a 45-minute gap here. That is very difficult to bridge, especially with bus fares being so expensive. This year, we plan to send out some camera cases. Each camera case will contain a meteorite, a magnet, an iPad, a projector and a little gadget that will allow it to connect to the satellite phone network so that one of my staff can talk to the school. The teacher will have plugged everything in, and we can have FaceTime. These things work very smoothly. I talk to my daughter in

New Zealand just like this. The equipment works straight out of the box. It is a huge game-changer. By doing that instead of sending someone out to a school, we have found that it is cheaper to send the boxes out and get them back. We have applied to our colleagues in the Republic. We were asked to make an application for some funding. We will make it an Ireland-wide operation if we can pick up that extra funding.

I am trying to say that this is something that is in continuous flux. There is movement all the time. Basically, one's constraint is the limits of your imagination. Schools here and everywhere else on the planet are very good at taking in kids who are busting with enthusiasm and turning them into butter pats so that they are all the same and do not think outside the box. I rest my case there also.

I am happy to take any questions. Do you want me to talk about child protection, or will you quiz me?

The Chairperson: It might be useful if you give us some background about your policies, how you review those policies and the relationship that you have directly with the Department.

Dr Mason: We have thousands of children coming through the planetarium, so child protection was an issue with us before it became an issue. Although we did not have written policies as such, which we do now, we had a very strict regime of who did what when and how. I have given you just two bits of paper because it is better to concentrate on the comments that the public provided. One of the comments that we have not put in there was from a mummy who complained two weeks ago, when it was very busy over Easter. She wanted to change her baby's nappy. We have nappy-changing facilities in the downstairs special needs toilet. The complaint was that one of my big, able-bodied demonstrators had gone into the special needs toilet, so she could not get in to change her baby's nappy. That is because our policy is that all our staff are told that they must not be in any place where the little kids are, even if there are teachers around. We tell them to use the special needs toilet. That was from way back. It means that you are isolated and there is no chance of any difficulty. We have looked at the policy documents from other people. For example, I am following the Arts Council checklist at the moment. I have a copy of it here if you want to enter it into the record. We tick all the boxes apart from two that do not really apply to us, which deal with sleepovers and field trips. We go out to schools, but my staff always work with a crowd with teachers present, so it is not really applicable there.

What we have done is we have looked at other's people's policies and then taken and modified them. My policy is slightly different from that of Armagh Observatory because it has fewer visitors, especially little children, although they are now getting an increasing number. Essentially, therefore, we have translated unwritten policies into written ones, and they have been looked at by DCAL. They are on file, and we are on an annual review. I have got one from March, because the change in legislation that occurred in the middle of last year meant that I was playing catch-up in January, February and March. As I said, our policy is reviewed annually.

The difference that the changes in Access NI will make to us, because we are too small according to the new Access ruling, is that our Access things will go through the Church of Ireland educational committee. The rationale for that is based on our very close relationship with the Church of Ireland, given that our board is chaired by the Archbishop of Armagh, as is our management committee, and the dean and chaplain of the cathedral sit on our board of governors. That is a historical hangover, as it were. We advised DCAL of that at our quarterly assurance meeting, and we do not see any difficulty with it.

I have brought some documentation for the record if you want it. If we are recruiting for a vacant post, which we will be doing in the near future, we send out documents stating that the applicants will not be interviewed if they do not sign the declaration form to say that they are putting themselves forward for an enhanced disclosure check. That is part of our recruitment process, and now it will work through the Church of Ireland rather than go directly to Access NI.

We make a point of training all new staff who come in, and that is my job. I do the health and safety and the fire exit training, and so on. We walk around and then go and have a little chat in which I ask them what they understand by child protection and various health and safety issues. If they do not give me answers that I think are reasonable, we will employ the Engineer Employers' Federation trainers, who act as our legal HR people, to send a trainer down. We have run courses then in tandem with the observatory on child protection issues. I am quite confident that my staff are up to speed. Moreover, we have a pack that lives in the cupboard across the way in the administrator's office. There is a copy of the procedure at the front desk, which I have cut up and sliced into the book so that there is a guideline. If you are faced with something, it tells you what you do. It is written down

and highlighted in red, because I am well aware that if some issue occurs, people will go into panic mode. I want them to be able to follow the instructions, which say "Do not panic. Follow the instructions."

The Chairperson: How many staff do you have?

Dr Mason: There are 10.

The Chairperson: Do you have any volunteers?

Dr Mason: No, we do not. We had volunteers in the past, but it proved to be very difficult. When the legislation was first mooted, I spoke to some folk who were considering volunteering. When they heard that there would be a charge for the Access NI check, it put them off. When I then said that I would cover the charge, they were quite aggrieved that one would question their integrity. I explained to them that I was sorry, but that is the way that it has to be. We do not have any volunteers as such, but anyone who comes in here to work on our payroll, and that will include temporary staff during the summer and various high-season times, will be taken through the agency. The agency sends them along, complete with their Access NI clearance; otherwise, we will not employ them.

The Chairperson: It is unfortunate that you do not have the benefit of having volunteers.

Dr Mason: It is sad, but I thought that it would make life simpler for me, because those in the temporary pool that we have perform that function for me. I must also say that they are paid so are much more reliable.

The Chairperson: You say that your primary focus is on education, and the school groups that you host are obviously accompanied by teachers.

Dr Mason: Yes.

The Chairperson: Can you give us any idea of the number of children who come through the planetarium's doors annually?

Dr Mason: We do not differentiate between the school numbers and others, but my latest figures show that over 40,000 came in through the door, and we talked to 20,000 or perhaps 25,000 off-site. At least half of those who come through the door are schoolchildren. They come in with the teachers, who get in for free. We have rules on what the ratio should be according to age group. Therefore, some schools will bring along parents, and we know that those parents will have been cleared through the school. It is hugely complex for us to check that, and I have to take it on good faith that the schools have put through the process the people whom they send along.

The Chairperson: The problem around unaccompanied young people was one of the issues raised at our meeting last week with museums representatives. Do you face a similar issue?

Dr Mason: It is an issue but one that hardly ever arises. The only time that we have unaccompanied young people would probably be in the afternoons, when pupils are being picked up by their parents from the schools that surround us. Sometimes, the kids will feel the sudden urge to pay a last-minute visit to the john, so they are in and out. Normally, not many people are around at that time. Our school visitors will normally all be gone around 1.30 pm because, if they have travelled any distance, it may take them an hour to get back home. We have a public show at 2.00 pm, which is not hugely well-subscribed to unless it is a public holiday. We normally have in three, four or half a dozen folk who have walked in off the street. Any children around at that time are just basically in and out to use the toilet.

The Chairperson: Have you had any incidents related to child protection issues reported to you recently?

Dr Mason: None, I am very pleased to say.

Mr D Bradley: I would have preferred to have seen the written copy of your child protection policy.

Dr Mason: I have brought it along, Dominic, and I can give you a copy.

Mr D Bradley: It probably would have been better for us to have had copies of that so that we could have had a chance to read it and question you on it. Perhaps you will provide the Committee with that in the meantime —

Dr Mason: I can.

Mr D Bradley: — because you have a huge number of children through the facility in the course of a year. The other point that I will make is that your annual report for the observatory and the planetarium has a section on health and safety.

Dr Mason: Yes.

Mr D Bradley: Considering the importance of child protection, would you in future consider having a paragraph or two on child protection, or a report, in the annual report to include any training or updating of the policy that has taken place?

Dr Mason: I can certainly do that, yes. I can add it in. I view health and safety and child protection as falling into the same statutory category, as it were. Therefore, yes, and thank you. That had not crossed my mind. I can put that in.

Mr Ó hOisín: For clarity: you do not use Access NI for your recruitment, which goes through the Church of Ireland. What, then, is the role of the Engineering Employers' Federation in the delivery of policies, including that on child protection?

Dr Mason: The federation is an industry organisation that was put together for employers. We use it as a human resources adviser because it has lawyers and barristers, and so on, on-site. I go through them for anything to do with recruitment or training. They also help us out with running health and safety training courses.

Mr Ó hOisín: Have they advised you on child protection?

Dr Mason: Yes, absolutely.

Mr Irwin: Thank you, Tom, for the tour. As a local person, I have been here on a number of occasions, but I would not mind updating my limited knowledge of the planets and the stars. The planetarium is very challenging and interesting for the young people, and the public at large, in many cases, are not fully aware of the mind-boggling magnitude of what is out there.

What are the main challenges for the planetarium in the future?

Dr Mason: The main challenge is maintaining our visitor numbers because that is an important part of our operating budget. However, when we are being compared with other organisations such as the Ulster Museum, for example, which performs a similar function, we are comparing apples and pears because the Ulster Museum has free entry.

In the recent past, we have promoted the planetarium using the Groupon coupons, which you may have heard of. To my surprise, that has been astonishingly successful. Many people have come to the planetarium with a Groupon coupon because they think that they are getting a bargain, which they are, as it is essentially a half-price visit.

Our figures for the end of the year showed that we were 6% up on our prediction. Although I have not had a chance to look closely at the numbers, I am convinced that that was almost exclusively because of the Groupon coupons. Although we were getting less money from that, our shop sales were up 17%, which means that people are inclined to buy from the shop if they think that they are getting a bargain.

At the moment, our strategy is to enhance the shop stock, which means that we will sell more, and to continue with the Groupon coupons, which, we hope, will bring more people through the door. An unintended consequence has been that my staff are telling me that the Groupon users who are

coming in, we think, represent a different socio-economic group. That is fabulous, because those are groups that museums and art galleries find very hard to tap into. I am keen to enhance that.

One of my aims for the planetarium, which we will have to think about, is to find a way to offer free entry. That would mean having an uplift in the budget allocated to us. I am convinced that we would double our numbers overnight. There is the hassle of travel, which costs whether you come by bus or car, and the cost of our family ticket is about £20. We will have to raise our prices now. I have not raised them in the past seven years. We had them at £5 for kids and £6 for adults, and when the recession hit and people were losing their jobs, we knocked £1 off the prices and absorbed that.

Hence we are operating on a very tight budget. However, I sincerely feel that that will work out. It also means that we will compare more evenly with the museum. Again, it has been said often that if Armagh Planetarium was in the Belfast bit of Armagh — or in the Armagh bit of Belfast — we would have very many more people through the door. That is our prime function: we have to get as many kids in here as possible.

I tell the adults that I am not hugely interested in them, but that I want their children to be happy. When I talk to folk, we walk around and interrogate them politely, and that is their feeling as well. If they think that their children are having a wonderful time, they are perfectly happy. In addition, we have many activities and events for which we do not charge. We have something different happening virtually every weekend in the summer, which is an add-on. The kids in this morning are doing rocket launching; at the weekend, they launch rockets and make things. It is sort of an extension of primary school.

The point is that we are throwing them into the mix and seeing what happens. Unlike the primary school, I do not care whether they turn up with an alien or rocket. It is all brilliant, clap clap, well done. I hope that that answers your question.

Mr Humphrey: Thank you very much for your presentation. Having been here on a number of occasions with a group of young people from the Scout Association, I concur with what you said about how interesting they find their visit, as Willie also mentioned. I was also surprised to see how busy the shop was when the tour finished. The kids were very interested and were taken by the whole experience here.

With regard to child protection, do you have a deputy if you are on holiday or not here?

Dr Mason: Yes, I normally do. We have a joint administrator, but he is not in post. I do not want to go into detail because this is a public forum. I am acting as deputy and head at present. I will be talking to my colleague Mark, who will act as my deputy in this instance, as I will for him, until we have a new person in. We have a temporary person in the post, but it is not fair to ask her, especially at this time of year when we are busy getting our end-of-year accounts together.

Under normal circumstances, the answer is yes, and this child protection policy literature normally lives in the administrator's office. It is labelled not to leave that room, but I brought it over for you this morning.

Mr Humphrey: When driving in, I noticed a unit to the side of the building signposted Radio Ulster. What goes on there and is there an income stream for the planetarium from that?

Dr Mason: It is a BBC sound studio, and they rent the space from us. In the days before mobile phones and good internet connections, they wanted a good, clean landline. People who were being interviewed pitched up and one of my staff let them in; everything was switched on and they talked directly to the studio. Nowadays, they conduct phone interviews much more. I have been interviewed on mobile phones and landlines because the quality is so much better. I suspect that when the BBC conducts a review, it may find that the studio is no longer necessary. Gordon Adair, the local BBC person, is based in there, so he edits his reports and fires them up to Belfast over our network. We have a fast-fibre connection.

Mr Humphrey: Is there an income stream?

Dr Mason: Yes; we rent the studio out to the BBC. We rent many things out as best we can. We have a basement that is rented out to a computer company. The rent is that they provide us with an

outreach vehicle, which means that I do not need to worry about replacing vehicles. We pay for just the running costs.

I have a computer node in a tiny container adjacent to the basement for which I am paid a garden rental. What was formally lawn is now a computer node. It is part of the Kelvin network, which is a huge government-sponsored network from four or five years ago.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, and thank you for the presentation. Is there a profile of the schools that visit the planetarium? Would you have more affluent than socially deprived children? If there are gaps, what are you doing to encourage those who are not drawn in?

Dr Mason: Thank you. That is a good question. We did not notice that more affluent schools were visiting. What we noticed was that schools tried their hardest to get here because they recognised that kids got a really good experience. In the more recent past, the Minister asked us, generically as part of the government-wide concentration on disadvantage, whether we could do something about that. In March, we ran a special event or production in which we had dragons in the space down below — I did not take you in there earlier, and the dragons are not there anymore — with a local company from Coalisland that we have worked with before. Essentially, we put on a little play. The Minister and the Department provided extra funds to pay for buses, we sent out invitations and had kids from all over the place — from the north coast and all parts of Belfast. We specifically targeted disadvantaged schools. We got the data from the Department of Education that showed the percentage of students who received free school meals and used that as our indicator of disadvantage. Some of the percentages were alarmingly high. I now have a target in my key performance indicators (KPIs) for total social need index/free school meals. In March, we had a 35% hit on it. It has proved to be very successful.

Once more, if we could allow schools, and everyone else, to come in free, they would only have to find their bus fare.

Mr D Bradley: Sorry, could I just interrupt for a moment?

Dr Mason: Yes.

Mr D Bradley: I see that the observatory has a targeting social need (TSN) action plan. Do you have something similar?

Dr Mason: Yes; absolutely. In our KPIs, we project for about 1,000 TSN numbers per year. Last year, we were 110% to target. It is quite tricky to count mainstream schools. The way the policy is now, special needs children are built into the system much more than in the past, and we are missing some of that count. This morning, Brookfield School, which is a special school, has a class here. They are in action at the moment.

Mr B McCrea: Tom, to follow up on that question, do you have a breakdown of how many or which schools come here?

Dr Mason: Yes. I do not have it here, but I could get it to you.

Mr B McCrea: If the Chair is agreeable, it might interesting to provide the Committee with a list of schools; that would allow us to see what comes across.

I have two other quick questions. You said that your public performances do not get a great deal of support. I think you said that you only get three or four people.

Dr Mason: Sorry; I have misled you. I was talking about special evening events in which people come to use telescopes. We used to charge people to come to those — we did a show and allowed them to use the telescopes — but we tended not to get many people —

Mr B McCrea: I might have got it the wrong way around. You mentioned 2.00 pm.

Dr Mason: Yes. We have a public show at 2.00 pm. We figured that we should be available for the public at some time of the day. It is quite quiet out there at the moment, but normally, at this time of the morning, it is bedlam outside, and we are knee-deep in children. Clearly, the public who want to

preserve their hearing do not want to come at that time and would come in the afternoon. We also noticed that —

Mr B McCrea: Your numbers are sort of, what?

Dr Mason: They are very low. We might get four, five or six people. During holiday times, like the recent Easter holidays, we get 30, 40 or more. People will come when they are free to do so.

Mr B McCrea: It has been said by a number of people that this is such a fantastic facility that it is a pity that we cannot get more people here to see it. I wonder about your concentration on young people — it is great — and whether you are missing a trick with their grandparents. Earlier, you said that mums and dads bring their kids, and you approached the issue of cost from your side and said that if it were free, people would only have to worry about their bus fare. I wonder whether Translink would be interested in doing something with grandparents, who, of course, get their travel for free and perhaps there could be a promotion to bring people down here.

The Chairperson: Do you want to declare an interest, Mr McCrea? *[Laughter.]*

Mr B McCrea: For those of you who do not know, I am a grandparent.

Ms McCorley: Are you a pensioner? *[Laughter.]*

Mr B McCrea: No. I had sort of forgotten. The Chair has got me on that one. It strikes me that there is something about having an experience for grandparents, who perhaps have a bit more time to bring the children down. It might be worth exploring how you get them involved. Is that something you might think about?

Dr Mason: Thank you; that is a very good suggestion. We do get OAPs — as a generic term — coming in in the afternoon. We run special evening events, and there is a special promotional price. We have spoken to Translink in the past about promotions as well, but I had not thought of the particular combination of grandparents bringing grandchildren before. Thank you very much. We will do it.

Mr D Bradley: On that point, there is an organisation called the University of the Third Age — U3A — there is one in Armagh. I think that there are at least three in this constituency alone, and I am sure there are more throughout Northern Ireland. That might be a market that you could tap into.

Dr Mason: For further promotion? I should mention that there is a teeny problem with promotion — advertising is expensive. Our advertising budget last year was £25,000, but I had to find savings of half of that. For the approximately £11,500 that we spent, we got a very good hit because we have very good relationships with many newspapers, which know that we are in hard times, so we pick up a lot of free advertising. We also work closely with Armagh City and District Council. We are in its summer booklet at no charge because it recognises that we are part of the nexus of visitor attractions. Likewise with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. Over the past few years, if you have come into Belfast City Airport, you will have seen promotion for the planetarium and observatory. That did not cost us anything. If I had to pay for it, I would probably be sitting here in rags; it is enormously expensive. We do radio promotion when we can as well. We can get quite good promotional deals, because they like to promote — Downtown Radio, for example. It is a bit like Groupon, but not as efficient. Groupon gets a much better hit rate at zero cost.

Mr D Bradley: Can I ask one short question? You had shows for the Irish-medium schools. Do you still do that?

Dr Mason: Yes. We have two shows at the moment that have been translated. One is a child's show; it is for little people. It is called 'The Cardboard Rocket'. We work very closely with Gael Linn, Foras na Gaeilge and the guys at the BBC who helped us out with it. The other is a Christmas show, which is to do with the nativity story. It is also in Irish. We are open to doing that, because, the way that the system works, the sound channel is a separate entity, so I can do it in Mandarin. In fact, it is in Mandarin. If we get a demand, I can whistle a Mandarin soundtrack up. We have done such things for the Chinese community in the past, and if there is a demand for it in Polish, Lithuanian or anything else, that is perfectly feasible.

Mr D Bradley: Do you get a good response to the Irish-medium shows?

Dr Mason: Not a lot. We were talking with our colleagues from Science Foundation Ireland a couple of weeks ago. We are planning to promote that, and we are thinking of doing it as a calendar week promotion among schools.

Mr D Bradley: There is an Irish-language week. Perhaps you could tap into that.

Dr Mason: I am aware of it. We operate as an Ireland-wide entity anyway, because, as I say, we have partners in Blackrock Castle Observatory, which we helped to set up. We also work in Limerick and Galway, etc, during Science Week Ireland, which, of course, being Ireland, runs for three weeks. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Hilditch: Thanks, Tom, for your presentation and for the tour; it has been very interesting. The questioning has been a mix of child protection and other general issues concerning the planetarium, but I go back to the child protection side of things and Dominic's point about the lack of a written document with us today.

I get the impression that you have the basic requirements and that you have enough to get you over the line and no more. Do you feel that you are more robust than that?

Dr Mason: Absolutely.

Mr Hilditch: That is what this inquiry is about; that is what we have to drill down into and find out. That is the impression that I have got and will go out the door with. There are initiatives and pilot schemes under the NSPCC, and so on. Have you taken part in any of those? Have you not had sufficient numbers of staff to engage like that? What additional recommendations would you make to the inquiry?

Dr Mason: I am sorry that you got that impression, as I think that we are very robust.

Mr Hilditch: That is what I want to hear.

Dr Mason: I need my staff to act virtually on instinct. If such and such happens, I want them to do the right thing by instinct. I spend a great deal of time talking —

Mr D Bradley: Sorry, Tom. That is not how it should go. They should not act on instinct; they should act according to your policy.

Dr Mason: Sorry, I chose my words badly —

Mr B McCrea: Hold on a wee tick, Tom. I understood —

The Chairperson: Excuse me. Tom, will you go back to that point?

Dr Mason: Sorry, I chose my words badly. I should have said that they should act on autopilot. They know that there is a procedure to follow. They do that straightaway and do not have to think about it. They know what they have to do. The policy is in the book here, and they open it up. As you know, when something like that is reported, people will be stressed. I want to make sure that they act instantly and follow the procedures. The procedures are very clear-cut.

The Chairperson: Mr McCrea, do you want to come in before I go back to Mr Hilditch?

Mr B McCrea: The implication was that you wanted it to be first and foremost in people's minds that they will follow the appropriate procedures.

Dr Mason: I do not want them to have to think.

Mr B McCrea: I am sure that that is what was intended. Tom, the point that colleagues are bringing up is that the appropriate choice of words is necessary to make sure that it is at the top. I understand the point that you are making.

Dr Mason: My apologies.

Mr Hilditch: I come back to the same points on robustness. Have there been opportunities to get involved in the child protection initiatives? Has there just been a sort of hand-me-down policy from the Church of Ireland or whoever is the management? Could you give us a wee bit more detail on all that?

Dr Mason: Sorry; the Church of Ireland has had nothing to do with the policy. What I was talking about is how Access NI proposed that it move forward. In the middle of last year, we were informed that we were too small to deal with Access NI directly. I presume that we are microscopic in the great scheme of things. It wanted us to use a larger body that we would be part of. The suggestion was that the larger body would be the Church of Ireland, which had an existing education process headed by Ian Ellis. The administrator, my other half who is not here today, dealt with that. We discussed it at our board and management committee and with DCAL. Everything has been discussed and agreed and is in writing. Essentially, the Church of Ireland is our conduit to Access NI, whereas, formerly, we went directly to it.

Again, I apologise. I did not think that I needed to give you that written policy today, but I will certainly make sure that you get a copy of it. I hope that you will see that it is very robust. I have also pointed out that I read through many of these statements. When the legislation was coming in, I attended meetings with DCAL at which these things were discussed. As I explained, we had policies and were well aware of all this. However, those policies were not written. They were not as robust as they are now, since it became statutory and is in legislation. In the theatre, we turn all the lights out. There are infrared cameras that monitor the theatre, one on each side. They are on 24/7, and they record to a disc.

Mr Hilditch: As regards volunteering and the not wanting to get involved; that has obviously been to your disadvantage. For most organisations, volunteers are coming forward readily and are accepting child protection issues. Is there anything that can change to encourage volunteers to participate?

Dr Mason: Yes, my experience at the start of this period was an unhappy one, because I had feedback from the volunteers that I had invited to come. Almost to a person, they were unhappy and took the attitude that I was not being trusting of them. I explained: "sorry, this is the legislative framework, and I have to do this. I am very sorry." The easy way out was to have paid temporary staff instead of volunteers, which meant that it was much easier for me to draw up my rotas because I knew that those people would be there. Volunteers are less reliable in that sense. That has been my experience.

The Chairperson: Have you had any experience with Volunteer Now?

Dr Mason: Not in the recent past. The last time we had volunteers here was eight years ago.

The Chairperson: It may be useful to you to have a conversation with Wendy Osborne and her team. It is certainly something that we have encouraged with libraries, and they are working up a volunteer strategy.

Dr Mason: That would be very useful.

The Chairperson: It may also be of assistance to you in relation to your overheads and staff costs. The MAC has MACtivists and has drafted a policy to drive that forward. That has been a very successful project.

Dr Mason: Is that the MAC in Belfast?

The Chairperson: Yes. That policy has been drafted through Volunteer Now, so I highly recommend that you make that contact in relation to your staffing and give others — students, and so on — the opportunity to work in this type of environment, because it would be invaluable to them and to you. It would be mutually beneficial.

You mentioned that you work on the template of the Arts Council.

Dr Mason: That was the checklist.

The Chairperson: You did not mention Sport NI or the NSPCC.

Dr Mason: No, I read through their strategies and put together our own one, which is very similar to the observatory's and covers all the same headers. Again, I apologise because I should have given you a copy of that. I will give you a copy to distribute by e-mail, or you can give me e-mail addresses and I will do that for you.

The Chairperson: That would be very useful.

Dr Mason: Please provide any feedback once you have seen it. Basically, the feedback I have had has come after presenting it to DCAL and to my board and management committee. So, it would be very worthwhile for you to see it and provide feedback.

The Chairperson: As a Committee, we were very struck by Sport NI's policy, which has been held as an example of best practice. That is why we are looking at this piece of work and at how there may be gaps throughout the rest of the organisation. We are not here to criticise you in any way: we are here to learn about what you do and see whether you have any best practice that could be applied throughout.

Dr Mason: Absolutely. It is about continuous improvement.

The Chairperson: Mr Hilditch asked a question that you have not come back on, and it was about recommendations. Would one recommendation be on the amount of support that you should be getting from DCAL centrally?

Dr Mason: I know that it is there if I ask for it. Essentially, I am relying on the Engineering Employers' Federation, because it deals with similar organisations on a UK-wide basis. Principally, it advises me on HR matters, but it does have specialists in child protection. The last course that we ran was in the little boardroom. The child protection deal was that we bring everyone in: anytime there is a training session, it is mandatory that you attend.

The Chairperson: Your comment that you know that it is there if you ask for it concerns me, because DCAL should be coming to you and should be much more proactive. Given the changes in the nature of issues around child protection, it should be there to give you information that makes you aware of those changes. Things are changing with technology.

I am very conscious of our time, and we have not touched on the use of mobile units in the complex. There are associated risks with photography.

Dr Mason: We are aware of those things. When we do photography, we do not take photos of children in the planetarium. If we are trying to do PR shots, we ask the schools to provide them.

The Chairperson: I appreciate that, but, obviously, children now have access to cameras in their pockets as well. There are so many things that we could probably talk around today. It would be useful if you were to forward your policy to the Committee. Do not take what we are saying as a criticism. We are just trying to be helpful.

Dr Mason: One way in which you could be helpful is to mention something to DCAL. Mark and I provide DCAL with a quarterly assurance statement, which is on the minutiae of governance. In my view, child protection is equally important to health and safety. It would not be beyond the bounds to stick in that statement another bit about child protection, because there could be policy review dates and so on. We have to fill in all these other things, so why not add that? That is the best suggestion that I can provide for you.

The Chairperson: That is exactly what we are looking for. Having spoken to most arm's-length bodies now, I can say that there seems to be a feeling that they would benefit from all of them coming together in a round table format, with DCAL there, to share best practice.

Dr Mason: I could not agree more. I am sorry, the time is flowing on.

The Chairperson: Mr Ó hOisín, did you want to come in?

Mr Ó hOisín: In fairness, my question was almost covered there. Again, I go back to the Engineering Employers' Federation. Do you bring it in as and when you need it, or only at recruitment and interview level?

Dr Mason: As and when I need it.

Mr Ó hOisín: How often is that, Tom?

Dr Mason: Often.

Mr Ó hOisín: Would it be twice a year?

Dr Mason: I deal with it weekly, almost.

Mr Ó hOisín: How often do you bring it in?

Dr Mason: We had a training course yesterday. We did not bring it in. The guy went up. It was a course on social media. I have not had a chance to speak to him about it yet. It is ongoing and very frequent.

The Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation and for hosting us today. We will be in touch about further information.