



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR
HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND
PUBLIC SAFETY

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

**Safeguarding Board Bill: Evidence
Session with Children in Northern
Ireland/Voice of Young People in Care**

16 September 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

**COMMITTEE FOR
HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES
AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

**Safeguarding Board Bill: Evidence Session with Children in
Northern Ireland/Voice of Young People in Care**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Jim Wells (Chairperson)
Mrs Michelle O'Neill (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Mickey Brady
Dr Kieran Deeny
Mr Alex Easton
Mr Tommy Gallagher
Mr Paul Girvan
Mr John McCallister
Ms Sue Ramsey

Witnesses:

Ms Pauline Leeson)	Children in Northern Ireland
Ms Ethel McNeill)	
Ms Vivian McConvey)	Voice of Young People in Care
Ms Alicia Toal)	

The Chairperson (Mr Wells):

Some members had the opportunity to meet the Committee's next witnesses at the lunchtime briefing. The witnesses had the benefit of being in the Public Gallery for the discussion of the

research carried out by Dr Janice Thompson and the evidence session with the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). You are very welcome. May I introduce to the meeting: Pauline Leeson of Children in Northern Ireland (CINI); Ethel McNeill, who is also from Children in Northern Ireland; Vivian McConvey of Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC), with whom we had a useful lunchtime session; and Alicia Toal, who is also from VOYPIC. You had the advantage of seeing the format of an evidence session, so you know the procedure. We usually allow about 10 minutes for a presentation, after which members can ask questions.

Ms Pauline Leeson (Children in Northern Ireland):

Thank you, Chairperson, and members. I thank the Chairperson for hosting the informal lunch for members of Children in Northern Ireland who, I can assure Sue Ramsey, work at the coalface of safeguarding children here.

We also thank the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety for allowing Children in Northern Ireland the opportunity to give evidence on the proposed safeguarding legislation for Northern Ireland. We have provided members with copies of our written submission, and I want to highlight some key issues for discussion.

We agree with, and support, clause 2(1), which states:

“the objective of the Safeguarding Board is to co-ordinate and ensure the effectiveness of what is done by each person or body represented on the Board ... for the purposes of safeguarding”
practices within the agencies that make up the membership of the safeguarding board for Northern Ireland (SBNI).

Children in Northern Ireland also advocates that, when the new board is put in place, it should develop a mechanism through which to assess the effectiveness of safeguarding in its member agencies and develop standards to promote effective practice. A useful example of that are the actions that the National Assembly for Wales took following the tragic death of little Baby P in Haringey in 2009. That Assembly requested key agencies to undertake self-assessments of the effectiveness of local arrangements to safeguard and protect children, and asked the chairpersons of local safeguarding boards to co-ordinate a joint agency response on the effectiveness of the regional safeguarding board. The Welsh inspectorate evaluated the self-assessments and visited local authorities and local safeguarding boards to verify the findings. We think that a similar self-audit, self-assessment approach, verified by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority

(RQIA) would help to develop and maintain the conditions and culture in which safeguarding and protecting children in Northern Ireland could be aligned and embedded across all parts of the system at all times. Sue Woolmore from the NSPCC referred to a similar self-evaluation or self-audit system.

In the proposed legislation relating to the functions of the safeguarding board, there must be clarity about the roles and responsibilities of the SBNI and the case management review panel to which clause 3(4) refers. It is our understanding that the SBNI will not be responsible for undertaking case management reviews but will hold responsibility for the establishment of a case management review panel, which will be critical in identifying key trends and themes with a view to improving reflective learning and safeguarding practices through its findings. The clause is misleading and needs to be amended to clarify the respective roles.

We also welcome clause 3(7), which states that communication between the board and children and young people is recognised as a key function. However, we believe that that function needs to be considerably strengthened, and we have proposed an amended clause.

Our colleagues from VOYPIC will speak in much more depth on the practice and value of the participation of young people. However, from a legislative point of view, it is imperative that clause 3(7) be amended to ensure the effective engagement and involvement of children and young people.

Clause 4 outlines directions to the board. It is Children in Northern Ireland's view that the way in which the Bill is written is unhelpful. It would be more helpful in legislation to clarify precisely what is meant by the independence of the safeguarding board and from whom and what it is independent. Children in Northern Ireland recognises that all public bodies must have an accountability function, and it has no issue with the board remaining accountable to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS). However, there must be clarification of the relationship between the safeguarding board and the Department. That needs to be explored, and the intent of directions also needs to be further explored.

We also think that it is crucial that the board's annual report is laid before the Assembly, and we have recommended appropriate wording to reflect a timetable for that within three months of its receipt by the Department.

We welcome clause 7 — the provision of committees and subcommittees — and particularly the more inclusive and proactive approach to safeguarding that has been advocated. However, in the interests of the proper function of the committees, we envisage a single line of accountability from the Department through the board to the committees and subcommittees. We think that that would be much more helpful.

We warmly welcome clause 10, which deals with the duty to co-operate. We recommend that such a duty is specifically prescribed in regulations and identified as a core area for annual review by the safeguarding board.

Children in Northern Ireland also strongly believes that the development of statutory regulations and guidance is just as important, if not more important, than the legislation. The Department's current proactive process of engagement with stakeholders, which includes CINI, has been a central and welcome part of the policy and the legislative process. We want that to continue through the development of guidance and regulations.

We have some concerns about the level of remuneration for the chairperson of the board. As Sue Woolmore said earlier, we are pleased that the post will be for three days a week rather than for three days a month. However, if the safeguarding board is to be effective in the discharge of its functions, it requires effective leadership. The role of the chairperson is central to the success of the safeguarding board and requires a high degree of expertise and skill in facilitating the board and providing a critical challenge function. It is a complex and demanding post, as members probably know, and we are not convinced that the present remuneration proposals will attract the right candidate for the job.

Ms Vivian McConvey (Voice of Young People in Care):

Thank you for the opportunity to speak about the involvement of children and young people. Since VOYPIC last made a presentation to the Committee, we undertook some specific work exploring the involvement of children and young people. We carried out some research and made a study visit to England to meet young people there as well as the staff and senior management who supported their involvement. We met the independent chairpersons of two local safeguarding children boards (LSCBs).

We are here to present two important issues to the Committee. The first is a proposed amendment to clause 3(7), and the second is a proposed model for Northern Ireland for the involvement of young people. Such a model is achievable; it works in other places, and the necessary expertise exists in Northern Ireland.

In relation to clause 3(7), we welcome the fact that the need for communication between the SBNI and children and young people is recognised and included as a key function. However, we believe that that function needs to be considerably strengthened. We recommend an amended clause that would state:

“The Safeguarding Board, in exercising its functions, must engage actively and directly with children and young people, listen directly to their views and give these due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.”

VOYPIC believes that a robust clause of that nature is absolutely necessary to ensure the effective engagement and involvement of children and young people. In reviewing practice in England, we recently visited two local authorities and spoke to the chairpersons of two local safeguarding children boards. We found that engagement with children and young people is underdeveloped and patchy. Examples of good practice exist, so we targeted those agencies. Participation ranges greatly from children and young people being completely uninformed about the work of the safeguarding boards and not actively involved, to a few local authorities that have a young people’s engagement strategy and a flow of data and information.

We heard about the experiences of local safeguarding children boards in London and how they vary greatly, from no consultation to ad hoc arrangements whereby participation was undertaken by specific groups. The Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board made four seats available for children and parents. Other boards have a statutory requirement for a lay person to be on the board, who may be a young person or a parent. In both situations, the children or parents involved represented only their individual views.

The most structured and innovative example that we could find was in Barking and Dagenham, where it facilitates a young people’s safety group, which was constituted as a subcommittee with a number of core functions. It provided a forum for raising issues and solving problems about safety and safeguarding, including research and consultation; it increased good practice in safeguarding and approaches by sharing expertise and information resources; and it identified gaps and developed solutions for safety and safeguarding.

The young people's safety group in Barking and Dagenham has been successful. It meets four times a year and has an attendance of about 45 to 50 young people from local secondary schools and different projects. It appointed a young person as chairperson. Barking and Dagenham's shared services and engagement team supported that work and assisted the young people's safety group. It particularly assisted the young person to chair the group. After each meeting, an evaluation report — I have some examples from the group to hand out — is presented to the local safeguarding children board. Therefore, children fed directly into the process.

The young people's safety group, through consultation, developed an action plan and key issues that young people wanted to discuss. The topics that were important to the young people in Barking and Dagenham were knife crime; e-safety; the impact of Baby P; the background to child protection; and the safeguarding board and how it worked in their area. A seat at the safeguarding board has been designated for the chairperson of the young people's safety group. The current chairperson chose not to take up the opportunity, so the group manager for the inclusion team represents the chairperson and feeds back on the key issues and prepares the chairperson each time. The next chairperson of the young people's safety group may choose to take up that seat.

The process that is in place in Barking and Dagenham is a critical success factor in why the arrangements work between young people and their local safeguarding children board in that two development days are held each year between the LSCB and the young people's safety group. That means that the LSCB meets directly with young people to discuss priority issues and future plans.

What did we learn about how that model will it help us in Northern Ireland in our thinking? We started with the principle that we need to connect what already exists in Northern Ireland and build on the existing infrastructure. The SBNI should examine the existing groups and agencies that support children and young people and identify those that have an interest in working with the safeguarding board. That process will ensure co-ordination, connectedness and a comprehensive cross-section of children and young people who are supported by skilled practitioners.

A youth-based agency with a regional role is needed. It could be commissioned on behalf of the safeguarding board to oversee and facilitate a strong infrastructure being put in place — a

shadow board. That board could develop an engagement strategy to connect a wide range of children and young people into a regional forum. It could have responsibility for representing its peers and link to the safeguarding board on their behalf. The young people on a shadow board could be supported by relevant agencies that are committed to the safeguarding board. It could develop clear criteria, with expectations of support being provided by the lead agency and the supporting organisations. There could be a clear feedback mechanism between the safeguarding board and a shadow board. There could be development days, and a shadow board could attend meetings and deliver progress reports, with the young people's issues being presented directly to the safeguarding board.

A shadow board could have representation from the most vulnerable groups and the generic population. We suggest that it could comprise eight young people from the Youth Service or schools, two from the disability sector, two from ethnic minorities, two from the justice interface, two from looked-after children and two from child protection. In the initial stages, while the process is being learned, it would be better to work with a group of young people aged between 11 and 18, after which a younger age group could be considered. It could probably meet four times a year.

It is possible to have a shadow board; the organisations are there. The model of engagement with young people and the cycle of meetings could be wrapped around the operations of the safeguarding board. Initially, a shadow board could be established, and the workings of the safeguarding board could be explained to its members. Through a process of consultation, it could be designed in a shadow board. Those young people could then go back into their communities, local areas and agencies and carry out a wider consultation with other young people. They could then come back to a shadow board, collate all that information and produce a report, such as the report that was produced by the young people's safety group in Barking and Dagenham, to be presented to the safeguarding board.

After the safeguarding board meeting, a shadow board could meet again to receive the feedback directly from the safeguarding board and find out how it implemented the issues or to hear its thinking on the issues that were raised. A simple format is used in England, which works well in providing feedback to young people. The "you said, we did" statement was published on websites, and a table listed what young people said and what the safeguarding board did. That was how the local safeguarding children board reported to the safety group: a particular issue

was pointed up, and the safeguarding board did something about it. The LSCB reported to, and communicated with, the young people's safety group regularly.

In Northern Ireland, we already have the agencies, skills, contacts and structures of much young people's and children's participation. The demand is not there to set up an entire new concept; it already exists. The issue is to build on what we already have. Although the proposal avoids the expense of setting up a new organisation, it will require investment. With a commitment to, and investment in, a shadow board, Northern Ireland will have an achievable model.

The Chairperson:

You talked about the scenario in Barking and Dagenham, and you mentioned that the young chairperson of the young people's safety group declined to take his or her position on the board. Do you know why?

Ms Alicia Toal (Voice of Young People in Care):

We met that young person when we were on our study visit. She told us that she felt that, as a care-experienced young adult, she did not want to hear some of the content that was being shared at the meeting, particularly about child deaths. She chose not to take her seat. However, the board left it open that the next chairperson could choose to take that seat.

The Chairperson:

Could the deputy chairperson or another representative from the young people's safety group have taken the position on her behalf?

Ms Toal:

The group did not have a deputy chairperson.

The Chairperson:

It strikes me that a golden opportunity had been missed. Your answer has partially answered my next question about those young people having direct personal experience of child protection issues. Obviously, that lady did, and she spoke, therefore, from direct knowledge. To be honest, there is not much sense in appointing someone from a steady family background who has had no difficulties whatsoever to act as a spokesperson for those who have experienced child abuse. You

headed me off at the pass with your answer to that question.

You had the benefit of being in the Public Gallery for this afternoon's sessions, and you heard evidence from the NSPCC and the research from Dr Thompson. You also clearly share the concern about the perceived lack of the chairperson's independence under the present structure. What did you think of Ms Woolmore's suggestion that the board should appoint the chairperson rather than the Department or the Minister? Have you given that any consideration?

Ms McConvey:

Let us return to the situation in Barking and Dagenham. There was a specific, close relationship between the chairperson of the safeguarding board and the chairperson of the young people's safety group. The chairperson of the board also attended some of the meetings of the young people's safety group and had a good understanding of the issues. That was central.

It was important that the chairperson of the safeguarding board understood the need for the participation of children and young people. Issues arose, one of which concerned the lack of safety for young people on London transport. The chairperson of the LSCB brought a representative of Transport for London to the local safeguarding board to try to address those issues. Therefore, the chairperson of LSCB must have a good relationship with the young people's safety group and understand the importance of maintaining it.

As to how one appoints a chairperson, I must honestly say that I am not sure.

The Chairperson:

That is a very honest answer. We often do not get that, and it is helpful. It is an issue that I have not heard raised until today, but we will have to consider it in detail.

Ms Leeson:

CINI is content that a public appointment process is appropriate. We must consider the purpose of the safeguarding board. It is not the same as that of the Children's Commissioner or a national human rights institution. There must be a balance of purpose and function. We raised the issue of how directions are framed in the legislation, and that matter needs to be revisited. The Department needs to be asked about the intent of the directions and to explore further the relationship between the Department and the safeguarding board. However, we are content that

the safeguarding board is placed within the Public Health Agency and that there is a line of accountability to the Department.

Mr McCallister:

From what Pauline said, I gather that she is relaxed about the way in which the chairperson is appointed. However, evidence to the Committee stresses that the appointment is absolutely critical. This is about getting it right, whether the appointment is best made by the board or by the Minister and the Department. The problem is in identifying someone suitable. You would probably accept some of the criteria that Sue Woolmore included in answer to my question to her.

Ms McConvey:

Yes, I would.

Mr McCallister:

Your evidence highlights the issue of how a balance is struck between accountability and independence. It came through strongly in your evidence that you want the safeguarding board to be independent, and that is the general difficulty that the Committee has with the Bill.

In your experience with Barking and Dagenham, Vivian, was there a feeling on the young people's safety group and among the young people with whom it engaged that things were moving? Under the "you said, we did" format, was there a feeling that young people were having an input? Many such initiatives lead to people becoming frustrated and believing that they will never be able to do anything because there is no money and achieving results seems terribly difficult and cannot happen. Was there a genuine feeling that the format was useful?

Ms McConvey:

Yes, there was. The format is simple, and the responses were contained on a single page of priorities on what actions had been discussed, agreed and taken. During our research, we found that some areas used a traffic light system that identified young people's big issues, which were tracked throughout the year. A green light signified that the issue was being tackled; an amber light raised questions about what was preventing action; and young people understood that a red light meant that the issue was going nowhere and wanted to know why. The feedback from the group would have asked why a certain issue was at a standstill, why nothing was happening and why the young people were not hearing something.

By and large, we found that a simple, single-page format was the best structure. I accept the Chairperson's point about getting to groups of young people who really understand child protection issues. I think that we have enough organisations here. There may be as many as 16 groups represented on a shadow board, but we have to realise that we are talking about Northern Ireland. Unlike in England, where a safeguarding board may be very local, we are talking about bringing together five trusts across a large area. Therefore, we must use the infrastructure of community groups and the voluntary sector so that we do not have only five specialists, two of whom talk about disability. We need to be able to go behind that and link into all those systems to have the necessary conversations.

To achieve that, we must have a format that can be put on a website to sound out the issues clearly and that has a mechanism for exposing whether such issues are addressed when they are supposed to be, and to ask if not, why not. Issues slip off the table and are forgotten, but it is hard to evade them if we adopt the "you said, we did" approach.

Mr McCallister:

I was also concerned about the young chairperson of the young people's safety group who opted out. Did she opt out for her term in office? Could a chairperson opt out of meetings when certain agenda items might be difficult for him or her to discuss? I feel that what the Chairperson called a "golden opportunity" might be missed. I am concerned that, if somebody opted out for an entire year, the process would be rendered pointless.

Ms McConvey:

That would not really happen because a mechanism would be put in place. My organisation had similar issues. Young people joining its board may say that there are certain issues, such as staff, with which they do not want to deal. Therefore, we had to consider a different system that allowed those young people to deal with their issues, and young people are usually very clear about boundaries: they will state which issues do and do not pertain to them. We find that we need to support young people in the relevant issues. To involve young people with experience of child protection, the safeguarding board will deal with the personal experience of such young people and their families. VOYPIC has had to set up a support system that allows people to come to terms with their experience so that, with a little distance, they can provide the benefit of their experience through a format. I believe that a shadow board will provide such a strong format.

I take your point, Chairperson. If someone had been appointed deputy chairperson of the young people's safety group, that person might have felt more comfortable about attending a safeguarding board meeting, which would have allowed some more planning. The group was quite honest in saying that it was going well but that it was still a learning phase.

On our study visit, we wanted to talk to as many people as possible and take with us the more positive points. A formalised structure here, led and supported by a regional agency, through a shadow board on which we had representation, would filter back into communities. There could be a sequence of meetings that are tied to the safeguarding board, with a chairperson and a place for someone from VOYPIC. Someone would sit with the young person through the process and help him or her. If that matching process had been used in Barking and Dagenham, the situation might have been different.

The Chairperson:

I am glad to say that I seldom encounter child abuse in my constituency, but what I have to listen to often haunts me. Is it wise to ask a young person who has experienced abuse to sit on a safeguarding board that may be dealing with some dreadful situations? Would that not make life even more difficult for the young person who has suffered abuse?

Ms McConvey:

The example goes back to our experience of VOYPIC's board. For a board agenda, we need to work out the most pertinent issues for young people and where they feel that they participate most fully. We need to build a structure around their level of involvement. Young people will always point out what item is not important to them or what they do not need to be involved in, and we find another mechanism. They will say that they can get the information that they require without necessarily having to be in that position.

Mr McCallister:

That is what I was getting at. Can people opt out of agenda items?

The Chairperson:

It is inevitable that young people who are on the board will accidentally stumble onto material that is extremely unpalatable and with which many adults cannot cope. I am worried that, if

young people were involved to such an extent that they are exposed to that, it might be extremely uncomfortable for them.

Ms Toal:

We recommend a shadow board. The linkages between the SBNI and a shadow board would need to be worked out. It might be done outside of SBNI official meetings through meetings that allowed a link between both chairpersons rather than having children and young people sitting in on SBNI meetings.

Mr Girvan:

Like the Chairperson, I have concerns about young people being put into that environment. Perhaps those young people will have witnessed some of the cases from which the board will try to highlight issues. You mentioned the issue of young people having difficulties with public transport being raised. That issue could be more appropriately dealt with through the Youth Council for Northern Ireland rather than the safeguarding board.

Having worked with young people for many years, I find that there is much initial enthusiasm but that it is difficult to keep that enthusiasm going and to keep a board going. Having been involved in Youth Council work, I know that people will attend the first number of meetings but that one person will disappear followed by another. Before you know it, the core has left and few remain. How has such a structure demonstrated its operation in other areas? Has it been a long-term structure, or has it tended to flare up and run down?

Ms McConvey:

You are right; unlike adults who are paid to be on a board, young people will vote with their feet. Our experience of running groups and having infrastructures or reference groups is that the effectiveness of the reference group is based on how the animal is fed and set up. Things can sometimes go wrong if a structure is set up simply to support young people's participation, and it does not have a clear agenda, understand the work and have a life that is continually linked to another life and has work to do. If that happens, people will vote with their feet because there is no interest in that.

We are talking about a cycle of young people who have an interest in safeguarding and that being fed into a continual examination so that active work is always taking place and is of

interest. The skill lies with the workers who support the young people, understanding their role on a shadow board and the lead agency that will convene and facilitate it.

Ms Toal:

We recommend that, rather than focusing solely on child protection issues, a shadow board be allowed to develop its own agenda and communicate to the SBNI what safety, in its broadest sense, means to it.

A shadow board will have more buy-in if it can create its own agenda, although that is not to say that all the issues that it highlights will be within its remit. In Barking and Dagenham, the agency under whose remit an issue falls is linked to the young people's safety group so that action can be taken. If young people see that raising issues brings about action, they will engage more and have a buy-in.

Dr Deeny:

This is an interesting discussion. Thank you, ladies; it is nice to see you again, Vivian.

I see what you are getting at. You mentioned young people contacting adults and the difficulty that they may hold back from addressing or opening up a very serious problem. In the past year, the relative of an individual came to me, and I got the Nexus Institute involved because of the abuse that was reported. I can see why it may be difficult for a young person whose parents may know the local nurse or GP, and that is what you are trying to address.

I listened to Sue Woolmore during the evidence session with the NSPCC. Who do you think should be on the SBNI? Board members will have to be people who can deal with, and have experience of, such issues and who can deal with young people through intermediaries if required.

Vivian, your submission states that the safeguarding board will:

“Build a conduit between children and young people through a Shadow Board”.

Is that a misprint? Should it not build a conduit between children and young people with the SBNI through a shadow board?

Ms McConvey:

Yes; you are right.

Further to the conversation that we had at lunchtime, we are saying that it is important to involve the community and voluntary sector on the SBNI to get a wide range of opinions. There is no way that it will have the capacity or format to go out constantly to find out what children and young people are saying without a built-in shadow board structure. It would be deemed that those young people could go back to their groups and be supported by their organisations to have wider consultations.

Dr Deeny:

That is important. You are not saying that a shadow board will be made up of professionals.

Ms McConvey:

No, it will be made up of young people.

Dr Deeny:

That is the important point with which I and other members who spoke agree. Some young people could not handle that and would be upset by it. However, it would be useful to have a group that could facilitate people who have been abused by bringing them to the right people. Who should be on a shadow board? Would you recommend that, as in England, the safeguarding board should be a broad section of professionals with much experience? What age group should be on a shadow board?

Ms Toal:

A shadow board would be made up of young people who are supported by the relevant agencies, and there would be two representatives of looked-after children.

Dr Deeny:

What age group will be involved, Alicia?

Ms Toal:

Until the structures and processes are ironed out, we suggest that it should involve 11- to 18-year-olds. Once the systems and structures are in place and working, younger children could become

involved.

Dr Deeny:

Would you like the SBNI to be full of people who have much experience of such issues across all the professions? As health professionals, we find that young people do not come forward because they are frightened that someone might find out. I can see where you are coming from.

Ms McConvey:

A shadow board of young people will be supported by a number of community and voluntary organisations. Once it is agreed that there should be a shadow board, how the groups should be connected can be worked out. For example, we have an interest in other people and looked-after children. Our experience is that, with regional groups such as this, staff members support young people through the process by listening to the information. In that role, they can then consult other young people. Therefore, although there may be only two shadow board members who represent the looked-after children sector, they would be the voice of up to 50 children in care.

Ms Leeson:

The membership of the safeguarding board should be drawn from a number of operational bodies, particularly the trusts, which have service delivery obligations to children and young people. However, it not only health and social services agencies that should be involved. The Regional Child Protection Committee, on which CINI sits, comprises the PSNI, prisons representatives, community and voluntary bodies and educational interests. That type of membership, which should not be too unwieldy, could quite usefully translate over to the arrangements for the new safeguarding board. The contribution of the community and voluntary sector is important with regard to service delivery and the challenge role that we currently provide.

Dr Deeny:

I want to look at practical issues, Pauline. In one instance, a young person who was coming to see me was frightened to come forward because another member of the family was involved, which is often the case. I am worried that the involvement of the police and the judicial system will put people off. That young person was worried about getting her family member into trouble.

Ms Leeson:

If you are talking about safeguarding, it is important that the PSNI is involved. It is a professional oversight role. The person in that role can refer cases on to operational agencies, but terms of reference will be established for the people who will serve on the SBNI. Board members are given an induction and training so that they know how to behave properly and in accordance with their brief.

Ms S Ramsey:

I apologise for missing your presentation. Michelle and I had to do something that we had agreed to do some weeks ago.

I have read a lot of material connected to the Bill. There is a school of thought, with which I agree, that, whatever happens, we ought to be proactive. We need to learn lessons. It is not always about dealing with a crisis when it happens but about ensuring that it does not happen. In some sense, it is important that “stakeholders”, for want of a better word, are involved.

You talked about a shadow board and the lead agency. Which agency do you suggest that that should be? You also talked about the make-up of a shadow board. I assume that, when you mentioned two looked-after children being on a shadow board, you meant young people rather than workers. Where does the Children’s Commissioner fit into that? As you are aware, there was a long, hard, drawn-out battle over the years to get that post up and running. Why are we not using that office to take on a safeguarding role? I am thinking about costings, because we are going into the unknown. Is there not a mechanism that would allow us to use the Children’s Commissioner’s office, which I know has a good relationship with children and young people?

Ms McConvey:

First, you are absolutely right to say that every member of a shadow board should be a young person. Secondly, there is a need for a lead facilitative agency, which will require investment. More groups of young people come forward to agencies than to the Children’s Commissioner’s office, and they would willingly take on that role at no cost to the safeguarding board.

VOYPIC has experience of young people coming forward. Our agency might be approached to put a group of young people on a board with looked-after children. That is a matter of dedicating a member of staff. There might be four meetings a year of a shadow board and they

have to come back in. We would have a vested interest in influencing what is happening, as will many agencies. It is about giving users a voice. We would knit that into our daily work as a process.

The Children's Commissioner deals with a wide range of young people from nought to 18 years of age. I work closely with the Commissioner. When it comes to issues involving children in care, the Commissioner is excellent at visiting specialist groups. She acknowledges the fact that we deal with certain issues daily; over 500 youngsters come through our doors every year. That is not the experience of the Commissioner, who deals with specific cases. We must work out the best place for the Commissioner to act. I do not say that the Commissioner would not be a part of the process, but specific groups give a voice to users and also work closely with the Commissioner. I do not rule out intervention by the Commissioner.

Ms S Ramsey:

I am trying to tease out whether the Commissioner's office, which has resources, could be the lead agency. People will run away from a suggestion on the basis that it will cost money. If we use what is already available, it will not cost additional money, and we will be sure that we are doing it right.

Ms Leeson:

There are two issues, Sue. VOYPIC has presented an innovative proposal that will not cost a great deal. Given the resources that are needed, it seems cost-effective.

Another issue is the role of the Children's Commissioner. We work closely with the Commissioner on participation and many other issues. However, the Commissioner's office is a scrutiny mechanism. I see the Commissioner's office as scrutinising the Department and the safeguarding board on whether it is doing its job properly. Therefore, there should be some distance between them. There could be working protocols and memorandums of understanding. However, Children in Northern Ireland does not envisage the Commissioner's office carrying out this function. That office has a more independent scrutiny function.

The Chairperson:

Are you happy, Sue?

Ms S Ramsey:

I am never happy.

Mr Easton:

Vivian, you were here not so long ago.

Ms McConvey:

Yes, I was.

Mr Easton:

Will VOYPIC want to sit on the safeguarding board if it has the opportunity?

Ms McConvey:

All children who have gone into care have been through child protection, and VOYPIC has a great deal of experience on such issues. There are protection issues for children in care all the time. It is important that one hears their experiences directly. We have undertaken work on children in child protection — for example, through our Listen to Me! project.

Yes is the short answer.

[Laughter].

Mr Easton:

Let me go back to what John and Paul said about young people. From what age group will the young people on a shadow board be drawn? How was the Barking and Dagenham board able to get young people involved? What mechanisms did it use to enthuse them?

The following is not a great example, but I have a 17-year-old daughter, and I cannot even get her to tidy her room. How was the Barking and Dagenham board able to get young people involved?

Ms McConvey:

Young people will connect with an issue when they realise its importance. They will stay on board and not vote with their feet when they realise that there is a process that works, someone is

listening, they are getting a response, and they are being asked to do more on the issue.

Young people in care are exceptionally concerned about their safety. Many issues arise from that — safety in the community, schools, and so on. It is vital to have skilled professionals working with young people. It is like everything else: it is a selling job. It is important to be clear about what is in it for young people and what expectations are realistic. It is important to have a mixture of both. Our work is a mixture of serious work and fun and realising that they are only children. It is about giving them information in a format that they understand and decision-making to that level. We tend to work in different groups. Even in the context of the safeguarding board and a shadow board, although we say that children should be between the ages of 11 and 18, we have to consider their ages and their comprehension of what is happening. It often comes down to the skill of a worker in a face-to-face scenario helping a young person.

However, the feedback we constantly receive is: “I have given you this information. Has it been listened to? Can you prove it?” If it is proven and leads to someone asking another question, it is amazing how willing young people are to engage with you and stick with it.

We do not want to set up a specialist group that is simply there for the safeguarding board; that can be a problem for young people. Sometimes, those young people quickly become experts in their own field, and they start to lose focus with their peers. It is important to set up an infrastructure that will allow the involvement of supportive organisations that bring along young people with specific roles. They may be involved on a shadow board for six months and then consult with a range of young people. If an agency such as VOYPIC is doing matching work on skills development, self-esteem, understanding, giving good credence and telling young people that shadow board involvement is good for their CVs and good in many other ways, those young people can be kept on board.

The Chairperson:

The Committee has also had the benefit of the evidence it received at lunchtime, which was minuted by the Clerks. We have had a good briefing on this important issue. No doubt, as the weeks progress, we will re-examine your evidence. Thank you for your help.