



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR
HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND
PUBLIC SAFETY

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

**Safeguarding Board Bill: Evidence
Session with the NSPCC**

16 September 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES
AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

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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:

Mr Neil Anderson)	
Mr Colm Elliot)	National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
Mr Colin Reid)	
Ms Sue Woolmore)	

The Chairperson (Mr Wells):

The Committee will now take evidence from the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), a group that has been before the Committee on many occasions. Unusually, the NSPCC is named in the legislation, which demonstrates the role that the charity plays in child protection, and, for that reason in particular, it is good to hear evidence from it. Before the Committee today is Neil Anderson, the national head of services. You are most welcome. Is this

your first time before the Committee?

Mr Neil Anderson (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children):

It is indeed, Chair. Thank you.

The Chairperson:

Also before the Committee is Colin Reid, who is here so regularly that he has a season ticket. *[Laughter.]* He is the NSPCC's policy and public affairs manager and one of the sad people who sits and watches quite a few of the Committee's hearings. Sue Woolmore, a local safeguarding child board advisor and Colm Elliott, the assistant director of children's services, make up the delegation from the NSPCC. You are all welcome.

As usual, the Committee will give the witnesses 10 minutes to provide their evidence. Members who are interested in asking questions should let the Committee Clerk know.

Mr N Anderson:

Thank you, Chair. We are grateful for the opportunity to present evidence to the Committee this afternoon. In addition to your kind introduction of my colleagues, you introduced me and apparently know Colin Reid well. I should add that Colm Elliott, as an assistant director, is directly involved in the delivery of children's services for the NSPCC. For the purposes of subsequent questioning, you may be interested to know that Colm is also the regional child protection committee representative for the NSPCC and is highly experienced in the current area child protection committee (ACPC) arrangements.

Sue Woolmore is the NSPCC's local safeguarding children board adviser, and her role is to maximise the charity's contribution through the local safeguarding children board (LSCB) structures in England and Wales. Over the past three years, she has also been advising the NSPCC and the Department on the development of the safeguarding board for Northern Ireland (SBNI). Additionally, Sue is an independent chair of a local safeguarding board in the north-west of England, chairs the national forum for the independent chairs of LSCBs in England and is a qualified nurse and social worker. You may wish to keep in mind my colleagues' experience when asking questions afterwards.

The Chairperson:

We have found our chairman.

Mr N Anderson:

I will move quickly through the evidence in the same order that we provided it to you in writing. We will offer only some brief verbal comments; I will not read it out in full.

The NSPCC fully supports the implementation of the SBNI and wishes to see that happen as soon as possible. If implemented correctly, it will enhance our structures for safeguarding and protecting children and address some of the deficits that we perceive in the current area child protection committees.

We wish to highlight a number of issues that relate to the membership and independence of the proposed SBNI and the role of the Department of Health and Social Services and Public Safety, which I will refer to as “the Department”.

We have some comments on clause 1, which relates to the board’s membership. We have expressed a view that relevant Departments should, perhaps, be involved closely with the SBNI, but we acknowledge the danger of its membership becoming unwieldy. Therefore, if not through membership, we suggest that the Committee might wish to seek clarification from the Department on any planned arrangements to make the interface between the SBNI and Departments effective.

The Committee may wish to seek clarification from the Department on the selection processes for the non-core voluntary and community sector members of the SBNI. In our view, that is less than clear in the Bill.

Clause 3 deals with the functions of the SBNI. The NSPCC regards that as a particularly significant clause, as it deals with the mechanisms to hold to account members of the SBNI. To ensure that best practice is adopted, we ask that cognisance be taken of experience in other jurisdictions. We suggest a specific amendment to the Bill to allow the Department to issue statutory guidance in that regard.

In relation to the reviews to be undertaken by the SBNI, NSPCC’s view is that the board should not be constrained to a narrow focus on case management reviews (CMRs). We have

suggested a further specific amendment to the Bill to ensure that the SBNI will undertake a range of reviews in addition to case management reviews.

I will now echo some comments from our earlier discussion. We are concerned about clause 3(9)(c), which outlines the requirement for the Department to approve the publication of the SBNI's material. We suggest that the Committee might wish to seek assurances that the use of that provision will not be allowed to fetter or restrict the work and reporting of the SBNI.

Clause 4 deals with directions to the safeguarding board. The NSPCC supports the implementation of robust governance arrangements, but we suggest that the Committee seek clarification on the intent of that provision. Exemplar circumstances of when directions can be issued to SBNI might be useful in that regard. We expect that the powers of direction should be used only in exceptional circumstances. To measure that, we recommend that for the purposes of public scrutiny, all directions issued to the SBNI should be reported in detail in its annual report. We understand that much of the detail of the working of the SBNI will be contained in subsequent regulations. I wish to bring to your attention and place on record that important documents, such as membership agreements and standing orders, will also be under development. We consider it important for the independent chairperson of the SBNI and its members to be closely engaged in the development of those working documents, as opposed to receiving them as prescribed tablets of stone.

Clause 6 relates to the annual report of the SBNI. It is essential for the SBNI to report on all its functions and not be allowed to report selectively. Therefore, we have suggested a specific amendment to make it clear that the SBNI is required to produce a report on the delivery of all its functions, as set out in clause 3.

Clause 7 relates to the committees and subcommittees of SBNI and deals with the establishment of the case management review panel. The experience of England and Wales suggests to us that there are weaknesses in compliance monitoring and in the implementation of action plans following serious case reviews. We suggest a specific amendment to strengthen that element by giving an additional regulatory power to the Department in relation to the development of action plans and the compliance monitoring for case management reviews. Alternatively, guidance for those purposes could be issued and developed by the Department. The Committee might wish to pursue that as a preferred response to the matter.

Finally, clause 12 details arrangements to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. We accept that everything in the Bill is implicitly concerned with the membership of the safeguarding board. However, clause 12, as currently presented, is open to interpretation as a stand-alone duty that relates to the broad remit of all the bodies that are listed, even beyond their role in the SBNI. Members will understand the NSPCC's concern that the clause could impede its ability to act independently in the interests of children and when challenging government on matters of safeguarding and child protection. Therefore, we have suggested a specific amendment to make it clear that that duty applies to all the listed bodies in relation to their membership of SBNI and its subgroups. The Committee might also wish to satisfy itself about the nature and type of guidance that the Department envisages that it will issue.

That concludes my opening remarks. My colleagues and I will be pleased to respond to any questions.

The Chairperson:

Thank you, Mr Anderson. I want to clarify whether the “national” in national head of services means Northern Ireland or UK-wide?

Mr N Anderson:

Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson:

We have the benefit of Ms Woolmore's attendance today. She has direct experience of the situation in GB. The Committee was due to go over and observe the situation and practice in Bolton and Bradford, but, unfortunately, the Icelandic dust cloud left us stranded in Belfast City Airport. However, we have an advantage in that similar boards are up and running in England. It is most opportune, therefore, to have an expert here who clearly knows the workings of those boards.

As you heard earlier, the Committee is greatly concerned about the Department's potential to bridle the work of the SBNI by controlling its publications, what it investigates and, perhaps, by sacking the chairperson should that individual be too strident in his or her criticisms. You have much experience, Sue. Are there about 50 or 60 boards up and running in GB?

Ms Sue Woolmore (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children):

There are approximately 140 local safeguarding children boards, of which about 90 have independent chairpersons.

The Chairperson:

In your experience, has there been a problem with a perceived lack of independence? Has there been interference from the councils, as would be the case in GB, rather than the Department? Is the problem that we perceive more apparent than real?

Ms Woolmore:

It is extremely apparent. My reading of the Bill alarmed me, in the sense that it appeared as though the Department wanted to exercise quite a bit of control over the SBNI in a way that local authorities do not. The local authorities in England would not exercise that kind of influence over their safeguarding boards. In fact, I, as an independent chairperson of a board, attend the overview and scrutiny committee of the local authority, which wants to be able to quiz me in great detail on what the safeguarding board does, without my being inhibited in what I can say. I need to be free to describe exactly what goes on. The committee relies on the safeguarding board to give it a clear picture. The board cannot, for instance, be inhibited by the local paid officers and told what it can and cannot say.

That said, it is, sometimes, a delicate and difficult line to walk. From my reading of the legislation, the SBNI would experience some difficulty in recruiting an independent chairperson of great calibre, because any prospective candidates would feel that their hands might well be tied. It is highly prescriptive.

The Chairperson:

I made that point at the lunchtime meeting. We are looking for an extremely special person with the wisdom of Solomon and the brains of Einstein.

Ms S Ramsey:

It is me. Do not comment.

The Chairperson:

In other places, it tends to be ex-MLAs, but we want someone of a higher calibre. *[Laughter.]*

Seriously, if we want to attract that type of person, he or she will want to be unfettered. Am I right in thinking that he or she, in the district council situation, is still appointed by that council?

Ms Woolmore:

No. Generally, in England, the chairperson is appointed by the board. That point is worth the Committee's consideration. It is considered very important that the chairperson of the board commands the respect of the board members. The local authority will not impose a chairperson on the safeguarding board. As part of my recruitment, for example, I was interviewed by a panel that was made up of board members who represented the various statutory agencies. I was also interviewed by a panel of young people. It is not uncommon in England for the process to happen in that way. Therefore, there is no sense that the chairperson is being imposed on the board.

It is important, too, that the board consider whether its chairperson is performing adequately, and many boards appraise their chairperson's performance annually. Members of the board representing the different agencies participate in that appraisal, so there can be no sense that the role is being politicised or that somebody is being removed because he or she was, for example, speaking out of turn.

The Chairperson:

Therefore, only the board can remove the chairperson?

Ms Woolmore:

That is right.

The Chairperson:

That is a clear departure from what the Bill proposes. What about the wider issue for the NSPCC? Representatives of the NSPCC will sit on the board, because it is named in legislation. The National Trust is also named in legislation and is the only other voluntary group to be thus named that I have come across. What would happen in a situation in which your work as a lead charity in that field came to the attention of and under scrutiny from the SBNI? As a board

representative, how do you envisage that situation working when you are, in fact, being investigated?

Mr Colin Reid (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children):

The NSSPC always goes by best practice. We are led by the guiding principles of our royal charter and our authorised status under the Children Order (NI) 1995, in which we are also named as a charity. We do not have a statutory power in England, but we are happy to take on that power in Northern Ireland. However, we will always act in the best interests of children.

The Chairperson:

The NSPCC cannot be excluded from the board, because it is a named member in the legislation. If you were put in the unfortunate and embarrassing situation whereby one of your staff got something wrong and the board on which you sat had to carry out an investigation, how would you react? Would you expect to be asked to step aside during that investigation and take no part in it? How would that mechanism work?

Mr N Anderson:

I envisage that, in working out the detail, to which I referred in my earlier comments, provision will be made for avoiding conflicts of interest through membership agreements, standing orders, and so on, rather than in regulations. If a service provided by the NSPCC were to be the subject of question, we would have to stand aside from any involvement in the investigation of matters related to that.

The Chairperson:

Do you think that that will be dealt with in the regulations?

Mr N Anderson:

I imagine that it will not be dealt with in the Bill, but in the detail elsewhere.

The Chairperson:

I want to go back to the crucial role of the chairperson, which is identified in the legislation as a pivotal role. In GB, have you been able to attract quality applicants to fill those positions? Has that been a problem, or is there a pool of capable people?

Ms Woolmore:

The pool of people is small and decreasing. A survey of all the safeguarding boards would elicit a mixed response. Some feel that they are well served by their chairpersons; others less so. In England, chairpersons are usually employed for up to three days a month, so they give a small amount of time. However, in common with many chairpersons, I work well in excess of the number of days for which I am employed, because to do a good job I argue that I must give more time. Some chairpersons will do the job simply to earn money and will, therefore, do the minimum amount of work required. However, the majority of chairpersons put much more effort into their role. Therefore, you must be clear about your expectations of the chairperson.

The pool is small because of the skills that are required and because the role is extremely challenging and demanding. Potentially, any individual doing the job assumes considerable reputational risk should anything go wrong. Given how certain child protection cases can be politicised and picked up by the media, people are sensitive to the fact that, if they take up a high-profile position, they will be the ones who will be held to account.

The Chairperson:

If the pool is small in GB, it will be much smaller here. I have been frantically trying to think of the sort of people whom the Department will be looking for. That brings me to my final question: what type of people become chairpersons in GB? Are they solicitors? Have they worked in the family division? Are they ex-social workers?

Ms Woolmore:

There is a cross-section. Some chairpersons are retired senior police officers, many are senior officers from children's social services and a number are senior health officials. They are drawn largely from health, children's social services and the police. A small number of academics have also taken up the role. Predominantly, however, the chairpersons have been involved in public service.

Mr Girvan:

Thank you for your submission and presentation. I agree with your point about the importance of reporting on all activities without outside interference. That area must be clarified. I believe in the arm's-length approach to reporting by all bodies on the SBNI. Sometimes, when another group carries out an investigation, there can be interference from outside. I agree with you,

Chairperson, that all aspects of the SBNI's work must be reported on.

The Chairperson:

You do not have a question, Paul?

Mr Girvan

No, it was more of a statement.

Ms S Ramsey:

I thank the witnesses for their presentation and briefing paper. It is important that we get this right and that we learn the lessons from the brutal cases of child abuse in England. The Chairperson is right in saying that it is a pity that we were unable to make that visit to England.

My concern is to maintain the good, positive working relationship that I have observed here over the years between the Department and the community and voluntary sector. Therefore, the fact that such an issue arises makes me ask right away what is going on. It could be nothing, but there may be something amiss.

Your paper states:

“Guidance produced by government in England ‘Working Together to Safeguard Children (2010)’ has significantly strengthened the LSCBs’ annual reports”.

Why was that guidance written and introduced?

Ms Woolmore:

That guidance built on the experience of the area child protection committees, which could make requests of members, but could not exercise any further leverage. It was thought that they depended too much on goodwill, whereas the LSCBs, through guidance, have more teeth. Their members can be held to account in a much clearer way, as set out in ‘Working Together’. If a member agency does not respond to a reasonable request from the board, for example, an LSCB can ask the inspector of that agency to carry out a thematic inspection. Ultimately, an LSCB can go to the Secretary of State should it consider that the agency is not co-operating as it should.

Ms S Ramsey:

Is there a possibility that some people have taken on board lessons from some cases and that is why the guidance was brought in?

Ms Woolmore:

That is right. It was felt, particularly based on Lord Laming's inquiry into the tragic case of Victoria Climbié in a London borough, that the existing ACPCs were not sufficiently powerful to make a difference. The LSCBs are still evolving and learning. The SBNI has an excellent opportunity that England did not have to learn about what has worked well and what has not. The SBNI does not have to make some of the same mistakes, and you are, therefore, at a great advantage.

Ms S Ramsey:

I am concerned that we are not learning the lessons from cases in England. That guidance shows me that some lessons have been learned. I am concerned that we might not be using that opportunity to learn.

The Executive decided to set up a ministerial subcommittee on children and young people because, in my words, they believe that children's and young people's issues cut across all Departments. I agree with that. The fact that the Department of Education, the Department of Justice and other Departments were not involved from the outset contradicts the mindset of the Executive. It is not, therefore, a properly joined-up approach. Can anyone explain why that is not happening in the legislation?

Mr Reid:

We had lengthy discussions with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety about that. The policy intent was largely about getting operational bodies to co-operate. One of the challenges in Northern Ireland, and one of the key differences between our arrangements and those that Sue talked about, is membership. We deal with a countrywide membership, which is much more difficult than membership on a local level, as it introduces all sorts of complications.

Some Departments play a key role in children's policy and protection. The Department of Justice, the Department of Education, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) all have considerable

responsibility. The Health Department wants to ensure that the operational bodies work together, and it has assured us and the Committee about the interfaces with Departments. In our experience, Departments often do not work particularly well on safeguarding, as the tendency is to pass on responsibility to someone else.

A key element is that Departments must be copper-fastened into the arrangements, if they are not part of them already. That will ensure that the safeguarding board for Northern Ireland has a clear interface and protocol with a range of Departments and can hold them to account on safeguarding. Yesterday, we had a helpful meeting with DCAL, for example, about its responsibility to safeguard children. More children participate in sport than almost any other activity, so DCAL has certain responsibilities. We would like there to be protocols for such interfaces in operation between the SBNI and Departments.

Ms S Ramsey:

I agree with you. Without going back over our earlier conversation, it seems that some agencies and Departments are more in the habit of passing the buck. If they worked together at that level, that would be harder to do.

The community and voluntary sector here has been sold short. I mean no disrespect to Sue from England, but the community and voluntary sector has been involved in some of the issues for 30 or 40 years in areas where statutory agencies had failed in certain respects. I am concerned about not using that on-the-ground expertise, as the Chairperson pointed out earlier. People at the coalface know the issues inside out. I have a concern about how the representation from the community and voluntary sector will be chosen. It should not always be the wine-and-cheese brigade, nor should it be the people who are always represented, such as the NSPCC and others. People who work at the coalface must be represented. I want to put that on record.

Mr McCallister:

My point follows on from that of the Chairperson. From your experience in England, Sue, how big a difference is there between the boards that work well and those that you perceive do not work well? What do you put that difference down to? Is it a question of leadership or the make-up of the boards? How can we achieve a good board here, rather than one that does not work well?

Ms Woolmore:

You have put your finger on the pulse of the most difficult question that challenges many of the safeguarding boards: what makes an effective board? Many people have been asking that question for a long time, which is one of the reasons why they try to collaborate and share best practice. A board that works well has a strong independent chairperson who is well respected and willing to go that extra mile for the board. A well-functioning board will not be dominated by one or two agencies; there will be a shared sense that safeguarding and child protection is everyone's business.

A poorly functioning board will have a number of passengers who turn up, but feel that safeguarding is social services' or health's job. A well-functioning board will have strong links to the community and voluntary sector. I share the view that it is often the community and voluntary sector that knows, and can respond to, what is really happening to children and families in the community. A good board is one that can listen to children and young people. A board also needs to be well supported by professional officers. There does not have to be an army of people, but there must be skilled individuals who can take forward the business of the board and help to hold members to account by reminding them what they need to do and by ensuring that they comply.

Clear processes for auditing the business of the individual agencies are required to ensure that the board does not simply take what people say at a meeting at face value. One might, for example, carry out case file audits under a theme, such as the sexual exploitation of teenagers, and set aside time to examine the case files of all the different agencies. The aim would be to determine whether all those agencies were doing what they said they were doing and whether they were sticking to the policies and procedures that the board had set up. Thorough processes and systems must be in place, guided through by some good staff, but also steered by a strong chairperson who is sensitive — politically sensitive with a small “p” — and understands the power dynamics that can exist in that kind of group. That is necessary to bring out the very best from that group.

That is the wish list, or the ideal world. Those are some of the ingredients, but your chairperson is crucial, as is his or her ability to pull together the board so that it is not dominated by any one or two agencies. We discussed the members' agreement that outlines what is expected of them; they must sign up to that. If that were to be given to them externally and the

chairperson were being told what they must do, there would be no buy-in, nor any sense of ownership or desire to drive things forward.

The SBNI has brilliant potential to make a difference for children, to speak out for them and to give you, as a Committee, access to a window on what is happening to children and young people in Northern Ireland that may not be available through other avenues. It is a wonderful opportunity, and you are in an excellent position to make the board as good as it can be.

Mr McCallister:

Given your earlier comments, Sue, is it better to make the appointments to the board through the public appointments process and then let that board decide the chairmanship?

Ms Woolmore:

I will be honest; I am not too familiar with the process of your public appointments system, but if you can find a way, through your processes, to make members of the board feel that they have a say in the kind of person that will be helpful to them, that would be a positive step.

Mr McCallister:

Our public appointments process is the same.

The Chairperson:

It is very similar. There are two options. The first option is that members of the board sit on the panel or that the board makes the decision. Today is the first time that I have heard that. It is quite revolutionary when compared with what we envisaged happening, which is that the person would be appointed by a Minister of a Department. In that situation, the chairperson's independence would be questionable, because the appointee would feel obliged to the person who had employed him or her in the first place.

Ms Woolmore:

I suspect that that is what members of the board would feel, particularly in light of the legislation as it stands. They would feel that the Department was saying that it could give them direction. However, the Department is saying that the board cannot even publish anything without its permission. The Department will have appointed the chairperson, who will, it is to be hoped, sign off any publications. If I were a member of that board, I would have questions about how much

independence the chairperson had.

Ms S Ramsey:

It is a case of whoever pays the piper.

Mr McCallister:

Further to that point, any criticism of a Department is, potentially, problematic. There could be political interference in the timing of any such criticism, which could be unhelpful when dealing with such vital issues.

The Chairperson:

Before I ask Dr Deeny to contribute, is it correct to say that there has been four years' experience of such boards in England?

Ms Woolmore:

Yes, they were first set up in 2006.

The Chairperson:

Is there any empirical evidence that a strongly independent, efficiently working board has made a real and tangible difference to child protection in its area? In other words, are the statistics beginning to show either a decrease in major cases or a slowing-down of the deterioration?

Ms Woolmore:

There is no empirical evidence that is as tangible as that. As I suggested earlier, evidence shows that some boards function well. It takes a long time for such bodies to bed down. Often, one of the first things to do, before those differences can start to be seen, is to achieve a sense of collaboration between agencies. When boards in England have learned from serious or critical local cases and implemented the lessons, similar cases have been monitored much more carefully than they were in the past. That difference is recognised to some extent. Often, however, we do not know about children whose lives have been improved; we find out only what has gone wrong. That is another reason why the SBNI, in common with safeguarding boards in England, must have in place mechanisms for taking on board good practice as well as learning lessons from situations that have gone wrong.

The Chairperson:

Mr Anderson said that there should be not only the power to react to individual cases but the power to examine more broad-brush policy decisions that affect everyone. How much of that has happened over the past four years, or has the emphasis been mainly on reacting to individual statistics and cases?

Ms Woolmore:

Much of what has happened has been reactive, particularly in the past couple of years since the death of one little boy in the London borough of Haringey. All the safeguarding boards were required to audit their processes against what happened in that case. Although there is something to be gained from that, it can mean a loss of local learning. I chair the board in a local authority in the north-west of England. What happens in London boroughs is interesting, and we need to understand that, but I am interested in what is happening in my borough. Lessons can be learned, but we cannot overlook and lose what happens locally.

You can learn from what happens in England, but you have a great deal to learn from Northern Ireland. You can call on local expertise and wisdom to find out what is happening for children and young people, and that must never be lost. I am keen on the idea of different types of review process, not only a case management review when a situation has gone desperately wrong. Cases that are going well should be studied, as should any near misses. It should be considered why, on a certain occasion, a child did not suffer significant harm and what was in place that prevented a tragedy.

It will be important and helpful if, in the formation of the SBNI, an expectation can be built in that it will consider not only the most desperate cases but others, too. In that way, the board will be able to answer your question: what difference does the SBNI make, and has it made a jot of difference to any child? That is the question that I must ask in the borough where I chair. We always ask ourselves the question: if we all disappeared tomorrow, would any child in the borough notice the difference?

Dr Deeny:

Thank you, Sue and the three gentlemen. You seem to be getting all of the questions, Sue. That is what you get for coming to Stormont. You said that there is a window of opportunity here. The basis of my question is the accountability of the board. Earlier, I mentioned the RQIA and

the PCC, which have been set up to look out for patients —

The Chairperson:

The regulatory body has a different name in GB.

Ms Woolmore:

It is called the Care Quality Commission.

Dr Deeny:

The full titles are the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority and the Patient and Client Council. The view of those who are concerned about certain people taking control is that no one must have overall control of the board. Many people think that the difference between here and England, Scotland and Wales is that elected representatives have run those three countries for some time. Some might say that they have not done so particularly well. Until recently, that has not been the case here.

There is a perception that senior civil servants still have a major say in Northern Ireland. I do not want a situation to arise in which civil servants control the new board, which is so important for children, particularly given that we want an independent chairperson and volunteers who do not fear such control. We want those two patient watchdog groups to work efficiently. This is a much smaller part of the world than England, but I like to think that the board would be accountable to the Health Committee.

I work as a GP, and I like the fact that the groups that you mentioned have a good cross-section of different people who have worked with the public for many years. That is good to hear, and it would be nice for members of the Committee to be fed information on what happens to make us aware of any problems. Someone might be of the opinion that, as result of holding a position for a certain number of years, he or she could control this important board. I am not saying that senior civil servants will have control, but that it is a concern.

To whom are the LSCBs politically accountable: the House of Commons Select Committee at Westminster or local health authorities?

Ms Woolmore:

At a local level, we are politically accountable to the lead member for children and young people, who is an elected member on the local council and has the portfolio for children and young people's services. That lead member must hold the board to account. Lead members can and often do attend board meetings as participating observers, although they cannot vote — how could a voting member hold the board to account? Therefore, they can attend meetings and ask questions, but not vote.

In my borough, as is the case with many local authorities, I, as the independent chairperson, attend scrutiny committees. I am scrutinised by those committees, which can request information in as much detail as they wish. I present the board's business plan to them for scrutiny, and I will, shortly, take my annual report to them, which they can scrutinise to find out exactly what is going on in the board. I am independent and am not there to protect or defend anybody. I answer questions candidly, because that is what I am there to do, and the board members know that I will do so. That is what they have asked me to do. That is the local-level political interface with safeguarding boards.

Dr Deeny:

Do you suggest or recommend that the SBNI be accountable to the Health Committee?

Ms Woolmore:

It would be helpful for the board to report to the Committee.

The Chairperson:

Who decided that the post would be only a three-days-a-month position?

Ms Woolmore:

The board made that decision. Often, the main reason for a safeguarding board to restrict the number of days is financial, because the way in which the boards are funded in England requires the member agencies to put money into the pot. Therefore, some boards are well funded, and others operate on a shoestring. The number of days allocated to a post in a month often depends on how much money the board has and how much it can afford.

It also depends on the level of understanding and the expectation of the chairperson's role:

does a board want the person to do no more than chair a meeting, or does it want a chairperson to meet members outside of board meetings and to get involved in scrutinising documentation that is being explored by subgroups, and so on? The chairperson's job is as big as the board wants to make it. I argue that three days a month is the absolute minimum requirement, and the SBNI will require significantly more than that, because the plan is to have other panels beneath or alongside the SBNI. That will be a good operational model that will provide flavour from different parts of Northern Ireland, but the role of chairperson will require many more than three days a month.

The Chairperson:

Thank you for your oral evidence and written material, which is much appreciated and will prove extremely useful as the Committee scrutinises the Bill. It is particularly useful to have one of the main players represented in such strength.