



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Health, Social Services and  
Public Safety

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service  
Briefing

12 December 2012

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety

### Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service Briefing

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

Ms Sue Ramsey (Chairperson)  
Mr Jim Wells (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Roy Beggs  
Ms Paula Bradley  
Mr Mickey Brady  
Ms Pam Brown  
Mr Gordon Dunne  
Mr Samuel Gardiner  
Mr Kieran McCarthy  
Mr Conall McDevitt  
Ms Maeve McLaughlin

**Witnesses:**

Dr Joe McKee	Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service
Mr Jim Wallace	Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service

**The Chairperson:** Is the Chief Fire Officer still on leave?

**Mr Jim Wallace (Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service):** He is on sick leave at the moment.

**The Chairperson:** I take this opportunity to welcome Mr Jim Wallace, chief executive of the Fire and Rescue Service; and Dr Joe McKee, chairman of the Fire and Rescue Service board. At our last meeting, we asked for a paper for this meeting providing an update on the actions that have been taken by the Fire and Rescue Service since the publication of the four reports that we have been discussing. However, we have not yet had an update on where things sit. I assume that you will update us in your oral evidence. So, rather than get into specific questions now, I will open it up to you to do your presentation, and then we will go to members' questions and comments. Thanks very much for coming here today.

**Dr Joe McKee (Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service):** Good afternoon, Chairman and members. We are here today to have a further conversation, as honestly as we can, about the situation in which our organisation finds itself; to tell you what we have done to remedy the position; and to give you confidence and an assurance that the community continues to be safeguarded 24/7 by an institution that has integrity and high public service values at its core.

Many of the challenges that have come to the public's attention in recent months, and that have confronted the board that was set up by Michael McGimpsey at the end of 2010, stretch back a number of years. In the financial year 2008-09, there was a major corporate governance issue around

irregular payments to non-uniformed directors that led to the then board and its chair being replaced by an interim board. That interim board was, in turn, replaced by the present board. So, during the past three years, as a consequence of that sequence of events, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) has been in a period of transition. From the retirement of Colin Lammey as Chief Fire Officer in 2010 to the present day, there have been three Chief Fire Officers and four chairs. In my view, all of this has been unsettling for the organisation and has had an obvious impact on leadership, stability, management effectiveness and, recently and most damagingly, on staff morale across the service.

Members of the Assembly Health Committee and other MLAs have been generous in their tributes to our front line firefighters, acknowledging the quality of their service and the dedication and courage they have shown over recent decades. We must not lose sight of that calibre of service, delivered by an exceptional community-based organisation.

The reports that the Northern Ireland Assembly received on 16 October reflect some of the organisational turmoil that members of staff, specifically those based at the headquarters in Lisburn, have experienced in the past two and a half years and possibly even longer.

In my view, we have significant challenges in certain key areas. Our most challenging area concerns people and workplace culture. The recent whistle-blower report notes that there are ongoing and significant tensions among headquarters staff, which are having a negative impact on the effective management of the organisation.

We are a public service that brings together at headquarters those who wear uniforms and those who do not. We have some people who are paid a great deal of money for their skills and the heavy responsibilities that we readily expect them to meet, and we have others who receive very modest wages. We have some people who are viewed by members of the public as heroes, and again quite rightly so, and we have others whose daily task is to sit behind a desk or drive a van. We have some highly ambitious and hugely motivated individuals, and we have others who find themselves in jobs that are critically important to the organisation but have very little glamour attached to them.

We also know that we are missing key people in important roles in the organisation, although Jim and I are addressing that now. We are really good at responding to emergencies, but we are not as good as we could be at policies and processes. Many of our policies are outdated or are no longer fit for purpose, because workplaces have changed across the employment sector in recent years.

The fire service, in my view, is big on tradition, and that can be a strength and a barrier. The operational side of the service is safeguarded by longstanding checks and balances and by safe working practices that have stood the test of time. If there is a tendency to be conservative and risk-averse across the organisation, it may be rooted in how we deliver our core business. However, the pace of change on the business side of the fire service must keep up with best practice in the rest of the public and private sectors, so there are obvious tensions in that to be confronted. My board colleagues are eager to see improvements in how the business of the service is managed.

A complex organisation, such as a modern fire and rescue service, demands the highest calibre of leadership and management. The model of command and control at a big emergency incident requires courage, skills and judgement of the highest order. Similarly, looking after an annual budget of between £70 million and £80 million, and providing effective management and inspiring leadership to over 2,000 staff in a range of disciplines calls for executive skills and attributes that are difficult to provide or to be found in any organisation. One of the biggest challenges that my board has experienced has been getting the right information that we, as board members, need to fulfil our scrutiny role. At times, we feel that we get too much, yet at others we have had very little feedback on crucial issues. Of course, all of this has been on top of conducting our main business of seeing that we have an effective fire service day by day.

Finally, a key issue that relates to leadership management is accountability. In the past two years, we have worked hard to ensure that we have genuinely effective internal and external accountability in place. My board colleagues and I have worked hard at the core business of our public responsibility, which is to see that the community is safe and well educated about fire and road deaths. To that end, we are very satisfied to have seen fire numbers continue to fall in the past year. Working with other emergency services and public agencies, the past calendar year saw the lowest number of road deaths since records began.

On taking over our duties, we were confronted initially with large numbers of senior and middle-ranking officers — around 170 — in temporary ranks that we have since filled. We have revised our committee structures. We have worked through one major report and are working through another. We have also fulfilled the normal corporate governance responsibilities for annual business plans, management statements, standing orders, and so on. We have looked at the Northern Ireland Community Safety College in Desertcreat, the 2013 World Police and Fire Games and many other issues.

We are acutely aware of many of the serious issues that the recent whistle-blower report highlighted about the way that the organisation was managed in the past and more recently. However, we have confronted that head on, by taking the unprecedented step of splitting the roles of Chief Fire Officer and chief executive, albeit for a fixed period. In Jim Wallace and Chris Kerr, we think that we have two first-class individuals who are committed to working closely with the board to deliver a programme of comprehensive cultural change management across the service. I can assure anyone that my entire board is immensely proud to be part of this organisation. We are gravely disappointed that much of the hard work and time that we have devoted to NIFRS has been frustrated by a combination of factors, some of them out of our control or rooted in a time before we took over. Equally, however, we are determined to see this thing through, to fix what is deficient in the organisation and to restore community confidence and staff morale to where they ought to be. Thank you.

**The Chairperson:** OK; thank you. I think that it is important to mention again that any of the stuff that we do in the Committee or in the Assembly is in no way a reflection of the work that is done daily by fire service personnel. They are heroes who at times put their lives in danger to save others. We have been very careful to highlight that fact and that what is happening does not reflect on the work of the front line staff. However, the reality is that it is having an impact, and you mentioned staff morale in your closing remarks, Joe.

**Dr McKee:** What is the protocol for how we address each other? Do we use first names?

**The Chairperson:** You can call me Sue and I will call you Joe, or I will call you Chair and you can call me Chair. *[Laughter.]*

**Dr McKee:** I am comfortable with first names, if that is OK.

**The Chairperson:** Yes. The reality is that this is having an impact on staff morale. It is important that although some of these issues have been in the ether for years, unless you deal with them, some of the rumours, accusations and counter-accusations become true. As I say, unless this is dealt with properly and put to bed, it continues to grow.

**Dr McKee:** We have had recent anecdotal evidence that firefighters are having comments made to them, but another example was brought to my attention recently in which support staff, who may be identified, for example, by wearing one of our fleeces, are attracting very negative and hurtful comments from members of the public on the street. We are anxious to get this sorted out.

**The Chairperson:** I am aware of that. MLAs suffered the same thing when the press looked at the expenses of MPs in England. We suffered as well; it does have an impact.

Just to get into some of the specifics: our job is to scrutinise and hold people to account. We are talking about a public body that is spending public money. That is why it is important that we get this done as quickly as possible. If mistakes are made, we rectify them. If people are at fault, we deal with that. The sooner we deal with this, move on and hold people to account, the easier it will be for everyone.

You talked about challenging this matter and dealing with it head-on. Have you submitted proposals to the Department for how you will implement the various reports' recommendations?

**Dr McKee:** Yes. I have a sizeable document here in which we have combined all the recommendations from the various reports that have come out, the whistleblower report —

**The Chairperson:** When did you submit that to the Department?

**Dr McKee:** We did so by the date it was required, 30 November: in fact, it was a couple of days before that.

**The Chairperson:** Can we have a copy?

**Dr McKee:** Yes. We also gave interim feedback by 9 November, so we were keen to get moving on this. It is quite complex, and there is a fair amount of overlap because we have two or three reports. For instance, there are references to our policies which I talked about in my preamble. So, there are a whole lot of recommendations around the review.

**The Chairperson:** Have you had any meetings with the Department since you gave it the hard copy? The Department says that it would need to look at the report to see whether it is content.

**Mr Jim Wallace (Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service):** I had another meeting with the Department yesterday. As Joe said, the entire recommendation schedule was submitted to the Department. In addition to what has already been submitted, I have committed to give the Department a more detailed breakdown of the whole governance issue and how our recommendations will be taken forward, not just from the board's point of view, but how they will be implemented and adopted, through me as the responsible officer, through the management team and into the improvement team with the board members nominated to attend sittings of that. It will set out the reporting lines and the timescales, with the Department, the board and the corporate management team all fitting in. It is a much more detailed breakdown than the high-level response that we have already provided to the Department.

**The Chairperson:** Does that include the ongoing grievances that you have committed to deal with, Jim?

**Mr Wallace:** It will include everything that is outstanding as of the date that all the reports were published.

**The Chairperson:** Have any grievances been dealt with or looked at since you came into post?

**Mr Wallace:** Since I came into post, I have heard two and managed to avoid one having to be heard by other issues. I am trying to organise to hear the big ones, those that relate to whistle-blowing, as we speak. I have offered to hear them all before Christmas, as you are aware, from comments from the Minister and the Department. I have had responses from individuals, which mean that I will be unable to hear the grievances in the short period between now and Christmas, but they will be heard.

There is a request that one particular set of grievances will not be heard by me. That is in relation to a previous agreement put in place some months ago. However, they are in being, and the big ones, which I had hoped to resolve before Christmas, will now be resolved early in the new year.

**The Chairperson:** OK. When you were in front of the Committee, you said that you were looking for an external person to take an independent overview. Is that happening? Has it happened, or have you appointed someone to do that piece of work?

**Mr Wallace:** That is almost concluded. I met the external assessors on 21 November. Again, the timescale that I gave for the completion of the work was four weeks. That is just about up, as you can work out, and I am anticipating their draft report before the Christmas break, that is, some time next week.

**The Chairperson:** Chairman, in your opening address, you mentioned that you do not have key people in post. Has the position of HR director been filled permanently?

**Dr McKee:** I am happy to say that we are holding interviews for that position next week. We have also shortlisted the applicants for the post of director of planning. So, the overall corporate management team has three non-uniformed directors, and two of those posts are being filled at the moment. We hope that both individuals will be in place before the end of March. That will be a significant improvement in the governance of the organisation.

**The Chairperson:** OK. When the board met on, I think, 30 October, did it recommend or come to the view that it would implement disciplinary procedures on the back of the reports?

**Dr McKee:** The board is keen that we look at potential disciplinary cases on the basis of any evidence of wrongdoing that is provided to us.

**The Chairperson:** Do the reports not give you all the evidence you need? Based on the recommendations from the four reports, is there any suggestion or possibility that people will be disciplined?

**Dr McKee:** Again, the team we have in place is looking at this in a dispassionate way, and it will give us advice on that.

**The Chairperson:** So who makes the decision: the board or you?

**Dr McKee:** The board will make the decision. It will come to the board.

**Mr Wallace:** My personal interpretation of the reports and what has come out in the recommendations — again going back to the previous Health Committee meeting that we attended and to what Joe said — is that the basis on which any discipline is implemented or undertaken will be evidence based. My view, from interpreting the reports as they stand, is that there was not sufficient evidence on the face of those reports to warrant or pursue discipline. However, I think that what the overview will give us, having come in and looked at the reports almost individually, is some reassurance that either I have got it wrong, which I hope is not the case, or indeed, that my initial reaction to them was, in fact, correct.

**The Chairperson:** Is that the independent one?

**Mr Wallace:** Yes. It will come back to me and, as Jim said, it will then be referred to the board for recommendations. If there is any evidence or conclusion that challenges my thinking and that of others, rest assured, that will be taken on board. The whole point of having the added dimension to the interpretation of the reports is to make sure that we get it right.

**The Chairperson:** So, initially, you are of the opinion that nobody should be disciplined based on the four reports.

**Mr Wallace:** On the basis of what was presented in the reports, I was not 100% certain that there was an out and out, clear path for disciplinary action.

**The Chairperson:** So, I take it that if an external independent assessor says to you, "I think that you are wrong", you will be big enough to say, "I have got that wrong, so I will discipline", or will you bring the recommendations to the board, which will then say, "We do not agree with you."?

**Mr Wallace:** Absolutely; that is the nature of it. That is the whole point of having the external assessment. I may miss some of the subtleties, if there are specific operational elements in the reports that I, understandably, have not got clear insight into.

**The Chairperson:** The perception out there, rightly or wrongly, is that there has been no internal accountability of senior management in the Fire and Rescue Service for a long time. There is also the perception, when these reports were brought to the fore, that that should have been the end of it. Granted, other information has come into the public domain, and so other inquiries are taking place. However, the perception is that it went on; there has been a report, but that nobody is going to be disciplined or get their card marked.

**Dr McKee:** No one has said that. What we have said —

**The Chairperson:** If that is the initial response of the chief executive, when will we know whether it is the final decision?

**Mr Wallace:** As I touched on, the report should be with us in the early part of next week. We will take that straight to the first meeting of —

**The Chairperson:** Will you let us know?

**Mr Wallace:** Absolutely, particularly if I have got it wrong.

**The Chairperson:** Who approved the former Chief Fire Officer's application for retirement?

**Dr McKee:** It came to me, and I took it to the Department and discussed it with the permanent secretary. There was no evidence at that time of gross misconduct, any other breach of his contract or anything that would have come anywhere near criminal proceedings. So, it was agreed by the accounting officer in the Department and me that he would be allowed to go. He had completed 36 years. I read the transcript of the previous meeting of this Committee. There was no package and there was no question of early retirement. Mr Craig left with his entitlement; the pension to which he was entitled after 36 years, part of which he would have commuted as a lump sum.

**The Chairperson:** Was it put to Mr Craig, and these are my words: "I think that it would be easier if you just take retirement now"?

**Dr McKee:** No, absolutely not.

**The Chairperson:** Did that proposal or suggestion come from the Department as an option?

**Dr McKee:** In March, I drew to his attention a number of concerns that I had about confidence in corporate management in the senior management team and several significant issues around his leadership and management style. I simply asked him how he might address those. Shortly afterwards, he decided off his own bat to retire.

**The Chairperson:** Was such a proposal mentioned in the discussion that you and the permanent secretary had?

**Dr McKee:** No, the permanent secretary's discussion with me was after the letter of retirement came in.

**The Chairperson:** Sorry, can you repeat that.

**Dr McKee:** The discussion I had with Dr McCormick was after the letter of retirement came in from Mr Craig.

**The Chairperson:** That is not my recollection of the discussion, but I will come back to it.

**Mr McDevitt:** Welcome, gentlemen. Joe, when did you become chair of the board?

**Dr McKee:** In January 2011. I was three months late coming in because I was working notice in my previous employment.

**Mr McDevitt:** Had you served on many public boards before joining the Fire and Rescue Service?

**Dr McKee:** I had.

**Mr McDevitt:** What boards have you served on?

**Dr McKee:** The board of the Grand Opera House, the board of the Ulster Youth Orchestra, the board of the Tyrone Guthrie Centre in Annamakerrig, County Monaghan.

**Mr McDevitt:** You have considerable experience of serving on public bodies.

**Dr McKee:** Yes.

**Mr McDevitt:** I want to come back to the issue that you were discussing with the Chair, namely the fire service's corporate response to the reports.

The substantial report is that of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's audit investigation of alleged irregularities at the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, which makes findings against nine allegations. It partly, largely or fully substantiates seven of the nine allegations. It fully substantiates an allegation of unapproved bonus payments, it largely substantiates an allegation of unapproved sponsorship, it fully substantiates an allegation around the completion of the Department of Finance and Personnel's frauds return and an investigation of alleged irregularity, it largely substantiates an allegation about staff-cost implications and adherence to HR policy, it largely substantiates allegations about the suspension of a whistle-blower and it partially substantiates an allegation on responsibility for fraud policy, the initiation of an investigation and control of finance system administrative rights. How much more evidence do you need to take some action against people?

**Dr McKee:** We have received the report and are looking at it. We need to have a very measured response. One of the most worrying allegations referred to financial information being given to the board a few years ago. That was totally unsubstantiated.

**Mr McDevitt:** I am dealing with the ones that have been substantiated, largely substantiated or partly substantiated. The overwhelming majority of the allegations made were proven to be either partly or substantially true. Therefore, I am asking you how much more evidence you need before you will take action to deal with the individuals who are so clearly responsible for those allegations being that way.

**Dr McKee:** We are addressing our actions on the professional recommendations that came from this report, the report of the internal auditors at the Department. None of the recommendations specifies that there are discipline issues to be taken against staff. There is a wide range of recommendations about our controls within the organisation and about the fitness of our policies and the speed at which we conduct certain bits of business, but there are no recommendations specifically on discipline.

**Mr McDevitt:** That is not quite what you have just told the Chair. You told her that you have commissioned independent reviewers to give you a recommendation on whether there are grounds.

**Dr McKee:** Some of that, Conall, I might say, is to do with other things; say, the report around whole-time recruitment. There might be issues in there. It is not just this one report that the external people are looking at.

**Mr McDevitt:** I understand that but I am trying to get to the bottom of this. It would not necessarily need to involve the staff. What these reports, in their totality, tell you is that there was a systemic failure in governance at the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. Correct?

**Dr McKee:** There were some failures, yes.

**Mr McDevitt:** Substantial failures, and those failures obviously, by definition, must have been within the senior executive team.

**Dr McKee:** A significant number of them date back a number of years.

**Mr McDevitt:** They are going to be failures by senior executives in the organisation, by definition.

**Dr McKee:** One of those individuals has already left.

**Mr McDevitt:** You do not believe that there were failures by senior executives in the organisation?

**Dr McKee:** I do.

**Mr McDevitt:** There are also going to be failures of governance at board level.

**Dr McKee:** There have been.



**Mr McDevitt:** Right.

**Dr McKee:** I have to say that those have been well-documented. A number of them have been through the public domain and audit. They have been challenged.

**Mr McDevitt:** So, your senior executive team today has at work the following people: Jim Wallace, the director of finance as I understand it, and one assistant chief fire officer who is acting up to the Chief Fire Officer role, doing the Chief Fire Officer's duties while he is unwell, and there is another more junior fire officer acting up to the role of assistant chief fire officer.

**Mr Wallace:** No. There is a substantive assistant chief.

**Mr McDevitt:** There is another substantive?

**Mr Wallace:** The interim Chief Fire Officer.

**Mr McDevitt:** OK. So it is at less than 50% capacity.

**Mr Wallace:** The fraction is about five eighths capacity.

**Dr McKee:** I have asked the chief executive whether we are safe in operating this way and we have spoken to the government adviser in London. If Mr Kerr is off for a short period, we are OK. If he is off for a longer period than that, we will have to take remedial action. However, we are coping and we have the resilience to deal with whatever comes along.

**Mr McDevitt:** The senior executive team still includes individuals who are at the centre of every one of the reports before this Committee. Do you believe that the senior executive team is capable of delivering the transformational change needed in order to come out the other side when it still includes individuals who are part of, or subject to, significant inquiry and substantiated findings?

**Mr Wallace:** Perhaps I may come in on this one. As things stand, the bottom line is "definitely not". If we are operating with a temporary director of human resources and we are light an assistant chief and a director of planning and performance, 37.5% of our corporate management team is not there. The impact of this on the corporate management team's activities means that we are not doing one of the key fundamentals of any corporate management team, which is to be pro-active. At the moment, all we are doing is being very reactive because we do not have capacity, stability and continuity within the corporate management team.

However, I will say that members of the corporate management team are working very hard within our present arrangements, although maybe not on the things that they would ideally want to be working on, because we are dealing with the issues that we are here today to discuss. We all have a clear shared perspective that we want to go forward with change. It will take time to get the people in post. We have ideas about where we need to go but we just do not have the capacity to do it at the present time. So, there is a real sense of frustration. However, as the chairman of the board touched on, we are keeping the service going, which, although not ideal, should provide some reassurance until we start to see the corporate turnaround.

**Mr McDevitt:** Jim wrote to you, Joe, as chairman of the board, some time — I guess — between 16 October and the beginning of November. He sent you a memo called 'Publication of Audit Investigation Reports Paper presented by Jim Wallace, Chief Executive'. At paragraph 2.8 of that memo, he outlined the steps that the organisation needs to take to turn things round. He stated:

*"In line with the expectations referred to in the letter, the corporate management team will have started working on draft proposals by 9 November, with the expectation that final proposals will be endorsed by the Fire and Rescue Service Board not later than 30 November."*

I take it that those are the proposals contained here. He went on to state in paragraph 3.24:

*"The board is asked to consider what governance arrangements they would consider appropriate in order to take any action plans forward."*

Can you tell me exactly what governance arrangements have been put in place to meet this that are different to what existed before 16 October?

**Mr Wallace:** Do you mean in respect of the combined recommendations?

**Mr McDevitt:** It is your recommendation; paragraph 3.24 of your paper to the chair of the board. The last paragraph states:

*"The board is asked to consider what governance arrangements they would consider appropriate in order to take any action plans forward."*

I am asking you this, Joe: what arrangements are in place?

**Dr McKee:** We are putting together a group of senior executives. There will be two board members who have volunteered to serve in that group, and they will meet separately each month. Their recommendations will come forward to the board. It will be a standing agenda item. It will be at the top of our list of actions each month. However, as a group, we still have to outline the hard detail of the corporate governance issues.

**Mr McDevitt:** So, you do not know yet.

**Dr McKee:** Not yet.

**Mr McDevitt:** OK.

**Dr McKee:** I have to say that at our last meeting in November in our southern area in Portadown we were four hours at our business, which included some of this. We also deal with the running and the scrutiny of the service month by month, so we are moving on this.

**Mr McDevitt:** One last question: did you ever travel in the Land Rover that is the subject of the allegation of inappropriate sponsorship?

**Dr McKee:** I did. I saw the vehicle twice. I saw it used at the Young Offenders Centre at Hydebank when we did one of our race events, which is a programme mostly for young men who are attracted by cars. The vehicle was covered in road safety images. It is a black vehicle, and it was plastered with images. There was an image of a firefighter with a set of hydraulic jaws cutting someone out of a car. It was stylised, and it said, "Cut it out before we cut you out", which is one of our standard road safety messages. The second time that I saw it was when I was taken with the Chief Fire Officer to do his annual inspection of the volunteer crew on Rathlin Island. We travelled in the vehicle to Rathlin and back again.

**Mr McDevitt:** What livery was on the side of the vehicle the day that you went to Rathlin?

**Dr McKee:** Exactly as I have outlined: it had road safety messages.

**Mr McDevitt:** Was the name of a supplier on the side of it?

**Dr McKee:** Oh, yes; it was. There was our corporate badge, and there was the sponsor credit for the people who supplied the vehicle to the advertising agency. I have to say —

**Mr McDevitt:** What company was that?

**Dr McKee:** Charles Hurst.

**Mr McDevitt:** Did it not seem strange to you that you were driving around in a vehicle sponsored by Charles Hurst?

**Dr McKee:** No.

**Mr McDevitt:** It did not seem strange to you, as the chair of a public authority?

**Dr McKee:** I have been involved in the arts for most of my career. I know what sponsorship is involved.

**Mr McDevitt:** With the greatest respect, this is a public body.

**Dr McKee:** It is, but I have worked in the public sector in the arts and education. The logo on the vehicle was proportionate. It was not a huge commercial credit but it was there. The vehicle made a huge statement about one of our aspects of public safety. How the vehicle was got is another story altogether.

**Mr McDevitt:** You did not think that there was anything strange about jumping into a jeep that had Charles Hurst's name displayed prominently on the side?

**Dr McKee:** It was not displayed prominently. It was there, but I thought that it was proportionate. On that occasion, I did not know that the vehicle had been in the service before. I did not know any of that context.

**Mr McDevitt:** How did you react when you read about the vehicle's provenance and history and how it had come into the service?

**Dr McKee:** I did not read anything about it. I was told when I came back that the vehicle had a history. I asked the fleet manager whether it was one of our vehicles and whether it was insured. I asked the chief to outline its history to me. I spoke to the director of planning about the acceptance of corporate sponsorship such as that. Concerns had been expressed initially by Mr Lammey when he was chief, and I instructed Mr Craig to have the vehicle removed.

**Mr McDevitt:** Did he?

**Dr McKee:** He did. Well, I believe he did.

**Mr Gardiner:** Thank you for your presentation thus far. Among the conclusions of your paper, it states that 11 improvements were recommended. It states that only four have been implemented and that there are five remaining.

**Dr McKee:** Sorry. Which paper is this?

**Mr Gardiner:** Your report. Maybe you do not have the same one; do you not?

**The Chairperson:** They are aware of it. Just read out the top part on the other page, Sam.

**Mr Gardiner:** "The NIFRS Internal Audit review of stores." Have you got it with you?

**Dr McKee:** No.

**Mr Gardiner:** It states:

*"An NIFRS Internal Audit review of stores, carried out in August 2011 identified weaknesses in the stores systems and made a total of eleven recommendations to improve control. A follow up exercise took place in May 2012 and four recommendations were found to have been implemented. Five of the remaining recommendations relate to the proposed link between the stock and procurement systems. Work started to create an interface between the two systems in April 2011 however this has not yet been completed and 16 staff continue to manually update".*

**Dr McKee:** I am sorry; you have the advantage on me. Is this the second investigation into stores management and stock control?

**Mr Gardiner:** Yes.

**Dr McKee:** Is it paragraph —

**Mr Gardiner:** It is at paragraph 12 of the conclusions.

**Dr McKee:** My understanding is that we have a senior uniformed officer with line management responsibility of the stores. I know that a lot of work has been done on control issues. I cannot give you a definitive answer on how many of the recommendations have been followed up on. However, we are anxious about scrutiny and control issues in the stores.

**Mr Gardiner:** Your report states that four recommendations had been implemented and that there are five remaining that have not yet been completed. What are the five that are remaining? There is a total of 11. You seem to be dealing with only nine. There are still five of that nine to be dealt with.

**Mr Wallace:** I will make a couple of observations. The integration of the two systems has not been completed. As the chair said, we have taken that on board as a priority. It has been outstanding, and it has been flagged up.

**Mr Gardiner:** That is exactly why I am raising it. It has been outstanding for too long, and you have not yet completed it.

**Mr Wallace:** That is correct. A number of other recommendations have been outstanding for some time. The criticality of that is reflected in the priority that we have given to making it happen. Discussions are already ongoing with IT suppliers. I was just trying to find the update of that in the recommendation schedule. I can give you a more specific and detailed breakdown on each of those if that would be helpful.

**Mr Gardiner:** To be quite honest with you, I would like to see you doing your work a bit more thoroughly if you want to get over this difficulty that you find yourselves in. There is a weakness somewhere that needs to be dealt with.

**Mr Wallace:** Again, I do not disagree with the sentiment of your view. From our own perspective, in trying to take it forward, it really has been a case of prioritising the risks that exist in the organisation in relation to every single outstanding recommendation, irrespective of the source of the reports. That is one that, as you say, has been outstanding for too long, and we recognise that.

**Mr McCarthy:** Thanks very much for your presentation. Joe, you said that you had watched the last proceedings of this Committee, when we had the permanent secretary, the Minister and another official. Is that correct?

**Dr McKee:** No, I heard part of that, because there had been an overlap with another Committee meeting at the same time.

**Mr McCarthy:** At that Committee, first of all, I wanted to express our gratitude to the staff on the ground. We have fire officers in all our constituencies and they do an excellent job. As you said in your introduction, the morale of the staff is very low, and has been for a number of years. They say to me — and I said at that meeting a fortnight ago — that you are wasting your time and you are not going to get anywhere with what has happened. I must say that, judging from your responses to members today, it looks like that is the way it is going to be. That is very disappointing, because you spoke about accountability, and that is what it is all about. Someone somewhere has got to be accountable for what has happened in the service for so long. Will you give the Committee your best shot on whether there will be accountability? The chair talked about disciplinary action, etc. What we need is for someone or some people to be accountable so that I can go back to my fire officers and say that they were wrong; those responsible for the shenanigans that went on within the fire service have been disciplined or whatever.

**Dr McKee:** I am going to give a broad answer to that, initially. When the fire service was in the news all the time dealing with the situation on the street that it dealt with for so long, the whole focus was on the operational delivery of the service. As I said in my presentation, we have always been very good at responding but we are not so good at planning. There is a major cultural change needed in the organisation. As you may know, I was immensely proud to have been involved in the service when I was a student. I worked for a year in Belfast when things were busy, and then I did another 10 years before I moved into other areas of my career, so I know that the focus of the service has always been on ensuring that we get out into the community and deal with fires and rescues.

We need to confront a major cultural review of how the organisation works. I will give you an anecdotal example, Kieran. We have to have a corporate management team where everyone on that team is valued — someone in a suit is valued as much as someone wearing a uniform. It was said to me recently that sometimes in the past, if a couple of the uniforms were unable to turn up to the corporate management team, the meeting was cancelled, but if a couple of people in suits were not able to turn up, the meeting went ahead. The sort of message that that gives out is not good for a corporate management team. We have to acknowledge that, in this post-conflict period that we are in, a service that bore the brunt of a lot of what was thrown at it over many years now has to find a new maturity. As I said in the presentation, we have over 2,000 staff and a major budget of between £70 million and £80 million a year. We just need to get smarter at how we run it as a business. If we go through into the new year and we have three new non-uniform directors, and a chief executive carrying on, and if we can fill the vacancies that we will have on the uniform side, I think we will have a new team. I also think that will be Jim Wallace's message, given his experience outside.

The other weakness, Kieran, is that very few people in our service have served anywhere else. We have issues around the salaries that we pay our principal officers. We had one applicant for the job of Chief Fire Officer two years ago. Nobody else applied for the job because we pay less than in the rest of the UK. So, there are a lot of what I would term cultural issues that some of the big uniformed services in Northern Ireland have gone through but that we now will, hopefully with the Committee and Department's support. That will not happen in a few months; it will be a number of years before that mature, joined-up leadership style, which has been missing, can be created.

**Mr McCarthy:** But, going back —

**The Chairperson:** Sorry, Kieran; let Jim come in.

**Mr Wallace:** Perhaps it would be appropriate to let Kieran finish setting the context.

**Mr McCarthy:** Absolutely. I hear what you say, but had it not been for the whistle-blower in this instance, things might have just trundled on. Jim might not even have been here. I do not know where you were, Joe, when the whistle-blower came forward. That girl was treated abysmally, to say the least. At the last meeting, the permanent secretary admitted that he had been wrong to do what he did at the time. Had it not been for the whistle-blower, these things might well have been ignored. The Department's own audit investigation is horrendous, to say the least. There is no need for me to go over the Land Rover, the procedures and all of those things. They were substantiated. Where, for instance, were you? Were you the chair when the whistle-blower came forward with these —

**Dr McKee:** She did not come directly to the service; she went to the Department. I have to say, not in my own defence but in my own values, that when it was pointed out to me that the Land Rover had an unsound history, I immediately dealt with that. I also went in three days later to the corporate management team and said, "The chief has made a major error of judgement here. The rest of you now have to get in behind and work together as a team and get through this and be mature about the thing". Similarly, for the past few years, my board has had some very heated meetings with our executive to try to get the right information. One of our elected representatives asked, "How do we know what we need to know?". We have struggled to get the right level of information. The one benefit to some of the uncomfortable truths that we have had to deal with — through this report or the number of reports or, in the past few weeks, a number of anonymous letters that have come through — is that we are now getting information around areas that we took on trust or whatever in the past.

**Mr McCarthy:** So you have learned lessons —

**Dr McKee:** Absolutely; very painful lessons and very unsettling lessons, but lessons so significant that we have to change the culture.

**Mr McCarthy:** I go back to my original question: can you give the Committee an assurance that someone or some people will be held responsible, reprimanded or certainly made accountable for the fiasco in the fire service, which we all look up to? That is the bottom line.

**Dr McKee:** At the end of this process, yes, we will look at that. There is no question about that. However, I think that there is and has been a deep-seated culture of the organisation rolling along in a particular style that has now been arrested. The Minister said on 15 or 16 October that this is a

watershed. I can tell you that it is a very painful — an immensely painful — watershed for people such as me, who years ago had direct associations with the service. I was recently at a Christmas dinner for retired staff, and they are appalled about the reputational damage that they have been experiencing. At the weekend, I was at the funeral of someone I served with years ago in Ballymena. Again, people came forward to tell me that they had always left the house in the morning to serve their community with pride, and they wanted me to get that back in place.

**Mr McCarthy:** As long as the men and women in my community who serve the fire service can have confidence and see action being taken against those responsible. We are not going to see the progress that we all want until that is done.

**Dr McKee:** The most significant change to the organisation is sitting to my left.

**The Chairperson:** No pressure, Jim.

**Dr McKee:** That was a major change in the way the organisation is run.

**Mr McCarthy:** We gave our support to Mr Wallace and his colleague the last time you were here. I am disappointed that Chris has not been here. Why is that? Is it because of extreme pressure that has left the organisation down? I am concerned about that. We gave the two gentlemen our full support, and we still do. I do not know how long Jim has left on the job, but before he leaves, we want to see the fire service being able to look everybody in the eye and say, "We are acting on behalf of the community."

**The Chairperson:** Kieran, we are going to be back at this in the new year anyway.

**Dr McKee:** The board takes this very seriously, and we have had very positive meetings with our main representative body, which is the Fire Brigades Union. The union is completely in support of having the operational side of the service absolutely fit for purpose.

**The Chairperson:** I do not mean to be flippant, and I am glad to hear that the board is taking this seriously, but the reports have shown me that some people on the board were sleeping when some of this was going on. So, it is important that we send out a clear message that what was done was done, that people are going to be held to account — and, if needs be, disciplined — and that we will ensure that it cannot happen again. That is why we are here.

**Dr McKee:** Nobody on my board has been sleeping. We have had a number of very hot meetings where the lay members of the board have been absolutely challenging the executive about how they are managing their budgets, why things are not being delivered in time or whatever.

**The Chairperson:** With respect, Joe, we are in this position, so something has gone wrong.

**Dr McKee:** One of the main things that went wrong was that we did not get the right information and made assumptions. Also, in the first year, we spent so much time — when we came in, there was no Chief Fire Officer, there were no principal officers and there was not a single area commander in substantive post. That was a major undertaking. It is not an excuse. We rolled up our sleeves and filled those posts. The ball was allowed to slip, because our chief executive at that time should have said to the board, "We need to be moving heaven and earth to fill the human resources slot and the other support." That is what they do. The fire engines do not go out and in unless they are supported by wages, salary and human resources. We can take a hit on that side, but the focus was too much on the operational side.

**Mr Wells:** A couple of points. First of all, can I take it that, under the new dispensation, you will not be getting commercial sponsorship? That may, in itself, be entirely above board, but it looks extremely doubtful.

**Dr McKee:** Yes, we have learned the lesson from that.

**Mr Wells:** So, there will not be a repeat of the vehicle incident where there was what seemed to be, and I will be very careful here, a form of commercial sponsorship that could have led to people doubting your impartiality when dealing with that company.

**Dr McKee:** Yes, there is no doubt about that.

**Mr Wells:** Is the allegation true that the company that sponsored that vehicle, which Colin named at the last meeting and you confirmed as being Charles Hurst, also had a tyre contract with the fire service?

**Dr McKee:** The report is clear that no fire service staff were involved in evaluating that tender and that the two things were quite separate.

**Mr Wells:** Can you see the public concern about a large vehicle going down the street with "Charles Hurst" emblazoned on it? When people learn that a major contract to supply tyres to the fire service happens also to be held by that company, can you see how they put two and two together and get five?

**Dr McKee:** Yes, I can see that.

**Mr Wells:** Are you taking steps to ensure that that does not happen again?

**Dr McKee:** Yes. It happened at the time. Colin Lamme, as chief, was sensitive to that public perception and ordered the vehicle to be taken away. As I said, the two instances where judgement was called into question were when Mr Craig allowed the vehicle to come into the yard without having had a conversation with his boss about it, and not getting rid of it when he was told to.

**Mr Wells:** Again, the advertising contract was with Ardmore.

**Dr McKee:** Yes.

**Mr Wells:** Again, the sheet is heavily redacted, but everyone knows that it was with Ardmore. Was there any connection between the vehicle being stored in Carryduff and Ardmore being headquartered in Carryduff?

**Dr McKee:** I do not know. I cannot answer that.

**Mr Wells:** I am not making any accusation. I just noticed that there was a bit of a coincidence.

**Dr McKee:** I simply asked that it be removed, and it was.

**Mr Wells:** I understand that it was removed to Carryduff.

**Dr McKee:** It went to a lock-up somewhere.

**Mr Wells:** I am sure that there is probably nothing to that, but I just thought it an interesting coincidence.

**Dr McKee:** It was sourced by them and it came from them. It did not come from the Land Rover dealership; it came through the advertising agency.

**Mr Wells:** Just to clarify: is there no relationship now between the fire service and Ardmore?

**Dr McKee:** No.

**Mr Wells:** That contract has ended —

**Dr McKee:** It came to an end.

**Mr Wells:** — and a new contract has been negotiated.

**Dr McKee:** Yes.

**Mr Wells:** Did any of this have any impact on the front line services in call-outs, rescues, accidents and all the other services that the fire brigade provides for the community? Was there any diminution of the quality of the service as a result of any of this?

**Dr McKee:** I do not believe so. We have very strong safeguards in place to see that we can deal with whatever is going on. Whether that is a flu epidemic or, as was the case in Rathfriland recently, a station being put out of use, or we have appalling weather conditions, contingencies are in place to safeguard the service.

**Mr Wells:** We are very pleased, by the way, with the very nice new station that we have got. The community is very happy with that. On a wider level, it worries me that you are getting a single applicant for senior positions that come up in the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. That indicates to me that the position is either not being advertised widely enough or that the package is insufficient to attract quality. It is interesting, for instance, that the police service and the prison service in Northern Ireland have both attracted external candidates. The other problem that I have with that is that being entirely reliant on internal candidates perpetuates some of the practices that may not be desirable, and you do not get a fresh input from people who come in from the outside and say, "Hold on here a minute; that would not be tolerated had I been working for Northumbria, Kerry, Norfolk or wherever." What have you done to address what seems to be a persisting problem?

**Dr McKee:** We have conversations with the Department. My predecessor as chair, on his last day, informed me that he wrote to the Department and said while we refuse — while the climate is such that we are not going to give our senior officers any more money for the responsibilities that they have — we will be in this position. We will continue to have one or two applicants for those key jobs, and that is a concern. However, it is a conversation that we need to have again in the new year. The difficulty is that we are in a time of public expenditure budgets flatlining.

**Mr Wells:** Do you trawl outside Northern Ireland?

**Dr McKee:** We do. We lost a senior officer a year and a half ago — one of our area commanders — when he left to go to a large metropolitan borough in England as an assistant chief. He told me that, within two years, he would earn more as an assistant chief than our chief, despite being two ranks lower. That is an economic reality. In the days when the Northern Ireland housing market was way behind that in GB, there were reasons why our people were considered to be well rewarded for their work, but that is not the case now. People simply cannot afford to come here on what we pay.

**Mr Wells:** The other issue — again, she has been named, but I am not going to name her here. It is well known who the chief whistle-blower is in this case. She was suspended following her allegations. Yet, there was a clear paper trail to show that she had complied with the criteria for reporting issues outside of the fire service. She had already informed fire service senior management of her concerns. That would have been known to the individuals who took those decisions. The questions must be asked: why was that allowed to happen, and have safeguards been introduced to make certain that it does not happen again?

**Dr McKee:** The suspension?

**Mr Wells:** The suspension, when it was already known that she had reported her concerns to senior management during an interview. That was well known to the person who decided to suspend her. By the way, I fully accept that someone should not have the right to do a whistle-blowing exercise without first going through the proper channels. That would totally undermine the authority of any board or senior management. However, in this case, she had done so, and that is recognised in the report. That issue has been substantiated in the report.

**Dr McKee:** I have to draw members' attention to allegation 11 in that part of the report. There were two aspects to the letter that Mr Craig sent to the whistle-blower. One was to do with the reporting of financial irregularities by whistle-blowing, and the other was to do with accessing financial files unapproved, with the potential for breaches of data protection. That is in the report. I cannot comment further on that, because this is still part of a live grievance. There is information in my report at paragraphs 182, 183 and 184, and members may wish to reflect on that.



**Mr Wells:** What is very clear is that the report recognises that the lady was not suspended because she accessed financial information that she should not have obtained. She was suspended because people were downright angry with her for having blown the whistle on other issues.

**Dr McKee:** This organisation is completely committed to the whistle-blowing principle.

**Mr McCarthy:** Now.

**Mr Wells:** Will the new policy make absolutely certain that before anyone is suspended for whistle-blowing a check is made to verify whether the person has already adhered to — *[Inaudible.]* — properly?

**Dr McKee:** Yes; we will do so, because there are recommendations on discipline and whistle-blowing. That is all in there.

**Mr Wells:** That will be a major step forward.

Finally, when will we reach a conclusion in all this? When will you be able to come before us and say, "All these issues have been dealt with and cleared up. So, we can move forward with a completely new system that makes certain we will never be back here again"? What is the timescale for that?

**Mr Wallace:** To be honest, I would not like to give a timescale. When you look at the breadth and depth of the issues, you see that they go to the heart of the organisation. We are almost having to rebuild a considerable amount of it. As I touched on, what we have to do in the short term is prioritise the biggest risks to the organisation within those recommendations, and tackle those first. We have already started that process, and I think that, by the end of this financial year, you will see significant movement on implementing a number of those recommendations.

In compliance issues around policy within the allegations and recommendations in the report, we talked earlier about accountability, and quite rightly so. We are addressing those key elements now. The accountability issues will be addressed, picked up, managed and owned individually and collectively. Those are our key priorities. So, by the end of the financial year, I think that the bulk of those issues will be addressed. That is what I feel needs to be taken forward.

In saying when the whole thing is complete, I do not know, and I do not necessarily know what that will look like. I think that the organisation will certainly look different; the way we do business will be slightly different; and the people doing the work may change. However, the one thing that, I hope, can be guaranteed is that the front line service will be as good as, if not better than, it is at present.

Perhaps I can make a personal observation and just set into context where we find ourselves. The disappointing part for me in my relatively short time is that although I am trying to look ahead, I am, regrettably, still looking at some of the back issues that we have to address before we can move forward. That is understandable. I think that we can manage the reputational damage that has already been inflicted on the organisation. As the chairman said, we are still delivering. However, I think that the relentless barrage of accusations and inquiries are not necessarily allowing us to step out of this and move on. If we can try to bottom out some of this fairly quickly, that will allow us to move forward and address the reputational damage, and to lift the morale and credibility of our staff. However, at the moment, that is very difficult.

You are right to put us on the spot, but it is quite difficult to give a timescale until we get a full handle on the work involved in delivering all the recommendations. We report back to the board on a monthly basis, and I certainly think that we will start to see some shift from where we are by the end of the financial year. I am sorry to be so vague, but I really do not know how long this will take.

**Mr Beggs:** I just want to go back to the issue of the suspension of the whistle-blower. The question is to Mr McKee. Would the board, or you as chairman, have been made aware that the whistle-blower was going to be suspended or was suspended? It is a very sensitive issue when someone who has whistle-blown is suspended, so would you have been made aware of that?

*(The Deputy Chairperson [Mr Wells] in the Chair)*

**Dr McKee:** I was made aware by the Chief Fire Officer that he intended to suspend Ms Ford, but he told me that it was on two counts. He is criticised in the report for the way in which the letter was framed. There were two elements to that. Again, that is a live grievance that has to be heard. Ms Ford has a grievance, and a third party has a grievance about the unauthorised accessing of files.

**Mr Beggs:** I am just saying that that is particularly sensitive, because some of the allegations refer to the then Chief Fire Officer. For someone who made those allegations to be suspended leaves a bad taste in my mouth. I was surprised when that happened. We have to let it run its course, and, hopefully, things will be put back together.

**Dr McKee:** My understanding was that the chief took legal advice as well. Human resources asked him whether he had taken legal advice, and we were led to believe that he had done so.

**Mr Beggs:** The lesson we have all learned from this is that we should not take anything for granted and we need to be certain. I want to move forward because I think there is a danger of getting stuck in the past. I note the fact that key officers are at an advanced stage of appointment in your new process. Hopefully, that will help you to build your new management team. At what point does the continuing temporary absence of your acting Chief Fire Officer become a concern, and when might the precautionary action that you have taken have to kick in?

**Mr Wallace:** The welfare of the individual is clearly of paramount importance in making sure that, when he comes back to work, it is appropriate that he comes back. As the chair suggested, the measures that we have put in place to provide the operational cover are short term. They will certainly see us through the festive period. Indications are that the interim chief may well be back next week. If that is not the case, we will revisit the arrangements. Rest assured that there will be no gap in providing the full operational cover.

**Mr Beggs:** In the actions of the board, you have rightly highlighted the lack of information coming to the board. It is not aware of issues and cannot then address them. However, there is always a danger of a board being an accepting board, just taking everything that comes in front of it and not being inquisitorial and questioning. I imagine that, through this process, the level of questioning from your board members has substantially increased in the information that is coming to you and whether they accept the information or seek further information. Have you seen the need for any additional training in the roles and responsibility of the current board members, other than the initial training that anyone would have got, to ensure that every board member is fully aware of their role and responsibility?

**Dr McKee:** There is no doubt about that. There has been ongoing training with them after their initial induction. The biggest tipping point has been that we are not going to rejig our various subcommittees, because they now know the organisation. It has taken two years for the board to get down into the detail. The major issue that we have is about getting the right information. Quite apart from what Sue was saying earlier about people sleeping, I can tell you that we have some very lively exchanges. At times I have had to say that we need to back off a little bit, because we got to the point where the executive felt that it could do nothing right because it was being seriously challenged. The relationship between the chair and the chief executive is also critical. You cannot always be snapping away at someone's heels, never letting up, because there has to be some degree of trust as well. I think we are much further down the road than we were, but it all comes down to what we get. We used to get far, far too much. We used to get telephone directories of information. I do not think that there was any subterfuge there to disguise stuff; it was simply done so that nobody could say, "You did not know. We did not tell you." Of all the public services, and given the position in 2008-09 that I outlined, when there was a complete change of board and chair, there is a nervousness in the service that we get things wrong. People cover themselves by providing all the information in the world. We keep saying that we do not need all that. We need an A4 sheet with bullet points to tell us what the salient features are. Now, we do get a very good structured framework every month on the operational side — on the turnouts and response times — but we need to be better at whittling down a lot of the other supporting information to the essentials.

**Mr Wallace:** To add to that, and consistent with what Joe said, there is an inherent and specific responsibility on me, as chief executive, to make sure, using my professional judgement, that the information and items going to that board are the ones that they should be getting, the ones that are of significant, strategic importance, the ones that they need to know, and the decisions that I need in order to mandate the rest of the organisation to deliver. That is one of the gaps that has been fairly significant, in present and previous times. Without standing in any judgement, the board can only

make decisions on the quality of the information and agenda items being presented to it. It is my responsibility to make sure that that works. The working relationship between the chair and the chief executive, which Joe touched on, is vital. I actually think that it has been very productive. I believe that we are starting to see a shift in the way that the board has been working and in the type of information and agenda items. There is work to do and work in progress, but I think that the signs of recovery are there.

**Dr McKee:** Recruitment and selection: we did training in November 2010 before we appointed the senior officers. We did ongoing corporate governance training from February 2011; health and safety training in November 2011; governance, risk management and assurance in February 2012; and a strategic planning awayday with the full board in April 2012. Individual members have gone on fraud awareness training, public accountability and governance training, accountability and control in central government, effective governance, the Nolan principles, governance training, tender evaluation training and a crisis communications seminar — that was a useful one. The chair of our risk management committee regularly attends Department events for the chairs and audit committees of all arm's-length bodies.

**Mr Beggs:** Thank you. There is a degree of reassurance in that. Hopefully, you will be able to pick it all up and put it into practice now.

**Mr Dunne:** Thanks very much, gentlemen, for coming here today. A lot of the issues have been clarified. First of all, I should say that we as a Committee are very supportive of the work that the fire service does out on the streets and roadways of the province. It does an excellent job. We should reassure its members that this investigation is not into them as individuals or into the work that they do for the public. It is, unfortunately, an inquiry into the senior management of the fire service, where there have been serious breaches. We need to make sure that it comes across clearly that we stand strongly behind the fire service and those who work out there with the public and do an excellent job. We are fully supportive of them.

Will you clarify what you see as the role of the board in relation to the day-to-day business that you deal with?

**Dr McKee:** The responsibility that we have is to see that the Northern Ireland public are aware of the risks from fire. That is done through advertising campaigns, home safety visits from our operational staff and all sorts of media opportunities. So, it is public safety and prevention. Also, we have a legislative role in protection to make sure that buildings satisfy government requirements; that they are safe for the people who work in them; and, when emergency workers turn up, that they are safe and protected from undue risks. Thirdly, it is about responding to emergencies. Increasingly, climate change is here —

**Mr Dunne:** Sorry, the role of the board, as such —

**Dr McKee:** That is our role: to scrutinise the service and see that those main blocks are in place — that is the job of the Fire and Rescue Service — and to hold the executive to account. The one thing we are not doing at the moment is another major responsibility, to look at the strategic direction of the service. Where should the service be in five years' time? Do we have the right people, equipment and appliances in the right places? So that is the thing that we need to get into, once we go through the quagmire in which we find ourselves at the moment.

**Mr Dunne:** Does the board, as a body, have a responsibility to scrutinise the senior management of the fire service?

**Dr McKee:** We do that on a monthly basis. The agenda —

**Mr Dunne:** How is that done? How is that carried out?

**Dr McKee:** The Chief Fire Officer is the director of operations, so he reports on how that is delivered. Human resources reports through either the subcommittee or the full board, and will give us the significant issues that they are dealing with. The director of planning will look at our corporate governance, our annual plan and that end of things. The finance director will bring us the figures for the month or predictions for the year ahead. So, it is scrutinised at director level.

**Mr Dunne:** So how did this major failure occur within the fire service, if this scrutiny was ongoing by the board — is it on a monthly basis?

**Dr McKee:** It is a monthly basis, absolutely. The committees meet every two or three months. I have to say, Gordon, that we can only scrutinise what we see.

**Mr Dunne:** Did you feel that you were not getting a lot of information?

**Dr McKee:** No. There may have been other things that were not brought to our attention.

**Mr Dunne:** So you felt that there was a risk of that? Earlier, you talked about the reports that you had not got. You had information. You said that there were officers who had not brought you information. What did you do about that, when people did not bring you information? Did you report it to anyone? I take it that, as chairman, you can take things up with the Department?

**Dr McKee:** We do that if there are major concerns. However, we are an arm's-length body and it is much better that we deal with those and that we actually say to someone, "Why were we not made aware of this?"

It is probably fair to say that I regret very much that the grievances have gone on as long as they have done. We will now make sure that the human resource committee will ask — and it has asked now — that on a monthly basis at the board and at its regular meetings, we will have an update of what the nature of the grievance is, where it is on any continuum and when it is due to be resolved.

**Mr Dunne:** Would it be fair to say that the board has the major responsibility — not, perhaps, you? A lot of it was probably before your time. However, the board has had major failings occur in relation to the business of the board. Was it perhaps a board that sat around, drank tea and had cosy meetings?

**Dr McKee:** No. Gordon, we do not sit around and drink tea.

**Mr Dunne:** Did they tell everyone how good they were and yet never really got down to the real business?

**Dr McKee:** No. That would be an unfair characterisation. There are very robust meetings.

**Mr Dunne:** Perhaps now. I appreciate that they are now, and I would expect that. The issues have been highlighted; it is very public. The public are talking about this, as you are very much aware. They are obviously looking to the board now to start doing its job properly. Obviously, there have been major failings within the board and in its role. How does the board report to the Department? This is where I really have a problem. How does the Department know what the board is doing? How is that monitored?

**Dr McKee:** I have just one last point. The board was asserting itself much more positively before those reports came out. During the period leading up to the time when I had a conversation with Peter Craig about leadership and management, there were certainly heated discussions about accountability and management of budgets, and underspends in particular. And that had gone back at least a year. So I can tell you that it is far from cosy. It is really very challenging. At times, I felt, it was almost too challenging, because —

**Mr Dunne:** It is now, but perhaps —

**Dr McKee:** No, it was challenging earlier as well. You have to take my word for that.

**Mr Dunne:** Why was there a failure to find out what was going on?

**Dr McKee:** I think that we inherited an agenda and a flow of information that may have been adequate in the past. We have transformed and changed that in the past two years, as we have grown into our knowledge of the organisation.

**Mr Dunne:** Jim, how do you think the board fell down in monitoring how the fire service performed?

**Mr Wallace:** It is very unfair of, and difficult for, me to stand in judgement over a board and a regime that I was not party to. For me, the relationship is simple. The board is there to make sure that the organisation is well run, not to run the business. That is the philosophy that I am trying to put in place in terms of what happens. To a degree, any board is only as good as the way the corporate management team (CMT) functions and runs the day-to-day business. From there, the issues are escalated to the board for consideration, and that is not the right way. If you look at the whole governance and accountability structure that was in place, you will see that it clearly did not work. If the CMT approach was not working, the inevitable outcome is that your board is not going to receive the substance and quality of agenda and discussion items that it needs.

I cannot comment on what the board of the time interpreted from and thought of what was taking place, because you would have to have been part of that at the time to make an objective view, and I clearly do not have that. All that I can say is that the foundations have been put in to make sure that there is an effective board/corporate management team relationship to try to move forward. There is a considerable amount of work to be done with the corporate management team on my part, not least of which is in relation to the lack of numbers on it at present. Already, we are starting to have significant items of business on our agenda, which will have a knock-on to the board, and also, I hope, greater scrutiny. Audits are fine; they look back. For me, it is about having greater scrutiny on the board, and, as Joe said, challenging me and other principal officers at the board table. That is what it is about. That is how it should work. That is where we want to be.

**Mr Dunne:** It obviously did not. Jim, managing culture change is going to be a major issue. How are you going about changing the culture of the management within the organisation? To me, a good organisation does not need whistle-blowing. A good organisation is open, honest and has an openness to how its business is carried out; people feel comfortable, feel that they can speak and are encouraged to speak because of that openness. Why was that not there? How are you going to change that?

**Mr Wallace:** Again, without being part of it and being immersed in it at the time, it is very difficult to give an interpretation or a view.

**Mr Dunne:** Is your role now to change that? We appreciate that it is a difficult task.

**Mr Wallace:** I will set this in a wider context. The place in which NIFRS finds itself is not that different from where many other fire services have been. I can certainly speak about Scotland and England, having worked in both. Looking back many years, the cultural aspects of this organisation are not that far removed from issues that were present in other services, albeit in a slightly different countrywide context. Those other services addressed it over a period time, mainly some time ago. I think you are right: culture change is probably the biggest challenge within this element of the work that is facing us. Clearly, some of the values and expectations that were portrayed at the top were not acceptable or appropriate in a modern day organisation — not just the fire service, any public sector organisation. Before I got here, the fire service had already, through some of the work that Chris was doing, started to redefine some of the values, priorities and ethos of the organisation. That is only as good as the way that we as a corporate management team demonstrate those values and expectations. We started to change our expectations of people and, equally, how we interact as principal officers, and how any officer — uniformed or non-uniformed — should be conducting themselves.

Whistle-blowing is a good example of where we have not got things right, because, for me, someone having to use the whistle-blowing procedure is almost a recognition that the system has failed. I hope to move away from that, and I hope that people will start to get away from not being afraid to challenge in the right way, at the right time and in the right manner; to say what they think; and their views to be sought, rather than them being told what to do. It is a gradual process of working with people in a holistic way rather than having the silos and individual compartmentalism that we still have an element of. What is encouraging, and the Chairman touched on this, is that we have 2,300 people and 99.5% of them want to move forward with this culture change. They are receptive. We have to give clear leadership. What that means is that we also have to set down the criteria of what our expectations and conduct and behavioural attitudes are, so that they will know what is acceptable. Again, that is an inherent responsibility for top management. I have to say also that the board is fully signed up to that approach and its principles.

**Mr Dunne:** Just one last thing. On reporting to the Department, how does the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service give assurance to the Department that all is well — that they are doing a good job and meeting their targets, and there are no issues further downstream?

**Dr McKee:** We used to have formal accountability and assurance meetings with the Department twice a year. After the corporate governance issue in 2008-09, that was increased to four meetings a year. Those are still in place, and that is the main forum. We also have, Gordon, an observer from the Department at every board meeting, and we have an observer at every subcommittee meeting. That was part of the measures that were set in place after the letdown on that corporate governance issue three years ago. So those are in place. I think that we are very closely monitored and scrutinised by our sponsoring Department.

**Mr Dunne:** The Department would or should have been aware of the issues that have now come to light?

**Dr McKee:** Yes, as I say, as part of the measures that were put in place, we have the Department present at all board meetings.

**Mr Dunne:** Since when did you say that was?

**Dr McKee:** Since 2008-09. That is, since the interim board was put in place, and then my board was put in place at the end of 2010 and start of 2011.

**Mr Dunne:** OK, gentlemen, thank you very much.

**Mr McDevitt:** I just want to clarify some things, following on from some of the things that you were asking. Joe, you said that Peter Craig told you that he was going to suspend Linda Ford. Do you remember exactly when that was?

**Dr McKee:** No. I do not remember the exact date. It was around the summer of last year. It was around the time that he and I went off to the World Police and Fire Games.

**Mr McDevitt:** OK. So, according to the audit investigation report, she was suspended in August 2011. So, I guess that that was just before she was suspended?

**Dr McKee:** Yes.

**Mr McDevitt:** She had written to you, though, on 25 July, because she cc'd you in on her whistle-blowing letter to the permanent secretary.

**Dr McKee:** Yes. I saw the responsibility for that as being Peter's. He was both chief executive and Chief Fire Officer, and he was the accounting officer for the organisation to the Department. I saw that as an executive matter for him to pursue.

**Mr McDevitt:** So, when you received her letter, in or around 25 July, you were aware that there was a whistle-blower, who was a relatively senior member of staff inside the organisation, making serious allegations?

**Dr McKee:** Yes.

**Mr McDevitt:** And you were aware that that letter had also been sent to the chairperson of the audit committee?

**Dr McKee:** Yes.

**Mr McDevitt:** Who was that?

**Dr McKee:** In our organisation, it is Alderman Geraldine Rice.

**Mr McDevitt:** And did you discuss that with her? A number of the allegations were financial allegations. It is her duty as chair of the audit committee to assure herself of the financial propriety of the organisation. That is a statutory duty as chair of the audit committee. Did you have a discussion with her about that letter?

**Dr McKee:** I do not recall a discussion at that time. As I said, it was over the summer period, and I was away for a part of that time.

**Mr McDevitt:** But these were not routine allegations; they were extremely serious. You received a letter which you knew was a copy of a letter going to the permanent secretary. You knew that she was invoking the whistle-blowing legislation. She told you that in the letter. You knew that it went to the chair of your audit committee. It also went to your chief finance officer (CFO), who, at the time, was also your accounting officer. Did you discuss the letter with the chair of the audit committee, or with the CFO? Or did either of them discuss it with you?

**Dr McKee:** No. Part of the consideration was around the manipulation of financial information coming to the board, which was one of the allegations which was subsequently unsubstantiated.

**Mr McDevitt:** No, forget about this; this is the benefit of hindsight. On or about 25 July, you get a letter in the post. You know that that letter has also gone to the CFO. You know that it has gone to the chair of the audit committee. You know that it has gone to the permanent secretary of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I am asking you, as chair of the board, whether you did not think that this might be something about which you may want to take the mind of the CFO, the chair of the audit committee or the permanent secretary of the Department on, given the allegations made in it.

**Dr McKee:** I think that after we came back from the World Police and Fire Games, I had discussions with the Department. However, I cannot recall having, at that time, specific conversations with Mrs Rice.

**Mr McDevitt:** What about Mr Craig?

**Dr McKee:** Oh yes, with Mr Craig.

**Mr McDevitt:** So, you discussed the letter with Mr Craig in or around 25 July?

**Dr McKee:** Yes.

**Mr McDevitt:** He then comes to you, a matter of weeks later, and says that he is now suspending this individual.

**Dr McKee:** On two counts.

**Mr McDevitt:** Did you not think it a bit strange that you had received a letter from a whistle-blower — invoking whistle-blower protection — about impropriety and allegations that affected Mr Craig, and two weeks later he comes to you and says, "Do you remember that whistle-blowing situation we have? I am suspending the woman". Did you not think that that was strange?

**Dr McKee:** I have to say again, Conall, that he did not suspend — the conversation that he had with me was not exclusively about whistle-blowing. It was seen as a cautionary suspension, and it was because there had been an allegation that there had been unauthorised and improper access of files.

**Mr McDevitt:** We know this; it is all in the report. But the fact is that this was the same person who you knew had just made whistle-blowing allegations and who had copied those to you, the chair of the audit committee and, as she was right and proper to do, the person affected, the chief finance officer. Two weeks later, that individual is telling you, "We're going to suspend her". That is strange. I mean, that would raise a question in any reasonable person's mind. It would particularly raise a question in the mind of the chairman of the board, would it not?

**Dr McKee:** As it was put to me, this was a cautionary suspension to protect the whistle-blower and the organisation — well, not the whistle-blower; Miss Ford and the organisation — because of the accessing of files. Now, I cannot discuss the details of that because a third party has subsequently put a grievance in about the accessing of financial files.

**Mr McDevitt:** We are not going anywhere near any grievance. This is to do with your conduct, that of the chairperson of the audit committee and the Chief Fire Officer at the time with regard to the whistle-blowing allegation. Are you saying to me that it was suggested to you that the whistle-blower was suspended for her own protection?

**Dr McKee:** Yes; that is what a cautionary suspension is for.

**Mr McDevitt:** Are you saying that the organisation's response to someone who had blown the whistle was to actually say, "Oh, well, we have a suggestion here that this individual might have done wrong, so we are going to suspend them for their own protection"?

**Dr McKee:** I, again, have to repeat that the suspension was not simply because Miss Ford had whistle-blown; it was because of the serious allegation, which has still to be heard, about the inappropriate accessing of files.

**Mr McDevitt:** I will not pursue this much longer, Chair, but there are a couple of other things that I need to ask.

Have you ever had a conversation with Geraldine Rice about her attitude towards the letter that she received on 25 July, as chair — and she is chair — of the audit committee, which is a very specific role in corporate governance? She has specific governance and directorial duties in that role. Did you have a conversation with her about that?

**Dr McKee:** I cannot recall.

**Mr McDevitt:** You have never discussed it with her?

**Dr McKee:** I may have done, but I cannot recall whether I did, and I do not want —

**Mr McDevitt:** So, you are chair of a board, and you guys get a letter making serious allegations, and you do not discuss the contents of the letter?

**Dr McKee:** I cannot recall the date on which I would have done that.

**Mr McDevitt:** You cannot recall the date on which you would have discussed it or whether you discussed it at all?

**Dr McKee:** I cannot remember. I cannot remember.

**Mr McDevitt:** Right.

**Dr McKee:** It did go to the Department and it did go to the Northern Ireland Audit Office. It was well covered —

**Mr McDevitt:** I understand. With the greatest respect, you are chairperson of the board; you are where the corporate governance buck stops. The individual affected and the individual in the dock in the whistle-blowing accusation is the accounting officer. It does not get much more serious than that. That same individual comes back to you two weeks later and says, "We are going to suspend this woman", and you agree to it.

**Dr McKee:** He told me that he had had legal advice.

**Mr McDevitt:** Did you seek legal advice?

**Dr McKee:** No. He is the chief executive of the organisation.

**Mr McDevitt:** Are you aware of the protections for whistle-blowers under the Public Interest Disclosure (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, for example? Are you aware of the duties on individuals who work with public bodies?



**Dr McKee:** The burden of what was put to me was that the cautionary suspension was on the basis of files having been accessed.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** I think that it is important to establish that. Dr McKee, at that stage, were you made aware that the other person implicated in the misuse of that information was not suspended, and that only Mrs Ford was singled out for that treatment?

**Dr McKee:** No, I was not aware of that at all. I did not even know who the third party was at that stage.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** So when did you become aware that another person had access to the confidential information?

**Dr McKee:** My understanding was that if there was impropriety, it was accessing the files. I do not know what the responsibility on the person receiving the information is.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Following on from Conall's point, it does seem very strange that, of the two people who apparently stepped over the line on the same issue, the person suspended was the one who had been very awkward by raising issues under the whistle-blower procedure, while the other one was left untouched. That immediately leads me to believe that that person was suspended not because she had access to the information but because she had blown the whistle on very uncomfortable matters.

**Dr McKee:** The third party did not access files without authority. Mr Craig's view was that the person who went into the system was the one putting the organisation and herself at risk.

**Mr McDevitt:** Mr Craig's judgement is a matter of public record.

May I ask the chairman of the board one last question? About an hour ago, you told the Committee that members of the board said to you:

*"How do we know what we need to know?"*

That sounds a bit like Donald Rumsfeld at his worst. Do you think that you know what you need to know? Do you think that you are capable of knowing what you need to know in order to do your job as chair?

**Dr McKee:** Yes; I think we are getting there.

**Mr McDevitt:** That is not the question I am asking. I am asking you this: do you know what you need to know?

**Dr McKee:** Somebody asked me whether I was in denial about what is going on in and around the organisation — I do not think so. I think that I have fair idea of what is going on. A lot of the allegations that have come out recently are anonymous. Letters have gone to MLAs and the Department. It is a great handicap to me and the board when people do not come forward and say, "Here is an issue that you need to know about".

**Mr McDevitt:** With the greatest respect, Joe, how would someone come forward to the board now, when the last time someone did so, you did not discuss their letter with any other member of the board, and that person then got, apparently for their own protection, a precautionary suspension — a suspension that was entirely proven to be without any grounds whatsoever. How do you think anyone in the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service will have any confidence in the current corporate management structure being credible in terms of handling a complaint after that happened?

**Dr McKee:** I think that we have moved on; I do. What I am saying is that I cannot remember a date. I may well have discussed it with Geraldine, and I will certainly check with her whether that is the case.

**Mr Gardiner:** I do not have a question. I just want just to record my thanks and appreciation to the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. It is coming up to Christmastime, when a lot of people can be burnt out of their homes. Your men and staff are there to help and rescue people, and that must

not go unnoticed. The vast majority of Northern Ireland people appreciate the fact that we could not live without you. There are more deaths every day on the roads and in the water but you are there, wherever you are needed.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** I think that we all concur with that. Someone once told me that if I learnt from my mistakes, I would be a genius. I think that we all want to record our appreciation for the outstanding work of your staff. We are very aware of the awful incidents in Dungiven and Armoy a few years ago, and of the danger your men and women put themselves in. Equally, the Committee wants to see you really striving to ensure that the lessons from this series of incidents are well and truly learnt and implemented. The task now is to rebuild the reputation of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and to reassure the public.

Thank you for being candid and giving us very forthright answers to what were quite difficult questions.

**Dr McKee:** I say this to Sam: as well as the front line operational staff, we have over 200 support staff, and they have borne the brunt of a lot of these criticisms. They are, by and large, wonderful and lovely people. However, we do have difficulties and one or two cliques. As Jim suggested, people need to be loyal to the organisation, not to cliques or groups. We all have to be in the same place. Nevertheless, we do have very loyal staff.

I say this to Conall: the whole issue around the grievances has caused great distress and unhappiness. We are committed to resolving that as soon as possible, and we take it very seriously. Thank you.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Thank you very much. We have given this quite a bit of going over, and we appreciate your time.