



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

North West Regional College Action Plan:
DEL and NWRC

19 February 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Robin Swann (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sammy Douglas
Mr Phil Flanagan
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Chris Lyttle
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mr Andy Cole	Department for Employment and Learning
Dr Mary Mclvor	Department for Employment and Learning
Mr Gerard Finnegan	North West Regional College
Mr William Laverty	North West Regional College

The Chairperson: I welcome Dr Mary Mclvor, the director of further education for the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL); Mr Andy Cole, head of corporate governance and accountability for the Department; Mr Gerard Finnegan, the temporary chair of the board of governors of the North West Regional College (NWRC), and Mr William Laverty, change manager for the NWRC. Folks, you are very welcome this morning. A special welcome to Gerard, as this is your first time here as temporary chair of the board of governors of the NWRC. Mary, over to you. We have your briefing documents, so maybe we could have a 10-minute lead-in.

Dr Mary Mclvor (Department for Employment and Learning): Yes, that is OK. I will say something, I will ask Andy to give a little bit more detail and then Gerard will put the college's view.

It is now almost one year since the review of industrial relations at the NWRC was published. I think it is worth briefly recapping some of the major actions that have taken place since then. The college has confirmed and reaffirmed its commitment to the McConnell report and its recommendations. The college has appointed a change manager — William is with us today — as a dedicated resource to manage the process.

As I mentioned the last time I was here, the chair of the governing body, Bertie Faulkner, resigned on 31 December, and Gerard Finnegan has been appointed as temporary chair until 31 March. A public appointments competition is under way for a new chair. Both the previous chair and the temporary chair have worked tirelessly and with great energy to make progress on the McConnell report and on the action plan. We will get into a little bit more detail on that with you today. The principal, Seamus

Murphy, confirmed his intention to retire at the end of this academic year, and the college will run a recruitment exercise for his successor when a new chair is appointed.

The college is now six months into the implementation of the action plan. Members can see the progress that has been made and the areas in which progress is behind schedule. Obviously, the Department is monitoring in depth, and I can say that, where progress has not been made, there are good, sound reasons for that. We are likely to discuss some of those.

On the assessment of progress, Committee members will have a copy of the most recent action plan in front of them. You will be aware that the period since the last update coincided with the Christmas break. However, there are some significant actions to note. The joint consultative committee met for the first time in December. This is the reconstituted committee, and the terms were agreed by all parties. The college held the first meeting with its curriculum managers to discuss their role in the college.

Members will also note that there are a number of items that are behind schedule. They are in red in your action plan. The first one is the new human resource (HR) strategy. The college initially included it as part of the wider development plan for the college when it put that out to consultation. On balance, the college decided that it merited separate focus and scrutiny, and decided to extend the time taken to consult on the HR strategy. We are content that this is reasonable, because some issues raised in the McConnell report are about actions and plans on the HR side.

The second issue is training for the governing body. Members will appreciate the time constraints that governing bodies operate under, especially given the fact that they are all volunteers. The NWRC's governing body has prioritised, and has been trained on, the challenge function, which was the key element of training that McConnell mentioned. The Department is satisfied with that approach and has been given assurances that the outstanding training will be delivered in the current academic year. The Department thinks that it is important to have a reassessment of the rate and scale of progress and the risks associated with such a project. In the Department's view, progress is satisfactory. In fact, the action plan in front of you has remarkably few items that are behind schedule.

I will now ask Andy Cole to take you through some of the detail of the assessment and the important issues around the topic. We appreciate that this will touch on difficult issues, some of which we have discussed on other occasions, but it is important that members are able to make judgements on the Department's assessment of the situation.

Mr Andy Cole (Department for Employment and Learning): I will move through this as quickly as possible. Throughout the process, it has been suggested that the college is not committed to the process or to implementing the McConnell report. This is not the case; the college is very much committed to the process. Mr Finnegan and Mr Faulkner, as chairs of the governing body, have committed an enormous amount of time to these issues over and above what could reasonably be expected from a voluntary position. That is on top of their considerable existing workload at the college. I can also provide assurances to the Committee that that commitment is shared by members of the senior management team.

The difficulties in industrial relations since the redundancy and redeployment programme at the college have been disruptive and have made managing the college difficult. The McConnell report offered senior management a way to resolve the issues and normalise relations in the college. Members should appreciate that it is in the interests of senior management to implement the McConnell report. The Committee will also be aware that the local branch of the University and College Union (UCU) has been raising the issue of the redundancy and redeployment programme in the college in 2010-11. We also understand that the UCU wishes the college to address its grievances around the redundancy programme as a gesture of goodwill under McConnell. It is disappointing that the union continues to campaign on this issue, because the college needs to learn the lessons of the past and move on together rather than continue debates and arguments with no possible avenue of resolution.

The Committee will have received correspondence from the college about the redundancy and redeployment programme in the past couple of weeks. That correspondence provides much detailed financial and performance data that informed that decision. You will also be aware that the issue has been reviewed by PricewaterhouseCoopers and a subcommittee of the governing body, and individuals have also taken their cases to tribunal. Although the Department understands that individuals disagree with the decision, the college must be able to organise its business in a way that it sees fit and is appropriate for its business needs. The college will acknowledge that the process could

have been handled better. However, it was entitled to make those decisions, had a sound rationale for the decisions and it implemented the decisions in accordance with agreed procedures.

The college has to move on from this issue. It is unreasonable to expect the college to perform effectively and deliver services to meet the needs of businesses and individuals if it has to continually review and justify decisions taken three and a half years ago for sound business reasons. I want to state clearly that the McConnell report, as a whole, is the way in which grievances about the redundancy programme will be addressed. Channels of communication are always open to the local UCU branch to begin the process of engaging constructively with the college for the benefit of its members, other staff in the college, students and stakeholders.

Members will recall that Mr McConnell identified trust throughout the organisation as the crux of the matter. It is clear from the McConnell report that he envisaged management and unions looking for ways to show their goodwill over time. The governing body and management have started that process by developing and implementing the action plan. The UCU must provide reciprocal examples of its goodwill. The Department is concerned that the UCU does not appear to be enthusiastic about changing how it operates in the college. The McConnell report made it clear that the UCU had two obligations, the first of which was to re-engage with the local industrial relations machinery in return for management beginning the process of developing a strategy to rebuild trust. We are now 12 months after the McConnell report, and nine months after publication of the action plan, agreement was reached with the regional UCU officials about the local industrial relations machinery. However, the local UCU is still not engaging.

McConnell also said that the UCU must make efforts to resolve issues in the college. It is disappointing that the UCU engaged the Committee and local media in relation to the college improvement team (CIT) issue but, of more significance, it has recently stopped engaging with the change manager at the college. Again, this is a disappointing development and raises concerns about the UCU's commitment to the overall process. McConnell observed that unions and management had engaged in confrontation and needed to learn new behaviours and ways of interacting that are constructive rather than destructive. The Department notes that the major examples of progress in the past year occurred when groups and individuals engaged constructively in the process and worked with the change manager to bring about improvements in the college. We continue to encourage the UCU to engage.

The development of trust and the normalisation of industrial relations at the college require leadership and commitment from all sides. I assure the Committee that the governing body and senior management team are committed to the process and have been providing leadership and direction to college staff. More importantly, they are committed to making the college the best it can be. Collectively, we need a strong college in the north-west to provide essential services to businesses and individuals.

I would now like to hand over to Gerard to introduce himself and outline his role and approach.

Mr Gerard Finnegan (North West Regional College): Thank you. Mr Chairman and members of the Committee, good morning. My name is Gerard Finnegan and I am the temporary chair of the NWRC. I have been a member of the governing body since 2011, and I am the chair of the audit committee.

In November 2012, the governing body and the senior management team set a goal for our college to be the best FE college in Britain and Ireland. By best, we mean that we will provide the best teaching and learning environment for students, the best working and learning environment for staff and management, the best skills provision for the economy and the best return on the funding entrusted to us by the Department.

I took up my current position in early January for a period of three months and have spent almost all of my time engaged in issues relating to the McConnell report and industrial relations in the college. These are very difficult and very important issues. They affect the lives of staff and management in the college.

I am privileged to work with very positive people in other strands of my working life, and I also work with positive people in the college. However, there is a mood and tone surrounding McConnell that makes progress on these matters very hard won. Nonetheless, there has been progress. The governing body and the senior team accepted the McConnell recommendations in their entirety, there has been a negotiated and agreed action plan of 79 actions, which William will talk about later, and we

have employed a change manager, William, to be the independent arbiter of the implementation of that plan. Some 69 actions have been completed or are on schedule and we are learning all the time.

This is a learning exercise for us all and things do not always go as intended. One such issue was the decision to transfer the oversight of some actions in the McConnell action plan away from the CIT, which had not yet met, to the governing body. This was a pragmatic decision taken in good faith by the change manager and the former chair in conversation with the Department. It was meant to close a temporary gap in oversight of the McConnell action plan and the change was implemented without consultation. Making the change without consultation was unfortunate and we have learned from that. The reaction to that change cost us all three months and caused both sides — not just one side or the other — to question the shared commitment to rebuilding trust in the process. However, it is a learning matter and we have learned from it. The CIT oversight has been restored and the actions that the CIT has oversight of continue to be on schedule.

The governing body is looking for positivity in all this, hard work and a commitment to the college being the best it can be. We are asking people to do what they know to be right for the college and to treat others as they would want to be treated. These are the two guidelines that we have put on the process from the start. We are finding those things in our work and in the work of the management.

The Committee can be assured that the governing body is resolved to working on these issues and continues to seek positivity and progress. We continue to invite everyone to do the same. We have created spaces in which people can engage positively on the issues, and invitations remain open to all sides to join in with the conversation. We expect to be challenged on our approach but in a constructive way. We believe that any other sort of conversation undermines the very thing that we are trying to rebuild, which is trust.

We are committed to the college being the best it can be. We want to focus on delivering the skills agenda for Derry and the wider north-west. We want to do more in maths, science, engineering, healthcare and in supporting locally owned businesses to grow. Although we are concentrating so much of our time, and all of my time on this, albeit very important, issue, we are not doing enough work on those other things, and that is of concern to me and my governing body colleagues.

The college has been on a difficult journey over the past number of years, but we are now moving towards a better place. We have learned and will learn more from the journey. The governing body has committed the college to an ambitious improvement programme. Overcoming our industrial relations issue is an integral part of that programme, but we also need to work on building a management culture in which leadership thrives, improve our performance, especially in areas such as science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM), and communicating all of that with effect. We have work to do on all those matters and we understand that.

As a governing body, we are focused on the things we can control. We have provided leadership and are increasing our openness and our work; we have worked on how we discharge our oversight role; and we have much more of a two-way engagement with senior management than before. However, that comes with its challenges, not least of which is the demand on the time that that makes on us as a voluntary board. We are implementing McConnell in good faith and we ask you to recognise that. We are up to very big and important things and everything will not go according to plan. We will continue to learn from this as we go.

We look forward to a positive engagement today on the McConnell action plan. As I said, there are 79 actions in that plan and 69 of them are on schedule. We are investing more time on other actions. Some have been delayed because we want to spend more time on them, and Mary has alluded to a couple of those, and some have been delayed just because of the necessary prioritisation that comes with implementing such a plan.

The governing body expects that everyone who works in the college delivers value and feels valued; that management is open and transparent about the decisions that it takes and makes; and that everyone in the college is working to improve their performance in the working environment. For us, that is the best college in action.

Mr Chairman, I am not used to this sort of environment, so I do not know the speaking protocols. I will seek your assistance in keeping me right with all of that and I thank you for your time.

The Chairperson: No problem, Gerard. Thank you for your time. I also thank Mary and Andy for the presentations.

Gerard, one thing that I would say at the outset is that you should be under no illusion that the Committee is not here to ensure that the NWRC will not be the best or pushed to be the best that it can be.

Mr Finnegan: Thank you.

The Chairperson: That is why we are here and why we have taken such an active interest in the action plan.

Mr Finnegan: We appreciate that.

The Chairperson: We want to ensure that it delivers all the action points, even the difficult ones.

Mr Finnegan: Absolutely.

The Chairperson: That is why we challenge the Department and the governing body when and where necessary to ensure that that results.

Mr Finnegan: We acknowledge that.

The Chairperson: Andy, you said that the Committee received correspondence from the college. We have no recollection or record of that. We received direct correspondence from William Coyle. Whether that was sent formally on behalf of the college I am not sure, but I thought that it was from him as an individual. He copied us in on all correspondence between him and the college, but we have not received anything from the college.

Mr Finnegan: I understood that that had been done. I will check that.

The Chairperson: Right.

Mr Finnegan: If you have seen the response, you will have seen the last line in which I said that it was intended that it should be sent. If that has not been done, then it is an oversight. It was certainly my intention for it to be sent to you, and I will check whether it has been sent.

The Chairperson: We have the correspondence, but it came through William Coyle as an individual rather than from the college.

Mr Finnegan: I take that point.

The Chairperson: You asked for learning and there —

Mr Finnegan: There is learning for me.

The Chairperson: Very much so, and it is a simple one at this stage.

One thing that concerns me is training. I sit on boards of governors for two secondary schools and a grammar school, and one of the things that the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) insists is that I do not sit on those boards of governors without appropriate training. I cannot accept as a valid reason the point about boards of governors being volunteers who do not have time and are very busy, especially given the conditions the NWRC is going through. Regarding report reference 15.11, your report to the Committee mentions the points in which you are falling behind. They relate to subject training and identifying training needs. William Coyle also raised this in his correspondence with the college. He said that he had received no formal training.

I have been involved in redundancy cases in my role as a member of a board of governors, and we could not deal with those cases without receiving training. Is the Department failing in that regard? Should it insist that that training is done?

Dr McIvor: The Department insists on training, and every governor goes through a day's induction in which they cover all aspects of governance, including the role, the responsibility and the auditing. In

addition, all governors are invited every year for a refresher and quite a few governors came back for that this year. You cannot sit on a governing body without that training.

The training that McConnell refers to is very specialist training, first of all in conflict management. That is not part of the normal training we give to governors but has been done because of the particular issues in the NWRC. Again, because of the issues raised with McConnell, he then asked for additional subject training. As Gerard said, the governing body has had a lot of training this year, and subject training will be given, but that has to be prioritised.

Mr Finnegan: Part of the challenge function training that we took on was a self-assessment of training needs by each of the governors who took part in that training. That self-assessment is currently being processed as a follow-on to the training. There were two parts to that training with which we were asked to interact in particular: one was personal training matters for me as a person in relation to this and the other was matters for the governing body as a corporate group. The returns from the training have been sent back to the governing body's secretary, who is processing them at the moment. That is the scoping of the subject training that is intended.

Dr McIvor: This year, we have undertaken an appraisal of each governing body appraising itself according to a very comprehensive set of measures, one of which was to look at training needs. We now have that for all individual governors and governing bodies of all further education (FE) colleges. We will determine whether additional training is needed. One of the issues we face is that governing bodies have restricted time, so training usually needs to be fitted into the governing body itself. The training that Andy and I would do with a governing body would be in a slot in the meeting; the training comes in bite-size pieces to accommodate time restrictions.

Mr Cole: To reassure you, Chairperson, all governors have been trained at induction and receive specialist training for specific roles on audit committees etc. McConnell identified some additional training; some of that has taken place and the rest has been prioritised. There is a gap on our side, which is to do with the code of governance and which still requires training. It was implemented in 2012 and initial training was provided, so we need to go back for refresher training. We will do that before the end of this academic year; it was a prioritisation issue, in agreement with the college.

Mr Finnegan: Self-assessment was used by the governing body, along with the training provider, to build the training that we have just done. All that has been fed back into the loop and we are using all the pieces of documentation that we can use. I hope that you will gather from our answers that we are taking the training requirement very seriously and are trying to scope the right training and get it done. We have committed to the Department, and we will do so here, to having that training completed by the end of this academic year.

The Chairperson: Will it be completed by the end of this academic year?

Mr Finnegan: Yes.

The Chairperson: I appreciate that, and I am looking at the deadlines identifying the training needs. You have told us what you have undertaken, but the target for identifying specific training needs was June 2013 and it was up to the director of HR services in the governing body to do that.

Dr McIvor: As Mr Finnegan said, those training needs were identified and are with the HR director at the moment. However, while they were being identified, training was taking place. We have mentioned the conflict training, as I call it, which is not what the governing body called it. That has been taking place.

Mr Finnegan: We hear your concerns about the training, Chairman.

The Chairperson: Andy, I just want to touch on one thing before I open up the discussion. You mentioned the code of governance, the review and the training for that as well. That is another point that is outstanding. I am reading here:

"The code of Governance will be confirmed as soon as practical following training on the DEL code of Governance".

That was due in September 2013, but is now scheduled for this month. Where are we on that?

Mr Cole: It still has not taken place in discussion with the college. The issue is around prioritisation. We are content that the code is in place. The code outlines the modus operandi of the governing body and the roles and responsibilities. That was put in place, and initial training was provided on it in 2012. We have an action that we need to refresh that flowing from McConnell. We will do that again before the end of the academic year in agreement with the chair about when that can take place.

The Chairperson: So, rather than September 2013, it is going to be the end of this academic year.

Mr Cole: Before the end of this academic year, as and when the chair determines.

Mr Finnegan: We have re-profiled that commitment. The commitment is to have it done this academic year, and we hear your concern.

The Chairperson: I appreciate that you are hearing my concerns; it is the actions that I want. The timelines in the documentation that I have in front of me say February 2014. If you have shifted that deadline prior to this meeting, I think that it would have been better if we had received the up-to-date deadlines that you are working to, because maybe we would not have the challenges put forward that we have here today.

Mr Flanagan: Thanks for your presentation. Gerard, you are very welcome in your position, and I am sure that the Committee wishes you well in that. The attitude that you bring is welcome. The difference between the attitude that we are getting from the presentation today compared with the last time there was a presentation on the report is striking, particularly with regard to the implementation of the action plan, the oversight and the unilateral changes that were made to it. Why has that policy changed? The last time Mary was here, we were told that the amendments that had been made to remove the change implementation team from monitoring, implementing or oversight provided a better line of accountability. Mary said that she was not terribly happy with the old way and that changing it was the decision of the governing body. What has changed to make the governing body go back to the original proposal?

Mr Finnegan: We have reflected on both avenues that were open. As I said, back in November 2012, the governing body and the senior management team set a goal for the college to be the best that it can be. That goal included setting up a college improvement team. It was intended to set up that team in early 2013. I am taking that off the top of my head, so forgive me. Then McConnell reported and we took the decision at that time — we still feel that it was an appropriate decision — that the McConnell report should take priority and that we would put together the processes that you have heard described in relation to all that, such as the action plan and the change manager. As part of that action planning piece, it was agreed that the oversight arrangement for a number of the actions — some 20 of them, I think — would be delegated to the college improvement team.

I would like to go back to McConnell's recommendation, which was that the governing body should take a strong oversight role. So, the overall oversight role in all this rests with the governing body. It has always rested with the governing body, and it remains with the governing body. What happened in the interim was that an agreement was made in the negotiation of the action plan that the oversight of some of those actions would be delegated to the college improvement team. It became apparent that the college improvement team had not yet had its first meeting. So, the decision was taken in good faith — I referred to it when I was speaking — to close that apparent oversight gap in relation to the McConnell action plan. The decision was taken and implemented without consultation. We hold our hands up for that part of it. We have had this discussion with the college improvement team. The college improvement team's proposal was to restate and put back in place exactly what was intended in the first place. That proposal was carried by the governing body last night. So, we have put back in place exactly what was intended in the first place. Further to that, we have acknowledged that the manner in which the change was made was unhelpful and unfortunate and that it ought not to have been made without consultation. That is a key learning point from all this. I hope, Mr Flanagan, that that answers your question.

McConnell was very, very clear in saying that the senior management team should lead on the implementation of the McConnell report. I cannot remember the actual paragraph; it was paragraph 15-point-something. It was also very, very clear that the governing body should take a strong oversight role in all this, and we take that very seriously. As I said, the decision was taken in good faith in a conversation between the Department, the change manager and the former chair. It was a temporary decision to fix what seemed to be a temporary gap. We rectified that as soon as we were able to do so.

Dr McIvor: As Gerard said, that is exactly right. It was a pragmatic decision, because the college improvement team was not in place. From the Department's point of view, it was very keen to have a mechanism there to monitor the McConnell report. The college improvement team would have reported to the governing body, but, because that was not there, the McConnell action was overseen directly by the governing body. Both methods are equally valid. I think that the advantage of the team reporting to the governing body for the initial few months of McConnell was that there was a real focus on the McConnell actions. As the chair said, the McConnell actions are now subsumed into the college improvement plan. We are, therefore, back to that form of monitoring. It was a purely pragmatic decision to make sure that there was monitoring.

Mr Finnegan: I would also like to say — sorry for cutting across you, Mary — that it is important that everyone understands the role and remit of the college improvement team.

Mr Flanagan: Given that you are stating that, will you compare the role of the college improvement team with that of the change implementation team? That seems to be —

Mr Finnegan: There is no change implementation team. It is the college improvement team. There has been confusion about the nomenclature. Is that the term for it?

The Chairperson: CIT.

Mr Finnegan: People have different views about what CIT is. Let me clear all that up, if I can.

There is a college improvement team. The college improvement team was borne out of the governors' aspiration to have the best college in Britain and Ireland. That college improvement team was to look at three main areas of improvement: leadership and management; performance and targets; and communication and profile. In essence, those are the three areas, although we have called them different things at different times. We have always been clear that that is the overall improvement programme for the college.

McConnell and industrial relations are clearly a very, very important part of leadership and management. That is why we in the governing body have always had a preference for the governing body's oversight of the McConnell action plan to be played out, reviewed, questioned and challenged in the context of the wider college improvement process by the wider college improvement team. The college improvement team includes members of the governing body, senior management, middle management and staff representation. So, it is the whole college family; it is the whole piece. We have always hoped that our oversight and the college improvement team's oversight of particular parts of McConnell would be open to scrutiny in that wider field within the college. It would make for much better interaction on those matters. It would be integrated completely with the overall improvement programme for the college.

Absolutely yes, McConnell has been given its priority and McConnell still has the priority. We are not suggesting in any way, shape or form that, because we are now talking about the college improvement team in the wider sense, we are taking our foot off the gas, our eye off the ball or any of those other things you might say about McConnell.

Mr Flanagan: Can I take you back to your first sentence? You said that there is no such thing as a change implementation team.

Mr Finnegan: I do not understand what the change implementation team is.

Mr Flanagan: I have a quote here from Dr McIvor from the last time that we were briefed on the issue, which says:

"The change implementation team comprises mainly senior staff and the governing body."

That is who the change implementation team is.

Mr Finnegan: Let me clear that up, and I hoped that it was clear. The terminology that is correct in all this is the "college improvement team".

Mr Flanagan: Where did the phrase "change implementation team" come from?

Dr McIvor: I think that that was your phrase initially last time.

Mr Cole: There are a couple of other observations, Chair, around that particular issue of the CIT that it might be useful to draw out. The Department was encouraged that William's correspondence to the staff group in January provided an open and transparent explanation of the change to the action plan and the CIT dropping out of it the last time, which was a pragmatic decision. That evidence is new modes of working and communication with staff and acknowledging that it was an unfortunate change. We are encouraged now that the CIT is in place.

The other issue that it is useful to draw from and to learn lessons from is the way that it was handled outside the college. The unilateral changes being made to the action plan and the action plan being in crisis were played out in the media through press releases. Such engagement with the media only served to undermine the trust that everyone is working so hard to develop. When the temporary chair came into post, one of his first actions and priorities was to examine that issue and to get the CIT up and running and in place. The lesson for us all is about engagement within the college.

Mr Flanagan: Andy, with all due respect, the reason why there is a problem with trust in the North West Regional College is not due to a press release that any member of the Committee put out.

Mr Cole: I am not —

Mr Flanagan: The McConnell report was brought in because of problems with trust. You cannot blame members of the Committee.

Mr Cole: Certainly not. Chair, for the record, I have not made that point.

The Chairperson: Phil, he did not mention any member of the Committee in relation to the press release.

Mr Cole: That is not the point that I was making, Chair. The point that I am making is that engagement within the college is the way to build trust and to take those issues forward. We are encouraged that the CIT is now in place. When we came to the Committee in November, it was not in place and that is why the change was made. It was a pragmatic change at the time.

Mr Finnegan: The important point here, Mr Flanagan, is that it is the college improvement team. I would like to set aside any misunderstandings on that from here on in. It is the college improvement team, and the college improvement team is a cross-college team that has been put in place with representation that I have discussed. It is there to build a college improvement programme that will focus on the three things: leadership and management culture; performance against key indicators; and the way in which we communicate.

With regard to the role and remit — it is important that we get this on the record — the college improvement team is a strategic entity; it is a project board to design, put in place and oversee a college improvement programme. It is not an operating body; it is a strategic body. It will have an oversight role in the college of people doing improvement things. The implementation of the programme will be delegated throughout the organisation by way of working groups. The staff will be absolutely involved in all that. It is not a negotiating body; so, notwithstanding the fact that there are staff representations and all the rest of it, it is not a place for people to come and negotiate their positions. They are there to drive the college forward, in the same way as, although I come from the business sector, I am not at the governing body to represent the business sector. I am there to do that job, in that forum, at that time.

So, terms of reference have been agreed, and there are eight things in that, one of which is oversight of the parts of McConnell that were agreed for it. All that has been put back into place and integrated into the wider college improvement programme. Membership has been agreed and is cross-college. There has been a request from unions to increase staff representation; we are looking at that and are in discussions with all the unions to see how we can widen staff engagement on all this, which, I think, is very important. We have defined who comes, and we have defined very clearly what the CIT does with McConnell. In relation to McConnell, the CIT carries out its oversight role on the agreed actions, as was agreed, in the context of the wider governing body's oversight of the whole programme.

I hope that that helps to lay out some of the misunderstandings.

Mr P Ramsey: Good morning. We are all in a position to try to ensure that all our colleges in Northern Ireland are meeting the challenges of the Department, whether they are on STEM, NEETs, apprenticeships or youth training. We are all clear about that. I want to place on record the contribution that North West Regional College is making to ensuring that our young people have better opportunities. However, in doing so, I have to reflect the serious concerns that I have had over a number of years, which I will do in a few minutes.

I have a few questions, particularly to the acting chair and the Department. Since Harry McConnell's report was produced, how many meetings, at your request, were sought with UCU formally?

Dr McIvor: How many meetings from the Department's perspective?

Mr P Ramsey: And from the chair or the previous chair to meet UCU. How many meetings were sought with UCU in relation to McConnell?

Dr McIvor: I can answer that on behalf of the Department: none.

Mr P Ramsey: That is fine.

Mr Finnegan: I do not know how many. The former chair, as you know, was dealing with all this. The former chair, I understand, corresponded with the Committee in relation to all that prior to Christmas. I understand, Pat, that the former chair put that on record. I do not know how many meetings were sought. All I know is this: Bertie was engaged with the regional and local officials on this on a constant basis. I really could not tell you how many meetings he had.

Mr P Ramsey: Since you became chair, how many meetings have you sought, given that you said that your time has been taken up, since your appointment, on McConnell? How many meetings have you sought with UCU?

Mr Finnegan: I have sought two meetings, and those meetings have occurred. I wish to keep what was discussed at those meetings between myself and the union, at this time. They are rather delicate discussions. By the way, Pat, the first meeting was in the very first week.

Mr P Ramsey: At your request.

Mr Finnegan: At my request.

Mr P Ramsey: Did you find the UCU members intimidatory or threatening? Did you find them disruptive? Did you find them destructive?

Mr Finnegan: Like I said, I would prefer to keep my discussions with the UCU and its representatives between myself and the union. You will understand, Pat, that it is all very delicate. Some people in the college have different hats. At some points, some people are governors. At some points, some people are UCU members. At some points, some people are lecturers. At some points, some people are chairs. We all have different hats and different roles. I have met members associated with the UCU on two occasions.

Mr P Ramsey: Was that in respect of the McConnell report?

Mr Finnegan: It was in respect of all this, which includes McConnell.

Mr Cole: In addition to any formal requests for meetings that the chair may have had with UCU, there is a framework for all the stakeholders to engage through, including UCU and the other staff representative groups such as the JCC and CIT, for example. So, that is the mechanism to engage. It is important to highlight the change manager, who will have met UCU on frequent occasions around McConnell specifically.

Mr Finnegan: Pat, let me be clear about this. We believe that the only way to build trust here is through engagement in a sensitive way in relation to these matters. You asked me what my meeting was like with the UCU people. I found the meeting to be difficult enough, but that is fine because these are difficult things that we are dealing with.

Mr P Ramsey: You did not feel threatened or bullied by the meeting.

Mr Finnegan: Look, I really do not think that it is helpful to be introducing the question of whether or not I felt threatened or bullied.

Mr P Ramsey: I will tell you why I asked the question. We have a senior departmental official, Andy Cole, here today, and he has clearly painted a picture. It is like Groundhog Day to me, because, two years ago, the previous chair came in here and played the blame game, placing sole blame on lecturers in the college for all the difficulties in industrial relations in the North West Regional College for the past five or six years. He used the terminology that they are "destructive". That was his word, not mine. I find that appalling in the circumstances.

Mr Cole: Can I respond to that, Chair, please, in due course?

The Chairperson: Yes, in due course. Pat, I do not want Groundhog Day either. We have Gerard here in front of us as the new chair.

Mr P Ramsey: Unfortunately, it is the case that it is Groundhog Day.

The Chairperson: I think that we have to give Gerard his place.

Mr P Ramsey: I will give him his place. Reflecting on the meeting when I was coming here, I was hoping that we would not be in this place again. I really was hoping that we would not be in this place, but scores and scores and scores of people have been coming to me in relation to feeling bullied and feeling threatened and about that culture of intimidation that Harry McConnell identified. It is strange that, with all these difficulties with industrial relations coming to head and Harry McConnell producing his report, there is the concession today of an apology and an acknowledgement that the college should have done better and that it alienated one of the key players in UCU by bringing unilateral changes to an action plan without any consultation. Surely, somebody with a bit of common sense would say, "This is going to create further tensions in the college". I find it incredible, and I really find it disgraceful that, given the intensity of the issues, UCU was not involved with either the previous or current chair in looking at and trying to get a consensus around the action plan for the implementation of the McConnell report.

Mr Finnegan: Andy will respond first to the piece, and then I request a place, Mr Chair.

Mr Cole: Chair and Pat, with respect and for the record, I did not make any comment about UCU being disruptive. I said that McConnell observed that unions and management had engaged in confrontation and now needed to learn new behaviours and ways of interacting that were constructive rather than destructive. That is what McConnell said, and it applies to all groups. Today, we have to provide evidence and provide you with a balanced, objective and measured assessment of our progress on implementation of the action plan. There are three key stakeholders in that action plan: the governing body, the senior management team and UCU. If the governing body were not stepping up to the mark, today, we would be providing you with an assessment of that. Likewise, we would be doing that if it were senior management. This is not goodies or baddies. McConnell said that the point scoring reflected badly on everyone. Everyone, including the Department and very much so the chair, the governing body and the college, wants everyone to be at the table engaging. That is what —

Mr P Ramsey: Would you not —

The Chairperson: Pat, just let him continue.

Mr Cole: We are encouraging UCU and all the stakeholders to do that. Where we have seen progress in the action plan, with 69 out of 79 on target, is where people have engaged. That is positive and constructive, and I encourage that to continue to happen. I am not holding and do not intend to hold anyone out as an example, but everyone in this process needs to be accountable. The process is difficult. Progress will be made, and there will be steps back, but everyone is on the same page in moving the issue forward for the betterment of the college and all the stakeholders, including UCU.

Mr Finnegan: Pat, we have made our best efforts in recent times to create structures and spaces where people can engage on these matters without point scoring and without blaming anyone. I have no interest in or intention of blaming anyone for anything. My interest and intention and my leadership is about creating space for people to engage in the process in a positive way. I absolutely believe that we have created that space through the college improvement team, through the JCC and through employing the change manager. People have places to go to discuss these matters. The invitation is open to everyone to engage in the process in a positive fashion. It will remain open to everyone. The invitation will never be taken away, no matter how many times people decide to make a choice not to come. If people decide to make a choice not to come, I respect that choice. We will continue to keep that invitation open, will continue to work in the way that I laid out in my opening remarks and will continue with an improvement plan for the college. I absolutely respect people's choice. So, if anybody does not want to take part or engage, they make that choice. Let me tell you that the people who are engaged in the process of dealing with the matter that we are discussing today are seeing change. I accept that those who are not engaged in it will not be seeing change. I understand that. It is a matter of choice, and the choice is everyone's — mine, yours, his and everyone's — whether to engage or not. When you engage, there comes a responsibility with that engagement, and the responsibility is to engage in a positive way. So, everything is open and all those invitations remain open.

Mr P Ramsey: My question has not been answered, Chair. I asked this question: is it good or best practice for one of the key players involved in the McConnell report to be excluded from the action plan changes?

Mr Finnegan: Mr Chair, I think that we have answered that. We have been very open about what happened. William, in his letter, which is part of the pack, was very open about what happened. We acknowledged that that change ought not to have been made without consultation, and we have learned from that. I believe that that has been answered.

The Chairperson: Pat, that acknowledgment is there.

Mr P Ramsey: It may be there, but one can imagine —

Dr McIvor: No one has excluded one party. The choice is everyone's. The temporary chair would welcome, the governing body would welcome and the Department would welcome the party that, for the moment, has decided not to engage in the process. McConnell has said that, without dialogue and discussion, there cannot be progress. At the moment, there is just one party that is not joining in that progress. We are in daily contact with the North West Regional College, and we see a change. I can confirm, from the Department's point of view, that there are positive attitudes and people joining in, and staff are now beginning to believe the aspiration of being the best college in Ireland and GB. That is all really positive, and I would love UCU to be part of that. I make a plea to it today: be part of that because it is a positive way forward. We need to change the language and start engaging, and negotiations should not happen in all the little sub-meetings outside the formal structure that has now been put in place by McConnell. That is the place to talk. The other unions are engaged, and other staff who are not members of unions are engaged. Please UCU, engage. That is my plea.

Mr Finnegan: Just on a point of correction, the other unions have requested that they be engaged. We are working on that; we have not completed that discussion.

Mr P Ramsey: It would be inappropriate for me not to raise this, but one of the other issues that was raised is that we have got correspondence from William Coyle, who was part of an appeal review panel on redundancies. There is a cloud hanging over this issue; there is no doubt about that. It is the elephant in the room. Is there any resolution or reconciliation? I say that to you, Gerard, in good faith. I will take you back to Phil Flanagan's point: we are in the new year, and I am not sure whether you are going for the position of permanent chair.

I will say this in good faith as well: you would need to be the reconciler to ensure that everybody feels that their part is meaningful and has a sense of pride in the college. You do not want to continue the previous chair's legacy. The McConnell report clearly identified a legacy of poor industrial relations in the college. It is our role to examine further the situation pertaining to the redundancies and the demotion of people in North West College. Mary might not like that; she might think that it is a done deal and that everything has been read. At some stage, we might invite Willie Coyle, who was not, and still is not, the cheerleader for UCU. He has a point to make, and I think that we have to listen to what he has to say.

Mr Finnegan: I know Willie Coyle, and maybe you do too, Pat. Just as I did in that response, I put on record my appreciation and that of the governing body of Willie Coyle's courage in standing forward at the time to be part of that subcommittee, which I was also part of.

We engaged in a very detailed examination of that business case, and we went through many of the matters that Willie Coyle raised in his request to us to respond to his points of clarification and concerns. We went through them at the time, and my first action was to ring Willie Coyle and say, "I will get you a response to that." I did do that, and I spent my first month in this post working primarily on that response. We answered every question that Willie Coyle had, and we did it point by point. I sent that response to Willie Coyle.

These are very complex issues, and, to be honest with you, they do not all translate to paper. I said to Willie Coyle, "I have this response for you. Will you come in so that we can sit down and I can explain it to you? I will get the people who put the numbers together to explain for you where they come from." He reflected on that and decided not to take up that invitation. I am content with that.

We then issued the response, and we were to send a copy to you, Mr Swann. I apologise that it never got there. The response answered all his questions point by point. Willie Coyle has since sent me two pieces of correspondence on that. One was an email in which he said, "Thank you for your response. I still have a number of questions that I want answered. I still wish my name to be taken off the review." I sent him an email back, saying, "Willie, I will take that position to the governing body, and we will consider it and respond to you." We took it to the governing body last evening and agreed, with regret, to put a footnote on the report to reflect Mr Coyle's wish that his name be taken off the report. As far as we are concerned, that closes the correspondence between us and Mr Coyle. I know that the Committee was rightly interested in that correspondence and requested that Mr Coyle come back to us with the questions. We have now answered the questions, Mr Coyle has responded to me and said that he has got the answers but that he still has certain concerns and that he wishes to have his name taken off. It is not a matter of taking his name off the report, because his name is on it; it is, however, a matter of putting a footnote on it to say that this has occurred.

He also sent me a text in which he thanked me for my honesty in that response. I appreciate that, and I will go on record now as saying that I appreciate Willie Coyle's integrity and courage in this. I think that we have dealt with that matter in an appropriate fashion, and, as far as I am now concerned, it is regrettably closed.

Mr Cole: I think that it is useful to point out that, from the Department's perspective, we were encouraged by how senior management and the governing body handled that piece of correspondence. The manner in which they responded to Mr Coyle was comprehensive, open and transparent. It was something that may not have happened a number of years ago, Pat. Those are the signs of recovery that we are seeing in trust building. Management spent a lot of time pulling that information together, Gerard led that and provided that open response to Mr Coyle. So, those are the kinds of slow changes that, from the Department's perspective, we are seeing being brought through from the McConnell report.

The Chairperson: This is your last point, Pat.

Mr P Ramsey: I am nearly finished, but I will make a couple of general points. I have been a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly for 10 years now, and I have engaged with every college in Northern Ireland. They have come up here and met me on a number of issues, and they engage with me constantly by email. I do not ever recall getting an invitation to the college in 10 years on any subject matter or for any discussion. I say that in the context of my belief, Gerard, that the college has become a wee bit estranged from the wider society in the city. It has, and something desperately needs to be done to counteract that.

Mr Finnegan: I hear that.

Mr P Ramsey: It is marginalising and alienating people. I meet senior lecturers who I know as friends but who are afraid to have a conversation with me. They actually send me emails saying, "Pat, I did not want to be seen talking to you." There is something badly wrong with that.

Mr Cole: We agree, Pat. From the Department's perspective, we want to have discussions with the college on the Minister's priorities and its engagement with local employers and with its community and the region. We need to implement this action plan and to bring these changes forward to allow

more focused discussions on that. We are on the same page with that. Those of us around this table, the governing body and DEL, all want collectively to see this move on so that that can happen.

Mr Finnegan: I referred to that in my opening remarks. We want to be discussing our contribution to helping businesses to grow. We want to be discussing our contribution to STEM, to maths, and to all these things.

On a wider issue, we also want this Committee and the Department to be discussing the expansion of the University at Magee, and we want this Committee to discuss with us how the college can deliver on the DEL skills agenda. I accept, Pat, that all this — stuff in the press, the hurt that has been caused, the whole thing — has created a barrier between the college and the community in Derry.

Mr P Ramsey: Seriously?

Mr Finnegan: I accept it. What I am saying to you, Pat, clearly, is that, as long as I am involved in the college, part of what I seek to do is to rebuild whatever bridges have been broken. This and other colleges are community colleges — that is what they call them in America. That is absolutely my intention, for as long as I am involved, whether I am in this seat or as the chair of the audit committee or whatever. I am there, Pat, because it means something to me. I will tell you why further education means something to me. When I was 18, I did my A levels, because I wanted to go to Queen's. However, I did not do so well the first time round, because I did not work hard enough. It was that basic: I did not work hard enough. I went to Bangor Tech and got involved with the lecturers there. I was treated really well and helped, and I did very well the second time round. I got away and did the thing, and here we are.

I understand how important it is, Pat. That is why I am involved. That is why I give my time to it. I recognise that this whole issue has caused a fracture. That saddens me. However, we are working on it now, and we will continue work on it in the way that I set out at the start of the meeting. We have been making progress, and we will make further progress. I am personally committed to that.

Mr Cole: It is hard, Pat, but it is inspiring when you look at the governing body and see the voluntary commitment. It is also inspiring when you look at the management and the staff throughout the college and the good faith and the engagement that there is now. The college will move forward. We all have to move it forward to change the discussion on this.

Dr McIvor: I confirm that the Department will absolutely support the college in that. You made a very good point. The Minister is encouraging North West to reach out to employers in the area and to make sure that people in those areas are skilled. He encourages all the colleges to do that. I can let the chair and the governing body know that we are behind them on that.

The Chairperson: Gerard, if it is helpful to you, the Committee would be quite willing to receive an invitation from NWRC to go to the college, either on a visit or to hold a meeting there. We will back that up by actions rather than just words.

Mr Finnegan: Thank you for that.

Mr Buchanan: I want to raise few issues. Like the Chair, I have a number of concerns about the fact that a number of the actions in the plan have been delayed. The governing body is to review a number of those. Since you folk last met the Committee, how many times has the governing body met?

Dr McIvor: The governing body has probably met twice — in December and last night. So, that is twice. However, we have William on the ground whose job it is to make sure that the action plan happens. So, it does not depend on when the governing meets. William will give the Department a monthly report on the progress made, action by action. Where there is not progress, we will challenge that, and where there is progress, we will congratulate the college and the staff. So, it is not dependent on the governing body actually meeting.

Mr Finnegan: The oversight of this is a constant thing. I am in daily contact with you, William, on any days that you are there. So, I am in daily contact with the change manager, asking questions about what has happened with this action or that action. Some of the things that have changed are as a result of that interaction. For instance, the change to the human resources strategy occurred because

of conversations that I had with William and with another governing body member, who raised a concern. The concern came to me. I then went to William, and he and I discussed it. I made a proposal, notwithstanding the fact that it was important to have the human resources strategy consulted on as part of the integrated CDP. What does CDP stand for?

Dr McIvor: College development plan.

Mr Finnegan: In the context of where we were and in the context of what McConnell asked for, it was more important that it got its own space. So, that is how changes occur. That is how oversight works. It does not wait until the governing body meets. When the governing body meets, William goes through the action plan, action by action, and governors as a whole get a chance to have that conversation. William is in constant contact with me, and I am in constant contact with the senior management team, not with just Seamus. In my time in dealing with all this, I have spoken to them all — every one.

Mr Buchanan: As you say, William or Andy go through the action plan with the governing body and they review it, and a number of issues in the action plan are being delayed. So, if the governing body is reviewing the action plan, would it surely not then need to be more hands on in this issue? It is my understanding that the meeting that was called last night was an emergency meeting of the governing body and that it was called prior to this meeting today.

Mr Finnegan: No, it was not an emergency meeting. With respect, your understanding of that is not correct. We have a body of work to do, which is a normal body of work, so the staffing committee will come with its minutes, the finance and general purposes committee will come with its minutes and the audit committee, which is my committee, will come with its minutes. By the time that you have gone through all that, there is not enough time to deal with the more strategic issues.

For two reasons, I took the decision to hold not an emergency meeting but a special meeting of the governing body. The first reason was I wanted to bring it up to date on the college improvement team, which was on the agenda. I wanted to bring it up to date on the action plan and various other things. I also wanted to deal with a number of pieces of correspondence, including the Coyle correspondence. I wanted to bring the correspondence to the governing body so that it could see it before it was discussed here.

I think that it is only appropriate that our governing body should have learned last night from me and William what we may say here on its behalf. So, it was entirely appropriate that we had a special meeting. I will call special meetings as many times as I feel that they are necessary. It was not an emergency meeting. There is no emergency meeting required in all this. It is a signal that I take my work seriously.

Mr Buchanan: We can bandy words about, but we will just leave it at that. When talking about McConnell, you said that not everything will go according to plan. Are you making the assertion that McConnell may not be able to be implemented in full?

Mr Finnegan: No, I am not making that assertion. What I am saying to you is this: this is a very complex situation, which is dealing with people's behaviours, people's hurt and all that has been experienced. We may do something and think that it is a great idea, but somebody else may think that it is an awful idea. So, what we may intend to do about something is done in all good faith, as is this, but it just might not work out.

I have never been involved in all my business life with a plan that worked exactly as it was set out. The only plan that works exactly as set out is one that is not nearly ambitious enough. We are pushing the envelope in all this. It is very difficult stuff, and I cannot tell you what is the next thing that will not go according to plan. However, I can tell you that there will be one, and I can tell you that we will learn from the CIT piece on consultation on all that. That is all that I can tell you. However, you should absolutely not take from anything that I say that McConnell will not be implemented in full.

Mr Buchanan: Fair enough. I have one final question. McConnell is almost a year old now. In that time, how have you seen improvement in relationships between the governing body, management and the lecturers? Let us remember that they were the people who felt intimidated and felt that there was a culture of fear in the college. So, how do we now see relationships beginning to improve in that circle in the past year?

Mr Cole: I will start with the Department's assessment at that higher level, and Gerard will probably give you more detail. We see a commitment in good faith throughout the organisation from the different stakeholders. We see progress being made where they are engaged. We see new modes of working. We see senior management, for example, corresponding and engaging constructively with the governing body. The very nature of the chair's relay of last night's meeting, the transparency on why he wanted to hold that with governors, the way they are engaging with staff through William's letter and through the Coyle correspondence — all those actions are evidence to us of things coming through in the action plan and change being effected on the ground.

It is the same with the mechanisms that were set up in the JCC. There is positive engagement between the college and stakeholders. We see the CIT positive engagement. We see middle management now involved in course reviews. That is academia led, rather than senior management led. So, from the Department's perspective, we are seeing changes of behaviour and trust building. That is just what we see on the ground.

Mr Finnegan: We are working with the senior management team. We have a much more natural two-way relationship with the senior management team than we had a year ago. It is around the business of creating space for people to do the right thing. So, the challenge for us was to do the right thing, and we are doing it. The challenge to the management was to do the right thing, and the other challenge is to treat people the way that you expect to be treated. The Department has asked certain things of us. I am going to say it if you do not: we have delivered everything that you have asked.

Dr McIvor: You have delivered everything that we have asked; I have to confirm that.

Mr Finnegan: Similarly, we have asked things of our senior management team that we need it to do. I will go on record now as saying that it has delivered everything that we have asked of it up to this point.

There is another constituency in all this, and that constituency has so far chosen to be one step removed and a little more distant. I understand that, as a result of that choice, it would not see the same sort of change that those who have chosen to be part of it see. That is a matter of time for me. I am not making any comment on that about fault, blame or anything else. There is no sense of those in our approach. Our approach is to continue to do the right thing. Our approach is for people to put the college first. The college first, not Finnegan first, not the Department first and not the lecturer first — the college first. The college is about the student.

That is the conversation that we are having, and I can tell you that anybody who is involved in that conversation is seeing a change. I can also understand those who have yet to fully engage. I am not saying that they are not engaged, but it is not the way that we want it to be. We had a discussion last evening that I should not even refer to, because we said that we would not discuss it, so I am not referring to it. Strike it off the record.

Mr Buchanan: Are the majority of people in the college now seeing that change that you are talking about?

Mr Finnegan: I do not want to speculate on that. William is working on a staff survey.

Mr William Laverty (North West Regional College): One of the unfortunate things about all that is that there is no solid benchmark. It is all a little bit like people saying, "Somebody said something; somebody else said something else". One of the key McConnell recommendations was to conduct an annual staff attitudes survey. I am working very hard at the moment with all the stakeholders to conduct that survey in this academic year and, more importantly, to get it published in this academic year. Until we do that, we will not know. We actually do not even have anything to measure it against, because everything previous was a statement or something from somebody. There is nothing concrete, but when we do the survey — hopefully we will have it out by June or July — we will know exactly where we are, good or bad. There will be good points and bad points, but we will have a picture.

Mr Buchanan: I take it that the Committee will get a copy of that report.

Mr Laverty: Absolutely.

Mr Cole: One of the things that the chair keeps saying to me, which resonates with me, is that McConnell referred to gestures of goodwill. We are beyond that. It is about genuine goodwill and doing the right thing because it is the right thing to do. The college is not into trading gestures. It is about doing the right thing. That is why it dealt with Mr Coyle's correspondence in the way that it did. That is why it communicates openly with staff and is starting to do things differently. Those things are starting to flow through.

The Chairperson: There is also a need for trust, which I think has been established.

Mr Douglas: I had a few questions, but I think that they have already been asked. My final question, however, was about goodwill gestures. You talked about rebuilding trust, but how do you do that if you do not make gestures? There is no doubt that there is a boil that needs to be lanced, because it is festering. When you made your comments at the start, Andy, about all the unions but particularly the University and College Union (UCU), you seemed to be very frustrated. How do you deal with those frustrations? Perhaps this is part of William's job as change manager, but we all know that things become extremely difficult when they get to that point.

Mr Cole: You are right, Sammy. It is difficult, as the chair said. You have to keep the engagement open and keep the invitation open to all stakeholders to engage. All that we can do is to continue to do the right thing and to implement the actions. Slowly, the evidence of that will rebuild trust and, hopefully, everyone will come in and be at the table and engage. There has been significant progress in the action plan, and some big issues have been addressed. So, it is a slow process, but McConnell acknowledged that it would take between three and five years. It is not the case that 79 actions have been delivered and that everyone is happy; this is slow and painful, and there is hurt.

Dr McIvor: I will give you an example of that. From the Department's point of view, looking at McConnell and the actions, there was one action where all parties engaged enthusiastically. That was on the new joint consultative committee. It took a while; William was there making sure that parties talked. Eventually, they did talk, and they built enough trust to agree a joint document. To me, it was extremely positive to get all parties involved. It was not easy, and it took time, because they all came with their separate documents, but they ended up with one. I think that that is a demonstration of how you build trust. We already have it; it has been done, and I would love to see more of it.

Mr Cole: A trust will develop, will it not?

Mr Finnegan: Sammy, we cannot force this. You cannot force people to trust other people. You just do what you know to be right, you ask others to do what they know to be right and you keep doing it. It absolutely will come. It will speed up when there is more engagement. We are putting structures in place to have more engagement, and, through the college improvement team, there will be subgroups and staff involved in the whole thing. We will just continue to do the right thing, Sammy, but I think that it would be a mistake to try to force it.

Mr P Ramsey: As I recall, the McConnell report envisaged that the Labour Relations Agency would be involved in assisting progress on these matters. Is that something that you would consider?

Mr Finnegan: The thing is, Pat, that we are talking about building trust. We are going to have a go on our own at building trust, we are having a go on our own at building trust, and we are going to continue to have a go on our own at building trust. If it turns out that it becomes impossible, for whatever reason, to build trust, we will look at that situation when we come up against it. However, I do not think that it is impossible. If we continue to do what we are doing and continue to do the right thing, I hope that others get a sense of our genuine and authentic goodwill in this matter. It is not a game, nor is it a bartering session where we say, "We will do this if you do that".

This is a genuine process in which we are putting ourselves in front of everyone else and saying that we are here to do the right thing. We are asking them to talk to us about doing the right thing. If it becomes impossible, we will consider that when it happens, but I am not in the position at the moment where I think that we need to consider that.

The Chairperson: OK.

Mr Finnegan: In answer to your question, if it becomes impossible, we will look at all the options that are open to us, and we will make that assessment at that time.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you very much for your time, folks. Gerard, be assured that the Committee is engaged and is seeking the same resolution as you. We want to see the North West Regional College serving all its students as best it can.

Mr Finnegan: I am assured, and I noted your kind offer of a visit.

The Chairperson: Thank you.