



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Health, Social Services and
Public Safety

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Fire and Rescue Service: DHSSPS Briefing

24 October 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Sue Ramsey (Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs
Ms Pam Brown
Mr Gordon Dunne
Mr Samuel Gardiner
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Conall McDevitt

Witnesses:

Ms Lynne Curran	Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Mr Noel McCann	Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Ms Julie Thompson	Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

The Chairperson: Our first presentation on the Fire and Rescue Service is from the Department, which has been invited because the service is an arm's-length body, and therefore the Department has responsibility to ensure that it is operating in a proper manner. We can use this session to explore some of the points that were made about how the Department responded when it became aware of the problems, what changes the Department has made with regard to monitoring and what lessons it has learned, etc. They were damning reports, and we got a chance to question the Minister on them last week. This is the first opportunity that we have had to talk to the Department and the Fire and Rescue Service about specific details.

I am conscious that it is 3.35 pm and we still have two presentations to hear.

Mr McDevitt: On a point of order, Chairperson. Why were the reports redacted?

The Chairperson: Let us hear the presentations. That will probably be one of your first questions to the Department. It was not us; we received them like that.

I will hand over to Julie, who will introduce her team and make her presentation, after which we will open the session to questions.

Ms Julie Thompson (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Thank you, Chair. I am joined by Noel McCann and Lynne Curran from the Department's public safety unit.

Thank you for the opportunity to brief the Committee on the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) on foot of the Minister's statement to the Assembly on 16 October. Last week, the Minister emphasised the dedication and professionalism of the firefighters who protect our community. First, I

want to reiterate that view and pay tribute to their commitment to saving lives across Northern Ireland on a daily basis.

Over recent years, however, as the Committee is aware, reviews and investigations have had to be carried out into the Fire and Rescue Service's governance arrangements. Those reviews led to the publication of a number of reports last week.

In his comments, the Minister said that the various reports on NIFRS pointed to:

"the need for a radical improvement in the way that complaints and grievances are dealt with, for strengthened corporate governance arrangements, for better team working, for improved recruitment procedures and for a culture of change that is led from the top."

The Minister and Members of the Assembly expressed the view that mistakes had been made in the past, that resolute and timely action was needed to deal with the issues that had been identified and that disciplinary action should be appropriately considered. At the outset, I want to assure the Committee that the Department will work with the Fire and Rescue Service to ensure that the various recommendations are implemented and that the changes happen.

The Minister published four reports covering three broad areas. The first concerned a range of issues raised by a NIFRS staff member in July 2011 under the whistle-blowing policy. These related to financial irregularities and corporate governance issues in NIFRS, and were investigated by the Department's internal auditors.

A further investigation was carried out by the Department's internal auditors into issues raised under the whistle-blowing policy by a second NIFRS staff member dealing with stores. There were also two investigations into a full-time firefighter recruitment exercise that was run by NIFRS in 2011. Those investigations were conducted by the London Fire Brigade under the auspices of Sir Ken Knight and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's central investigation service.

The reports contain a considerable amount of detail, reflecting the nature of the investigations carried out, and a wide range of recommendations relating to the way that things are done at NIFRS headquarters. They point to the need for a major programme of change. NIFRS senior management have already indicated that they accept all the recommendations contained in the various reports and that they will be implemented. The Department has requested that NIFRS submit its proposals for the detailed implementation of the recommendations and its change management programme within the next few weeks.

It has to be said that the governance issues in NIFRS have not been helped by considerable instability in its senior management team over the past couple of years. There have been changes at chair level and there have been no less than four chief fire officers over the past four years. There have been long-standing vacancies at director level, and there has been no director of human resources for two and a half years.

The lack of a director of HR has clearly been a considerable disadvantage to the organisation, and the reports have identified weaknesses in grievance processes and harassment, disciplinary, recruitment and overtime policies. However, we are hopeful that that post will be filled in the near future.

As the Committee is aware, given the scale of the governance issues, there have been significant changes to the very top of the organisation, with the appointment in August of Jim Wallace as interim chief executive for a period of 12 to 18 months. Jim's role is to provide a much needed focus on corporate governance and to lead the significant change management agenda that faces the organisation. Alongside him is Chris Kerr, who has been appointed interim Chief Fire Officer and is responsible for fire and rescue operations. They will be here later today to advise the Committee on the proposed way ahead for NIFRS in addressing the many issues of concern.

Over the past few years, the Department has carried out quarterly accountability and assurance meetings with the chair, Chief Fire Officer and senior management team. Those meetings are used to monitor NIFRS in terms of its corporate effectiveness and address any areas of concern. We have revised the management statement and financial memorandum to ensure that NIFRS is clear about its responsibilities. Departmental representatives have, as a matter of routine, also attended all NIFRS board and committee meetings as observers over the past four years. We review all key NIFRS documentation, including plans and strategies, and meet with NIFRS managers on a regular basis outside the formal accountability arrangements.

The Department's view was that that increased level of involvement would have been sufficient to ensure that the previous problems at NIFRS did not recur. We are, therefore, highly concerned that it took the actions of two whistle-blowers to bring some of these matters to our attention, leading to the publication of two of the reports last week. It is very clear that the Department needs to ensure that its monitoring arrangements are effective so that we can provide assurances that the recommendations and change management programme are being actioned by NIFRS senior management.

I acknowledge the role of the whistle-blowers and recognise the anxiety that they experienced during this process. The Minister does not just want to defend the right of staff to whistle-blow but to encourage it where they have genuine concerns and do not feel that they can raise an issue with their manager in the normal way.

Looking forward, clearly it is vital that NIFRS, the Department and all its arm's-length bodies (ALBs) learn lessons from this experience. We are continuing to build on our accountability arrangements with our ALBs, requiring consistent and early business planning, as well as ensuring that we have firm arrangements for holding ALBs to account. In particular, we will work closely with NIFRS senior management to provide our support to ensure that this process of change happens. We want to move forward with them to putting things right so that confidence can be restored in their leadership, with high standards of corporate governance in place and the recommendations from these reports implemented.

Jim and Chris will express their personal commitment later this afternoon to that change agenda. I and my team are happy to answer questions.

The Chairperson: OK. Just before I get into my questions, I want to reiterate that this material that we are covering in the reports doing is in no way a criticism of the work that is done on the ground by the Fire Service. At times, Fire Service personnel are putting their own lives at risk. The reality, however, is that there is an issue of morale, and that can have an impact on any organisation. However, before I get into some of the substantive questions I have, I will ask you to answer the point that Conall raised before your presentation.

Ms Thompson: The reports were redacted on the basis of legal advice because of the personal names involved. The post holder is there to reference who they were but, equally, the references to outside parties were redacted on the basis of legal advice.

Mr McDevitt: These are all in the public domain. I can name them all now. So, if I name them to you, are you going to deny they are who they are?

Ms Thompson: I agree with you that a large portion of this material is in the public domain. We did not want to put that out in our paperwork but I appreciate that you can deduce or get the information from a wide range of other sources.

Mr McDevitt: If I name them all for you now, will you confirm that these are the people so that we do not accidentally ask the wrong question?

Ms Thompson: I could certainly talk about the post holders involved. I am happy to do so.

Mr McDevitt: You will not confirm who the advertising agency is, for example.

Ms Thompson: The advertising agency has been reported in the press, but has been redacted from the document on the basis of legal advice.

Mr McDevitt: So the company reported in the press is the company we are talking about.

Ms Thompson: I would suggest that it is.

Mr McDevitt: So what is the name of the company reported in the press?

Ms Thompson: You are putting me in a position where I am not comfortable because the basis of the legal advice is that we should not talk about that company.

Mr McDevitt: Can you share the legal advice with us?

The Chairperson: I have just asked the Committee Clerk to get that.

Mr McDevitt: This is bizarre.

Mr McCarthy: It is; yes.

Mr McDevitt: This is absolutely bizarre. These are named individuals. Their names are in the public domain. They are public officials who are accountable to you and, through you, to us. These are companies that are procuring openly for public business. If there are legal grounds for withholding their names, I want to see it.

Ms Thompson: OK.

Mr McDevitt: Unless you can tell me what that advice is now.

Ms Thompson: I am telling you about the advice that we have been given and the basis on which the reports were put on the website, but I appreciate that a considerable amount of detail has already been put into the public domain by other parties.

The Chairperson: OK, but —

Mr McDevitt: We will come back to it.

The Chairperson: Yes, but I want the Committee to agree that we get our own legal advice on it as well.

Mr McDevitt: Absolutely, Chair; that is an excellent idea.

The Chairperson: OK. For the record, when he made a statement in the Assembly, the Minister named one of the whistle-blowers. So, despite the legal advice, people were named in the Assembly. On that point, why is only one grievance case mentioned when the evidence showed that there were two whistle-blowers, each with a grievance?

Ms Thompson: The connection between the two is described in one of the allegations in the first investigatory report. The link is to the grievance that is related to that whistle-blower, and that is the issue that has been raised by the whistle-blower. So it concentrates on the grievance related to that whistle-blower but alludes to the other grievance that is already in train. Allegation 10, which is around this issue, mentions the relationship between those two grievances.

The Chairperson: OK, but two people were involved and it seems as if the reports are focusing more on the information from one person than the other.

Ms Thompson: The reports are focused on the allegations that were raised by the two whistle-blowers and the two reports reflect allegations and report back against those. That is the basis for and premise behind each of the reports. We know that grievances need to be dealt with, and one of the significant actions that need to come out of this is to deal with those outstanding grievances and get them addressed. That is one of the issues, if you like, for NIFRS as it moves ahead. However, the reports concern the allegations, as raised by the whistle-blowers.

The Chairperson: Yes, but most of the time, the investigation just talks about "the whistle-blower", not whistle-blowers.

Ms Thompson: Each report talks about the whistle-blower related to that report, the allegations that that whistle-blower raised and the investigation that flowed from that. So each report starts from the allegations that the whistle-blower for that particular report raised. One of those whistle-blowers raised the issue of adherence to HR policy, and you are quite right, Chair, that there is a focus on that

issue. However, we are aware of the wider grievances around NIFRS and the need to ensure that those grievances are handled appropriately and resolved quickly.

The Chairperson: Your answers are leading me to ask other questions about the HR director's position. You said that the post was vacant for two years and the Department was aware of that. Why did the Department not step in at that time and do something about it? Other Departments have done that.

Ms Thompson: The Department did put in place interim arrangements for a period. I will ask for a bit of detail on that, but there was an interim arrangement and, in effect, a secondment was put in place for part of that time. When I said that it was vacant for two and a half years, I mean that it was substantively vacant for that time, but we stepped in and somebody was in place until last summer.

The Chairperson: Tell us when you stepped in and what happened in that period.

Mr Noel McCann (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): It is fair to say that we were concerned that there would be a gap at HR director, and that is why we arranged for Heather Ellis to be seconded from the Southern Trust to Fire and Rescue from summer 2010 until summer 2011. Approaching summer 2011, we were assured by the NIFRS senior management team that it would very soon be able to appoint substantively to the HR director's post. Heather Ellis had also indicated, at that point, that she did not want to continue in her period of secondment, and so that secondment came to an end last summer. It was the expectation of the Department that that post would be substantively filled. In the event, though, there were some glitches in the appointment process at NIFRS. They had to redo some of the work in relation to assessment centres and they had some other difficulties. That meant that the appointment has remained unfilled since then.

The Chairperson: That does not sit right with me, and I assume it does not sit right with other Members. I have said that to them, and to the Minister. The Department seems to have taken its eye off the ball on this. OK, you seconded someone from summer 2010 to 2011. She made a decision to move on, on the basis that there could be another appointment. However, there were glitches and there was not another appointment. What did the Department do?

Mr N McCann: It is fair to say that we were getting assurances from NIFRS senior managers at the time that they were confident that they could go ahead with the substantive appointment to the director post, and that they did not want another secondment arrangement. Their backup plan was to temporarily promote someone internally to that post. Those were the assurances that we were getting.

The Chairperson: It did not happen.

Mr N McCann: I accept that. In hindsight, that is clearly not what happened. However, all we could go on at the time was the assurances that we were getting from NIFRS, first of all, about the process, and, secondly, about their position on the resources.

The Chairperson: Do you feel annoyed that a partner, in the same organisation, led you up the garden path? It is a part of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and it just seems to be —

Ms Thompson: As I said in my opening statement, holding ALBs to account, and how we do that, is a significant part of the Department's business and we need to continue to learn from the experiences of this and improve our processes as we go forward. Absolutely, Chair: it is vitally important that we do that.

The Chairperson: The Minister, in his statement, said that he hoped that the board would be listening to the calls in the House for people to be disciplined, on the back of some of that stuff that you have just told us. What are the board's powers in relation to disciplining members of the management staff in the Fire Service?

Ms Thompson: Most of the disciplinary procedures are carried out by executive management rather than the board. The board sits as a right of appeal over the disciplinary procedures. It can ask the executive team about the various decisions that have been taken. However, primacy in disciplinary policy in NIFRS belongs to management. Now, as to —

The Chairperson: Sorry, Julie. Has the Minister got it wrong, when he believed that the board could do that?

Ms Thompson: NIFRS wants to consider whether disciplinary action is appropriate. There is a need to get an external assessment of that from outside the organisation. It needs advice on the appropriateness or otherwise of disciplinary action, and it will report that through the management team to the board. The board will certainly be kept in the loop with regard to decision-making as to whether disciplinary action is necessary.

The Chairperson: When will we know?

Ms Thompson: It is proposed to take that forward fairly quickly. There is no reason to believe that it cannot, as a discrete piece of work.

The Chairperson: Has the board met?

Ms Thompson: It is meeting next Tuesday, as I understand it.

The Chairperson: From the time the reports were launched, and the Minister making his statement, has the board met?

Ms Thompson: No, it has not met in the intervening time, as far as I am aware. The board meeting is scheduled for next Tuesday. It has not met since the statement of last Tuesday. The board members will, obviously, debate this issue and how they want to take matters forward. Whether disciplinary action is necessary will be a part of that debate. It will want to consider the evidence, look through the body of the reports and consider the most appropriate action from there. It intends to do that. Jim Wallace may be able to explain that in more detail.

The Chairperson: Does it not concern you that you had all those reports last week and the board has not met?

Ms Thompson: The board has not met formally since last week. Its formal board meeting is next Tuesday, as originally planned.

The Chairperson: You can have extraordinary meetings; we have all sat on organisations and boards. It concerns me that you had all those reports last week but the board has not met formally or informally or whatever way you want to call it. Does that not concern you?

Ms Thompson: The information has been shared with the board members. They and the chair, obviously, are well apprised of the issues. They will get the opportunity to have a more formal discussion next Tuesday. We have written to NIFRS to follow up on the back of the Minister's statement and ask how, when and by who the recommendations will be implemented. We focused on not only the recommendations but the wider issues, such as the likes of disciplinary action, and we asked NIFRS to respond to us. That is already in play.

The Chairperson: I have another couple of quick questions. I am aware that members want to get in as well. I will ask a couple, go back round members and then, if need be, do another round. I have a substantial amount of questions, but I want members to get in as well. Will the Department be at the board meeting to observe what happens?

Ms Thompson: The Department will be at the board meeting.

The Chairperson: Will we get a report of that?

Ms Thompson: Yes.

The Chairperson: Interestingly, special measures were introduced in the Belfast Trust. Is the Department thinking of introducing special measures on this?

Ms Thompson: The Minister will need to consider that. Effectively, a lot of the arrangements that are in place in NIFRS replicate that special measures approach in Belfast. We have a lot more formal engagements with NIFRS already in place. It is up to the Minister whether he wants to put in place further measures around that. We will work with him on that.

The Chairperson: OK. The Minister also said that it would be appropriate for the accounting officer of the Fire Service to consider whether the failings in relation to overtime payments for recruitment merit investigation around disciplinary procedures. Who is the accounting officer?

Ms Thompson: The accounting officer is Jim Wallace.

The Chairperson: Has he advised the Department of whether he intends to take forward disciplinary procedures?

Ms Thompson: As I have already described, NIFRS with some independent advice and support, intends to consider all of the recommendations and evidence in the reports about whether disciplinary action should be taken. It will then inform him and the board. The commitment is there. You can obviously talk to Jim about that to look at all of the reports in that vein. That recommendation is in only one report, but NIFRS is committed to looking at it across all the reports.

The Chairperson: Is the board meeting next week open to the public?

Ms Lynne Curran (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Yes.

The Chairperson: All of it?

Ms Thompson: I do not know specifically about next Tuesday.

The Chairperson: Could you find out and give us the details?

Ms Thompson: Yes.

The Chairperson: Is the assistant chief fire officer who dealt with the recruitment exercise still in post?

Ms Thompson: That person is still in post, but has been off for quite some time on sick leave.

The Chairperson: OK. I will come back to some of that.

Mr McCarthy: This is the worst and most difficult Committee meeting that I have sat at. Julie, and your colleagues, with all due respect — Julie particularly — you are doing your best, but you are not convincing me in respect of the seriousness of this whole episode. Last week, when the Minister provided his statement, I said that it was the most damning report that ever came before the Assembly. I think that he agreed with me. If he did not, I still maintain that it is.

This is horrendous stuff that we are discussing: bonuses, Land-Rovers, recruitment, equipment stores and all of those things are very serious. I am going to ask you a straightforward question: at the end of this, who is going to carry the can? Who is going to be responsible? It is not going to be you, because you are down there. Somebody has to carry the can. You mentioned Jim Wallace and Chris Kerr. They are, I understand, fairly new recruits, so they cannot be expected to carry the can. Julie, I suggest to you and your colleagues that, at the end of this process, the Minister is responsible for the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, and the buck stops there. He will, perhaps, have to look at his position. It is as serious as that.

There is so much in the report that we could talk about. However, paragraph 1.2 states:

"The CFO proposed the appointment of an independent person".

This independent person was to examine all the problems associated with the grievances.

Paragraph 1.4 states:

"The Permanent Secretary at DHSSPS instructed the CFO not to proceed with his proposal for an independent investigation and asked DHSSPS Internal Audit Group to investigate."

As far as I know, that is the way it went. Why on earth would the permanent secretary overrule what was, in my opinion, the best and proper way to go, which was getting an independent person to come in and examine all that was going on.

Although only two of the nine allegations were substantiated, three were largely substantiated and another two were partly substantiated. That says to me that there are a number of serious questions to answer. We are talking about a public service. I reiterate what the Chairperson said, which is that we are not talking about the men and women in the street, because they do a fantastic job. We have said that on the Assembly Floor. It is not them; rather, it is the people at the top who have made a complete and absolute Horlicks of this, and we need answers.

I am not convinced by what Julie is telling us this afternoon. She is here for the next 20 minutes or maybe half an hour to get through this. The guys who are coming in afterwards are relatively new, so they will not be able to answer for what happened before their appointment. Can you tell us why the permanent secretary overruled that proposal?

The Chairperson: Julie is here to provide answers on behalf of the Department. If we need answers beyond that, we will get them.

Mr McCarthy: I appreciate that, but it seems odd that Julie has been sent here today to take the flak from the Committee. There you go. I have had my say, so perhaps you can give us some answers, Julie.

Ms Thompson: I am here because I am the senior responsible person in the Department who looks after and oversees the Fire and Rescue Service. That is the position that I hold when I am here. I would like to emphasise that we do not find these reports pleasant reading or acceptable. All the issues need to be addressed, as do the recommendations. As I said, the issue of whether there should be disciplinary action needs to be followed up and considered. As the Minister said, we will be watching what happens to establish what should happen thereafter.

Mr McCarthy: Julie is saying that we need to establish whether disciplinary action should be taken. The man and woman on the street are asking who is responsible and saying that whoever is responsible should take the flak. It should not be a question of if there should be disciplinary action but against whom and when. In my opinion, action should be taken as quickly as possible.

The Chairperson: For information, our reason for wanting to hear from the Department, plus the chief executive and the Chief Fire Officer, is that some questions will overlap.

Mr McCarthy: OK.

Ms Thompson: I will deal with the question on the proposal for an independent investigation. Ultimately, the permanent secretary did put in place an independent investigation. The report refers to the DHSSPS internal audit group, which is independent from the Fire and Rescue Service. It was a conscious decision at that point to ensure that we were, if you like, in control of what was happening and of the investigation to make sure that it was carried out appropriately. At that stage, we had received a range of assurances from the Fire and Rescue Service about how it wanted to proceed. That was not proving effective, so we needed to step in and take over at that point, which is what happened from October/November.

Mr McCarthy: A couple of weeks ago, I raised concerns about the money that the Fire Service had to hand back. As I understand it, at present, the Fire Service is not properly equipped with the most modern fire suits, equipment and fire engines. Indeed, I understand that the IT equipment at fire headquarters is well below par. Business cases had been made for those items and we were told that, for some reason, someone in the Department simply did not want to co-operate. So the money had to be handed back and all that equipment is outstanding. The men and women whom we praise so much are not getting the proper equipment; the service is running out of fire engines; and the IT at headquarters is clapped out, yet money had to be handed back.

The Chairperson: It is up to you if you want to answer that, Julie, because we are trying to focus on the allegations —

Ms Thompson: I reassure you that the processes for everything that you mentioned are moving, procurements are proceeding, and we are moving towards purchasing the personal protective equipment (PPE) and the mobilisation equipment. All of that is in hand and moving ahead.

Mr McCarthy: Good. OK, that will do at the moment.

Mr McDevitt: Chair, may I get some guidance on redaction? If I were to ask a series of questions to ascertain facts and ask the witnesses to name the individuals who were in post on given dates, would that be in order?

The Chairperson: We would need to take advice.

Mr McDevitt: OK. I will take the Committee Clerk's advice.

The Chairperson: Today's meeting is not the end of this, Conall.

Mr McDevitt: No, it absolutely is not. I agree with you.

Let us just deal with what we can talk about. Julie, you said that departmental officials started attending the board four years ago. When exactly did you start attending board meetings?

Ms Curran: It was after 1 May 2009.

Mr McDevitt: The first of May 2009 was not four years ago.

Ms Curran: Sorry, three years.

Mr McDevitt: So you were not attending board meetings in February 2008, when the issue of unapproved bonus payments was raised?

Ms Curran: No.

Mr McDevitt: You were, however, attending board meetings in late 2009, when unapproved sponsorship issues arose?

Ms Curran: Yes.

Mr McDevitt: What about in July 2010, when the issue of adherence to HR policy arose?

Ms Curran: Yes.

Mr McDevitt: And in May 2011, when the issue of the completion of DFP fraud returns arose?

Ms Curran: I cannot give the Committee a guarantee that someone attended all of those meetings. We attended when we could. I would have to check our records to see whether somebody attended.

Mr McDevitt: What I heard Julie say was that departmental officials attended the board and its committee's meetings.

Ms Thompson: That is the general principle, certainly —

Mr McDevitt: You did not attend all meetings?

Ms Thompson: We can check out exactly which ones we attended, if that would be helpful. We will also need to check out whether the specific issues raised in the report were raised at those board meetings.

Mr McDevitt: I am just coming to that now. If we can just establish —

The Chairperson: Will you also check the grade of the official who attended the meetings?

Ms Thompson: Yes.

Mr McDevitt: Chair, if the Committee is in agreement, I would like a list of all board meetings and board committee meetings at which the Department was represented after that policy started.

The Chairperson: The Department will provide that list, as well as the ones from which it was absent.

Mr McDevitt: Yes, you are absolutely right that we need a full list of the meetings that took place. There has to be an audit and risk committee of the Fire Service board, but is there also a human resources committee?

Ms Curran: Yes.

Mr McDevitt: I presume that you were present at those meetings.

Ms Curran: My recollection is that the human resources committee came into existence only when the new board was set up in 2010.

Mr McDevitt: When in 2010 was the new board established?

Ms Curran: On 1 October.

Mr McDevitt: So there was no human resources committee when the issues of adherence to HR policy were live, which, as I understand it, was from April 2010 to July 2010.

Ms Thompson: It started from there.

Mr McDevitt: That is when it arose as an issue. So there was no HR committee at that time.

Ms Curran: Not to the best of my recollection.

Mr McDevitt: None of that is reflected in your report. Do you not think it strange that you did not reflect an obvious failing in corporate governance?

Ms Thompson: In the report, we have reflected a considerable amount of evidence and gathering of information. I assure the Committee that over 400 documents were looked at and almost 60 staff were interviewed in connection with the first whistle-blowing report. I am sure that you will understand if we are not clear on all of that detail today. We can go back and check that for you to provide clarity on what was and was not done at that stage.

Mr McDevitt: I understand that the allegations made by the whistle-blowers were investigated, but the report does not tell us much about what the Department was doing. Regardless of what the whistle-blowers may or may not have brought to your attention, specifically since the Department started attending board meetings in 2009, I am interested in knowing what the Department was doing. What interest was the Department taking? How was the Department taking an interest? Can you provide us with any detail of the Department raising any issues of corporate governance? If so, how? Where is the evidence? Who did that?

Ms Thompson: Corporate governance issues were raised as part of the original delivery and innovation division (DID) report on the Fire Service around 2009-10. We have been following up on those recommendations with the Fire Service and ensuring that they are implemented. As I said at the beginning, we have also been working on how we can improve the governance, generally, of ALBs, and, specifically, of the Fire Service. We have reshaped our accountability meetings, which now focus on governance. We have also looked at the roles of control assurance standards and the need to have mid-year assurance statements.

You are right to point out that some issues relate to the time of the new board, some pre-date the new board and some are within a time frame or within areas that we, perhaps, should have known more about. The bonus payment, for instance, is an area that there has been concern about in the Fire Service, although the bonuses recorded in this report pre-date those later qualified in the accounts. We were, of course, aware of the suspension of the whistle-blower and the difficulties associated with that. The permanent secretary has issued an apology to the whistle-blower.

Is there an acceptance that the Department has not done everything right here? I agree that there is. We accept that we need to learn lessons from this, both for NIFRS moving forward and for other arm's-length bodies.

Mr McDevitt: I do not want to hog the meeting, but I think it worth noting that the Department appointed the previous board and this board. There is a serious question in my mind, as a member of a public authority board, about whether board members were negligent in their directorial duties. There is a genuine question. I am not saying that they were, but that clearly relates to the past board and, arguably, to the present board, given some of the issues that have arisen during its mandate.

I want to ask you about the report on stock, in which your investigators state that they were unable to complete all the tests for stock control, tracing and requisitioning. They say that they were not able to investigate fully. However, you were able to conclude that the whistle-blower's claims were not fully substantiated. How could you say that the whistle-blower's claims were not fully substantiated if, by your own admission, you could not fully investigate?

Ms Thompson: In that report, we certainly concluded that there was a conflict of interest between the then manager of the store and the running of the company. On the basis of the investigation conducted, the investigators could not say definitively whether the business that he operated and the role that he performed impacted on the business of NIFRS. There are weaknesses in the stock side of NIFRS that need to be resolved. Some of that has been picked up by NIFRS internal audit, and a range of its recommendations are in process. Unfortunately, that meant that we could not prove whether there was any impact from the store manager's relationship with that company.

Mr McDevitt: There is a big difference between writing a public statement, which says that the claims are not fully substantiated, and not being able fully to investigate the claims. You are telling me that you did not fully investigate them, because you could not or you did not want to. It is fine if you could not investigate them, but it is not fine if you did not want to. It is not fine to say that the claims were not fully substantiated when, clearly, the investigation was not complete.

Ms Thompson: The report says that we cannot say whether the business that he operated impacted on the work of NIFRS. We have substantiated the allegations of lack of control over stock reconciliation. Unfortunately, the records are not sufficient to enable us to say whether the business impacted on that work.

Mr McDevitt: I will come back to that, Chair.

Mr Dunne: Thank you for coming here today to answer some difficult questions. I do not think that we will get into all of the detail today. I would like you to clarify a couple of points. The Chief Fire Officer is coming in to talk to us later. When did he come into post?

Ms Thompson: In August of this year.

Mr Dunne: So he has not been involved in the actions that we are talking about.

Ms Thompson: He was brought in specifically to address the issues of corporate governance and to provide a focus on that. As a result, we have been able to split the role with Chris Kerr, who leads and is responsible for fire and safety operations. That allows a complete focus to be given to brushing up on, improving and dealing with the corporate governance issues that have been reported. I believe that that particular focus is fundamentally needed in NIFRS over the next 12 to 18 months.

Mr Dunne: Who is Chris Kerr?

Ms Thompson: Chris Kerr is the acting Chief Fire Officer, and Jim Wallace is the chief executive.

Mr Dunne: You told us that the chief executive was brought in fairly recently, so they are both relatively new to the whole situation.

Ms Thompson: Chris Kerr is new to his current role, but he is not new to NIFRS.

Mr Dunne: That is grand. How many staff are employed in the Fire Service?

Ms Thompson: About 2,000.

Mr Dunne: So it is quite a large organisation. As other members have said, it is an excellent service. It is not just a Fire Service; it is a Fire and Rescue Service. Many people miss that point. Officers carry out their job at considerable risk, and we very much appreciate the work that they do. The majority of those 2,000 work at the coalface and are not part of this situation.

I have a few basic questions. You are accountable for the Fire Service. What sort of audit procedures did the Department, which heads up the Fire Service, have in place prior to the report's findings? Why did such audits not raise concern about non-compliance in previous years?

Ms Thompson: We have a range of accountability and governance mechanisms, including formal meetings with the chairperson, the Chief Fire Officer, the senior management team —

Mr Dunne: I am talking about audit. Formal meetings are one thing. People sit around drinking cups or tea. With due respect to the board, it merely ratifies recommendations from management; it is not involved in the day-to-day management of the Fire Service. Prior to the report's findings, what procedures were in place to audit the work of Fire Service management on an ongoing basis?

Ms Thompson: As in any relationship with an arm's-length body, we rely on the work of the organisation's internal audit and, equally, the work of external audit that goes over the top of that. The fact that we brought in our internal audit team for the two investigations is very unusual; that would not normally happen. It was brought in deliberately to allow the Department to understand directly what was going on and why that was the case. There was a deliberate change to do that and to bring our internal auditors in. It would be very unusual —

Mr Dunne: Was that audit external to the Fire Service?

Ms Thompson: Absolutely.

Mr Dunne: I think that we all appreciate that that had to be done to give the investigation the credibility that it needed.

Ms Thompson: That was unusual, and it would certainly not be normal for a Department to audit an arm's-length body in the way that you have described. Having said that, we know that we need to get more evidence, specifically to back up assurances to the Department. The grievances, for example, were in play from, roughly, the summer of 2010, and we relied on a range of assurances from NIFRS senior management about the processes for tackling them. With the benefit of hindsight, we appreciate that we needed to get more evidence that things were moving on. It would not be normal for the Department to be involved or have a detailed understanding of grievance processes in an arm's-length body. That is the normal, operational business of an ALB. With the benefit of hindsight, those grievances had gone on for far too long, and we should have got more evidence behind the assurances that we were given at that time. We know that, in future, we need to do that and ensure that such grievances are effectively managed. Grievances are on the list of areas that need to be dealt with and responded to by Fire Service management. I know that management is committed to doing that and to moving those grievances forward. It is one of the very urgent issues that need to be addressed. There are a number of those, and they have been outstanding for too long.

Mr Dunne: It is a reflection of a serious breakdown of senior management in the Fire Service. It looks as though the Department, to which they are accountable, was not aware of the issues, was not looking at the issue in any detail and was not carrying out any surveillance to get an assurance that the work of the senior management team was compliant. How do you feel about that? Do you not feel that the Department needs to look at how it monitors the role of the Fire Service in future? Local

government, for example, comes under a great deal of scrutiny, and internal and external audit systems and procedures are put in place. We expect that of every Department. I find it astonishing that the Fire Service was not monitored on a regular, planned basis in the way that Departments are.

Ms Thompson: They are and were subject to internal and external audit procedures, even throughout that timeline. There is no doubt about that.

Mr Dunne: Is that internal audit within the Fire Service?

Ms Thompson: Yes. That is normal —

Mr Dunne: Where was that reported to?

Ms Thompson: It was reported to its audit and risk committee and, from there, to the board.

Mr Dunne: Where did it go from there? Did it go up to the Department?

Ms Thompson: Yes. The Department was aware of it. It would have known what the internal audit recommendations were, and it would track them. Those issues are picked up —

Mr Dunne: That is an indictment on the Department. If the Department was aware of the issues, why were they not acted on?

Ms Thompson: We need to separate the normal internal audit that has been going on in the Fire Service —

Mr Dunne: Sorry, if internal audit works properly, the issues of internal management would be highlighted. If a system works properly, you should not need whistle-blowers. If there is openness, fairness and integrity in an organisation, people with grievances will have no fear of raising them, and they will do so. It stinks of corruption, rottenness and fear if people are unable to report things in an open and honest manner.

We want the findings of the report to be investigated. The bottom line is that we need to put in place the proper procedures to stop a recurrence, as would happen in any organisation. That is what the Department has to do. It has to assure us and the public that processes and procedures will be put in place and that those will be managed and reported on regularly through the board and the Department. At the end of the day, the Department is accountable. It carries the can, and, I suppose, it goes back to the Minister. This is public money, and there is an accountability to the public. We are all here to monitor and to make sure that there is value for money and all those good things. However, when I think of how that was managed, I find it incredible that the Department was not aware of it.

Ms Thompson: We are aware of what the internal audit function does, the reports that it produces and how it monitors the recommendations that it makes. That would be normal for an arm's-length body in its relationship with the Department. I can provide assurance on that.

Equally, I agree with you that we need to ensure that the recommendations are fully addressed, that everything is dealt with appropriately and that, therefore, proper and full corporate governance works more effectively in the future. Although the routine internal audit work has been reported through to us and we follow that up and raise issues with the Fire Service — there is certainly evidence of that — the internal audit report that resulted from the whistle-blower investigation came from the Department.

We are committed to learning lessons. Some of those — Jim's appointment; the need to fill senior posts; and the need to monitor the recommendations and ensure that they are fully implemented — are specific to the Fire Service. We have provided additional support in procurement to deal with the issue that Mr McCarthy raised. We know that we need to follow up on grievances and ensure that we get evidence about those. We are also looking at accountability generally, the role of the board and the handling of whistle-blowing. The Department needs to put a range of actions in place, and we are committed to doing so.

Mr Dunne: I appreciate that.

I have one last point. Was it because of the poor management and the breakdown of systems and procedures within senior management that people shied away from or avoided even applying for posts in the organisation? As a result, the vacancies proved difficult, if not impossible, to fill. Is that a possibility?

Ms Thompson: I think that I would go back to where the Chair started when she referred to the morale of the organisation, which is not where it should be. It is, maybe, understandable that morale dips when people are not happy working in an organisation, and it has dipped. The senior management team, and Jim Wallace in particular, are fully committed to addressing that. That will take time; it is not fixable immediately. They can look at actions to do with grievances and disciplinary procedures. Those areas can and should be worked on quickly. Issues of culture and morale will take time to address, but there is a commitment to do that.

The Chairperson: A couple of other members want to come back in, but I have questions on a specific point raised by Gordon and Conall. Have you or anybody else in the Department been reprimanded or disciplined? Will that happen?

Ms Thompson: I know that the Minister has advised that he will look at the Department. We are looking at the lessons learned from this, not only for the Fire Service but for how we manage all arm's-length bodies. That commitment is there. What the Minister decides to do is up to him, but we are looking at what we could and should have known about. It would have taken a whistle-blower to bring some of it to our attention —

The Chairperson: You did not do the whistle-blower any favours.

Ms Thompson: That has been acknowledged. Equally, I think that it is appropriate to look at what we could have known about and whether, with the benefit of hindsight, more could have been done. However, not everything is in that category. The Department is at arm's length from the Fire Service, and some of the issues are maybe in a lower level of detail and would not have come to the Department's attention. Having said that, there is a commitment to stand back against every single issue and identify what we could and should have done about them. However, they are not all in a category where you could say that something different might have happened.

The Chairperson: Where was the director of finance at the time of the unapproved bonuses?

Ms Thompson: Section 2 of the report sets out who was where when those decisions were taken. Effectively, the decisions were taken at the remuneration committee on 26 February 2008 and worked through and awarded at that point. There is correspondence to the director of finance arising from that, and the role of whistle-blower is explained in section 2.3. The decision is taken at the remuneration committee.

The Chairperson: There is an old saying that it is sometimes money for the boys. So, given the accountability mechanism from the Minister, to the permanent secretary, to yourself, to the Department and to the board, will we even attempt to get some of that money back?

Ms Thompson: We will certainly look at that to see whether we can. That will not necessarily be straightforward, but the Minister talked about that in the Assembly last week and has made it very clear that he wants to see whether we can.

The Chairperson: Is the director of finance who was there when this happened a number of years ago still in position?

Ms Thompson: Yes. It is the same director of finance from 2008.

The Chairperson: Was any disciplinary action carried out on the director of finance?

Ms Thompson: The Fire Service is committed to looking at all the reports and all the evidence in them. It will consider whether disciplinary action is appropriate or not. That work will happen very quickly, but it will be based on the evidence.

The Chairperson: The Department is the parent body on this matter. So, between when the reports were published and now — I accept that the board meeting is next week — have you put in any mechanism to give people training on HR, accountability or the workings of a board? Are you convinced that the board is fit for purpose today?

Ms Thompson: We will ask the board to assess where it is against a standardised checklist and provide evidence to the Department on a range of issues. We will ask the board to do that over the winter period, and we will look at that work very critically to establish whether all the necessary processes are in place and the capacity is there and whether any further training, for example, might be needed. We will absolutely take that work forward with the Fire Service.

Mr Beggs: It is really sad that the senior leadership of the Northern Ireland Fire Service has let down the ordinary firemen who put their lives at risk. The senior management of the service needs to reflect on that and on the effect that it might be having on those who put their lives at risk on behalf of the public. I want to pick up on a comment that was made earlier by Assembly Member Dunne. If I picked it up right, he said that the board of the Fire Service's job was to approve the recommendations. That is not my understanding of any board. What is the role of the board?

Ms Thompson: The board is to challenge the management team on whether it is carrying out its functions effectively and whether it is meeting its objectives, as set by the Department, and its statutory duties.

Mr Beggs: I agree that it is a much more detailed role. If it is simply going to approve everything that comes in front of it, it need not bother being there. It has a much wider responsibility. Has there been appropriate training of the board through time? Has that been laid on? Has there been an assessment of the role and responsibility of board members? Has that information been adopted by individual members of the board?

Ms Thompson: All board members have to go through training when they are appointed, but it is one of the areas that we will be asking the Fire Service to consider specifically. Potentially, it has a need to bring more financial expertise on to the board, and the chairperson has recognised that as a weakness in its current make up. Steps will be taken to see how that can be addressed specifically.

Mr Beggs: Has training for the Department's representative who attends the board been looked at as well?

Ms Thompson: We certainly intend to look at that as well.

Mr Beggs: I want to go back to a point that you made earlier. You said that the management team was responsible for taking disciplinary action, and that would be normal in any organisation, but I just want to go through a series of issues contained in the report. Paragraph 1.2 of the 'Investigation of Alleged Irregularities at Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service' states that:

"On 19 August 2011 the CFO placed the Whistleblower on precautionary suspension."

It goes on to say that, during the interview, the Chief Fire Officer:

"accepted that the Whistleblower had acted within the NIFRS Whistleblowing Policy."

If someone acts within the whistle-blowing policy, clearly, they should not be suspended. That is what the then Chief Fire Officer carried out and admitted.

Moving on to paragraph 4.2, and, again, I am not sure whether this is the same individual or there has been a change, because there are no names; there was an instruction from the Chief Fire Officer to the assistant chief fire officer that the Land Rover should be immediately removed from Fire Service premises and returned to the media service company. That was not done, and that individual was ultimately promoted. Someone clearly breached the instruction of senior management, and was then promoted. We are then advised that they incorrectly informed a more junior officer that board approval had been given. That is a second issue of concern.

The Chairperson: Sorry, Roy. Who owned the lock-up that the jeep was in?

Ms Thompson: I am not aware.

The Chairperson: Can you check that out for us?

Ms Thompson: I will see if we can find out.

The Chairperson: Find out whether they have any connection to the Fire Service.

Mr Beggs: Those were two issues of concern with the Chief Fire Officer. I do not know whether the same individual or different individuals were mentioned.

In paragraph 6.1, we are told that in the 2010-11 annual fraud report to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), no mention was made of the whistle-blowing allegation. You are meant to report actual acts of fraud or suspicion of fraud, and there was no report by the accounting officer, who would have been the Chief Fire Officer. He failed to make that report.

Later, in paragraph 6.2, there was an attempt to try to chase up an unusual transaction. The Chief Fire Officer said that he had tried to find the transaction that had been referred to him in February 2011 during investigation of a complaint but was unsuccessful. However, miraculously and very quickly, when the audit team sought to find out the information, it was obtained from another member of staff.

Later on in the same paragraph, we are told that the Chief Fire Officer indicated that:

"it was his intention to have all of these issues independently investigated together when all of the individual complaints processes had been finalised."

I find that to be complete nonsense. Someone has been suspended from their work because of accusations, and complaints were going on, and it is almost as if nothing is agreed until all is agreed. On that basis, you are likely to achieve nothing. That is coming from the Chief Fire Officer. My question is this: who is responsible for disciplining the Chief Fire Officer? Obviously, he cannot discipline himself. It is very clear that the Chief Fire Officer has handled a series of issues badly. As I said, I do not know whether that is the same individual or a number of individuals who have occupied that post. Is it the same individual in every instance?

Ms Thompson: In the issues you have described, it is the same individual, yes.

Mr Beggs: Who is responsible for disciplining the Chief Fire Officer, who, obviously, cannot discipline himself?

Ms Thompson: It is the role of the chairman to consider the disciplinary issues around the Chief Fire Officer.

Mr Beggs: As a matter of interest, where is that individual now? Obviously, replacement management has been put in at the top, and I welcome that. Clearly, that had to be done. Is this someone who is going to be given a golden handshake and a super pension despite a series of questionable actions? Can you tell us where that individual is now, and whether he is still with the organisation? Is his pension at risk because of his behaviour?

Ms Thompson: That individual left the Fire Service in June 2012.

The Chairperson: Sorry, did he not take early retirement?

Ms Thompson: He left. Yes, he took early retirement. With regard to whether anything further can happen with that, that can and will be looked at within the auspices of considering the outcome of these reports. The issue and the concerns that you are raising are valid. The chairperson had a conversation with the Chief Fire Officer, and part of that conversation was around his leadership and the agenda that was ahead of the Fire Service. Shortly after that, the Chief Fire Officer requested to go on early retirement.

Mr Beggs: I am not at all surprised. However, I am concerned about the misuse of his position. It is very serious, particularly the way in which the whistle-blower was dealt with. Bearing in mind, as others have said, that whistle-blowers have a very valid function to play in that they highlight to management, to Departments and to everyone that things are wrong, it is vital that they are not misused and abused. Clearly, in this case, the whistle-blower was misused. I hope that there will be some comeback for those who did that.

The Chairperson: Julie, can you outline the Chief Fire Officer's early retirement package at that time?

Ms Thompson: I do not have those figures with me, Chair, but we can get them for you.

The Chairperson: Can you include any bonus packages? On Roy's point, he has retired, and nothing can be done around the issue of the report. However, when you talk about the Department looking at other options, is there the possibility of criminal proceedings with some of this?

Ms Thompson: Criminal proceedings are one of the few things that you can probably do when somebody has left. However, I do not know whether anything of this nature would be viewed as criminal in that regard and a matter to be taken through that process. All of the reports and all of the evidence will be properly and appropriately considered. There are various angles to that. I think that the Committee has been debating a lot of that today. The individuals involved, the role of the board and the role of the management team at various places all need to be properly considered. It is a very complex thing, and it needs to be looked at. That is the commitment that needs to happen.

The Chairperson: OK. My understanding is that the package was something in the region of £400,000. It is a concern that, whatever happened, whatever conversation took place, someone took early retirement based on some of these allegations at that time, which have now been proven at this stage, and got a package of £400,000.

Are you currently taking any legal advice on the possibility of criminal proceedings?

Ms Thompson: The legal advice, initially, will be for the Fire Service to take. We will obviously then, a bit like I said in the conversation at the very start, take an independent look at that. Initially, this will be looked at by the Fire Service itself. We will then take our own independent legal advice. So, yes, it will be looked at. However, I think that you are right to say that criminal proceedings are likely to be the only outcome that you can take when someone has left an organisation.

The Chairperson: I think that, if you are looking at options, that could be one of the options. So it might be an idea to take legal advice on the possibility of taking criminal proceedings.

Ms Thompson: Legal advice will obviously be sought. There is absolutely no issue about that.

Mr McDevitt: I have just a couple of quickies, Chair. Did the director of finance receive any bonuses or extra award at any time covered by the period of this investigation?

Ms Thompson: The director of finance was one of the non-uniformed officers who received an irregular payment in 2008-09.

Mr McDevitt: So, the current director of finance at the Northern Ireland Fire Service received an irregular payment in 2008-09. How many other senior managers currently in post received irregular payments at that time?

Ms Thompson: None. No one else currently in post received such a payment.

Mr McDevitt: So the director of finance is the only individual currently in post to have received an irregular payment in 2008-09. You are a director of finance, yourself, Julie, and you are very aware of the duties, and, I presume, you are a qualified accountant?

Ms Thompson: Yes.

Mr McDevitt: And I suspect that he would be too?

Ms Thompson: Yes.

Mr McDevitt: So I do not need to remind you of the duties that you are under?

Ms Thompson: No.

Mr McDevitt: He would have had an approval role in that irregular payment.

Ms Thompson: In the payment to himself, or —

Mr McDevitt: In the approval of irregular bonus payments. As director of finance, he would have had a role?

Ms Thompson: I will come back to paragraph 2.3, related to —

Mr McDevitt: Yes, I know. I can read paragraph 2.3. Do you want me to read it into the record?

Ms Thompson: As regards where the director of finance was, a memo was issued. I understand exactly the point that you are making, which is that, if he was aware of a difficulty, he should have alerted somebody that those approvals were not in place. It is difficult not to construe that that should have happened.

Mr McDevitt: Just so that we are absolutely clear, and because colleagues may not have the chance to read paragraph 2.3, and, indeed, paragraph 2.1 might be helpful to colleagues by way of guidance or the allegation in paragraph 2.0 which, kind of, contextualises it.

It would be a reasonable expectation of a properly qualified accountant, serving as director of finance in a public authority the size of the Northern Ireland Fire Service, that he or she would be aware of the statutory parameters around the payment of extraordinary bonuses, and, if a recommendation were made, even if it were made by the board, that was clearly outside of the statutory limit — and in this case the statutory limit, as I understand it, is £5,000 and the bonuses were £15,200 — that he or she would be under a duty to bring that to the attention of the decision-makers?

Ms Thompson: Certainly, based on the evidence in the report, I would concur with that assessment.

Mr McDevitt: I have one last little point of detail. It is the Department that appoints the board, correct?

Ms Thompson: Yes.

Mr McDevitt: And so the Department would meet with board members from time to time?

Ms Thompson: The Department is meeting with the board on an ongoing basis.

Mr McDevitt: No, I mean individually with members. I am aware, for example, that the Department of Justice meets twice a year with all of the independent members of the Policing Board who are directly appointed by the Department and, effectively, evaluates their performance.

Ms Thompson: The performance evaluation process for all of our bodies involves the evaluation of the chair, and the chair then evaluates the non-executive members.

Mr McDevitt: So you do not meet individually with the non-executives?

Ms Thompson: The individual assessments then come up to the Department on an ongoing basis. That is the process by which all of our bodies are run.

Mr McDevitt: Ok, we will come back to that, because that is a whole new area that we probably do not have time for today.

The Chairperson: I want to make one point. On the date when the approval for the payment was given, was there a Department official at that meeting?

Ms Thompson: At the remuneration committee?

Mr McDevitt: I think the Chair is referring to March 2008.

Ms Thompson: No; that was before. There would not have been.

Mr Dunne: Is there a staff report/appraisal system in place across the organisation?

Ms Thompson: My understanding is that they are putting in place and improving their staff appraisal system across the organisation. There have been recommendations around improving that particular process.

Mr Dunne: Throughout the organisation.

Ms Thompson: Throughout the organisation. It needs to be built on and improved. It is not fully effective at this stage.

Mr Dunne: Is that following on from this report or previous evidence?

Mr N McCann: I think that follows on from the delivery and innovation division (DID) report back in 2010.

Ms Thompson: I know that it is one of the things that both Jim Wallace and Chris Kerr are keen to ensure are working more effectively across the organisation. It is certainly significantly on the agenda moving forward.

Mr McCarthy: In answer to Conall, Julie, you said that there was only one payment. I am reading paragraph 2.1, which says that payments were made to four principal uniformed officers.

Ms Thompson: Yes, it was one block paid to four people.

Mr McCarthy: OK; that clarifies that.

The Chairperson: Well, it has not been an easy day. The Minister is well aware, given that he made his statement, that we are going to be discussing as a Committee what our next steps are, after we get the briefing from the chief executive and the Chief Fire Officer. You have some information to give us. I would appreciate that sooner rather than later, so that we can make an informed decision on where we go next as a Committee. There are a lot of questions out there from a lot of people. This is a conversation that is happening right across the board, no matter who you run into. Sometimes the reality is that, because it is public money, there is less of a focus on it. We need to send out a clear message that there needs to be accountability for every penny of public money spent and people need to be held accountable. If they need to be disciplined they need to be disciplined, and if that means that there needs to be a criminal investigation then we need to think about that. We are the guarantors of public money, as you are within your own Department.

Thank you for providing us with what information you could today and being as open as you could. We will come back to it, depending on the conversation that we have after the next presentation. Thanks very much.

Ms Thompson: Thank you, Chair.