



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR JUSTICE

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Prison Service: Delivery of the SEE Programme

29 September 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR JUSTICE

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Givan (Chairperson)
Mr Raymond McCartney (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sydney Anderson
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr Colum Eastwood
Mr Seán Lynch
Ms Jennifer McCann
Mr Basil McCrea
Mr Alban Maginness
Mr Peter Weir
Mr Jim Wells

Witnesses:

| | | |
|---------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| Mr Ronnie Armour |) | |
| Mr Colin McConnell |) | Northern Ireland Prison Service |
| Mr Max Murray |) | |
| Mr Graeme Wilkinson |) | |

The Chairperson:

I welcome Colin McConnell, director general, Ronnie Armour, director of human resources and organisational development, Max Murray, director of offender policy, and Graeme Wilkinson, director of finance and corporate services. I invite Colin to brief us on where we are with the strategic efficiency and effectiveness (SEE) programme.

Mr Colin McConnell (Northern Ireland Prison Service):

Thank you very much Mr Chairman and Committee members. I welcome the opportunity to brief the Committee. As the Committee will recall, my directors and I briefed members in June on the journey that the Justice Minister agreed for the reform of the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS). I shared with you my vision for the Northern Ireland Prison Service of the future, a Prison Service that will become an example of best practice in public service, and strive to be respected and valued by the community it serves.

At that briefing, I set out the scope and scale of the changes that we face to make that vision a reality. In doing so, I outlined the key challenges to be overcome. For the sake of clarity, those challenges are responding to past criticisms; moderating our past focus on security to take a more balanced approach, placing the offender at the centre of our focus; developing a culture of corporate and personal accountability, while strengthening wider partnerships across and beyond the criminal justice system; improving industrial relations; responding to the pressures and needs of a rising and diverse prison population; effectively developing a prisons estate to best meet future demands; living within the tight financial constraints faced by the whole of the public sector in Northern Ireland; and, crucially, improving and getting on top of the day-to-day challenge of getting the basics right.

So, have those key challenges changed or moderated? Three months on, the key issues remain. Consequently, the challenges we face in modernising the Northern Ireland Prison Service are just as formidable. As the Committee will be aware, the much-anticipated final report of the prison review team is expected to be published next month. I doubt that the content of that report will surprise many in this room. We expect that Dame Anne will confirm and reinforce that the need for transformational change of the Northern Ireland Prison Service has been well-established and repeated on a number of occasions.

As I set out in my briefing paper, recent reports, including from the Pearson review team (PRT) in 2009, and Dr Michael Maguire's 2010 report into corporate governance arrangements, focused on the urgent need to radically overhaul NIPS's management approach, structures and working practices, its leadership and oversight, industrial relations and sickness absence, and the underlying organisational culture.

It is worth reminding ourselves that there is a recurring theme, a consistency across all

scrutiny reports, that this is a service in considerable need of fundamental reform. Most recently, Dame Anne's interim report, published earlier this year, picked up on those issues and highlighted again the urgent need for significant improvements in governance, leadership and working practices and to bring about cultural change. Dame Anne's final report will, I believe, reinforce the need for rapid, comprehensive and fundamental reform of the Northern Ireland Prison Service for the same reasons trailed in her interim report, for the same reasons highlighted in the Pearson review in 2009, and for the same reasons raised in Dr Michael Maguire's report in 2010. That is the backdrop against which the Northern Ireland Prison Service has started to take forward its much needed and much required end-to-end reform of the Prison Service.

So, what have we been doing since I last briefed members on our plans for the transformation of the Northern Ireland Prison Service? What have we achieved so far? As the Committee is aware, NIPS has embarked on a four-year programme of reform, badged as the SEE programme: the strategic efficiency and effectiveness programme. The successful delivery of that reform will need to be carefully choreographed. Our corporate and business plan 2012-15 is due to be published at the beginning of October and sets out our journey.

Year 1 focuses primarily on preparing for structural change. In year 2, we will deliver structural change and prepare for cultural change. In year 3, we will focus on delivering cultural change, plus finalising the transition to new structures and new ways of working. In year 4, we will concentrate on consolidating the changes that we have made and on driving improved performance.

As we move through the four-year programme, we will very much focus on transforming the service into a well-led, competently managed, efficient and effective organisation that has the offender at the centre of its focus. It is only by taking that approach that the Northern Ireland Prison Service will be able to reduce the risk of reoffending at the point of release back into the community. That change journey has already started. We have begun to introduce some of the changes set out in that four-year plan and to respond to the high-level, strategic shortcomings that were highlighted by the Dame Anne Owers and the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI).

Since the launch of the SEE programme in June, amongst a significant number of planned activities, we have delivered the following: we have agreed a new statement of purpose to

improve public safety by reducing the risk of reoffending through the management and rehabilitation of offenders in custody. We have also established three new strategic aims: to provide safe, secure and decent custody; to reform and modernise in order to create an efficient and effective service; and to reduce the risk of reoffending. We have produced the 2011-15 corporate plan and the 2011-12 business plan, which will be published in October. The focus of the corporate and business plans is, deliberately and clearly, on reforming the service and getting the basics right.

We have introduced a new communication strategy and a monthly team brief, which updates staff on progress against the SEE programme and other changes affecting the service and its staff. We have established a project team to oversee the transfer of NIPS to Account NI, which, we project, will go live in April 2013. We have restructured headquarters to better align our corporate structures with business delivery. We have confirmed changes to reporting arrangements so that governors in charge now report directly to me, as director general, on operational performance matters.

We have developed and agreed a new set of targets and performance measures for each establishment, and performance against those targets will be monitored as part of the governors' quarterly meetings with me. We have established and set to work a new standards, audit and compliance unit that will have a crucial role in helping the organisation to review and assess the robustness of performance reporting in establishments and compliance against corporate standards.

In relation to the wider SEE programme, progress has also been made against the broad themes of that programme, and since the launch, we have begun to identify the fundamental underpinnings of the concept target operating model. As I said, the SEE programme was officially launched on 28 June, and since then, we have made progress on a wide range of issues. For example, the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) approved the exit scheme's strategic business case on 9 August.

Management commenced discussions with the Prison Officers' Association (POA) and the Prison Governor's Association (PGA) during August to advise them of our proposals for an exit scheme for operational staff aged 50 and above. We are now about to finalise the outline business case for submission through financial services division to DFP, and I am hopeful of a

decision that will enable NIPS to launch a scheme by the end of October.

A concept target operating model has been developed with the assistance of external experts. At a strategic level, the model is being developed to deliver new roles for front line staff; a leaner, more-focused and accountable four-tier management structure; and a standard core day. It also brings forward proposals to move to a 37-hour week for uniformed staff in return for substantial improvements to operational flexibility and effectiveness. We aim to reduce non-effective time. We seek to improve staff:prisoner ratios and to set them at a level where it is appropriate for local circumstances but takes into account comparison with other jurisdictions. Finally, we seek the removal of inefficient and outdated working practices.

Work has commenced to redefine the role of the prison officer. It is proposed to create a new prison custody grade that is focused on the day-to-day routines and provision of safe, decent and secure custody and a new offenders supervisor grade that focuses on intense and directed individualised work with offenders to help them to reduce their assessed risk of reoffending on release through the management and delivery of a personalised severance plan.

A refreshed prison estate strategy, which will bring forward proposals for the development of the NIPS estate over the next 10 years, is a work in progress and is heading towards ministerial consideration once the strategy has benefitted from the conclusions of the final Owers report. A review of dog deployment has been completed with the assistance of external experts, and it made a number of recommendations on the use and effectiveness of dog deployment and the cost of providing and maintaining training. The annual savings from the recommended structural changes are likely to be in excess of £450,000 based on current costs.

As the Committee will expect, NIPS has engaged in direct face-to-face communications and negotiations with our staff associations and has backed those up with published correspondence. In taking this forward, the management team throughout NIPS has been active in taking the message to our workforce. I have met small and large groups of staff in the workplace and face to face to explain why our service must change, to listen to their concerns and to take on board their ideas of how they might contribute more widely to the reforms that we have embarked upon. In taking the work forward, we have, where appropriate, drawn on the experiences and expertise of other jurisdictions and engaged or consulted with subject matter experts to help inform our analysis and plans.

The advantage of fresh perspectives is already delivering considerable benefits. For example, as I have mentioned, we will be able to realise £450,000 in savings through the independent review of the dogs function, and I anticipate that other similar initiatives will have the potential to deliver substantial improvements in delivery as well as reducing cost. I am confident that we are on the right track and that we are doing things the right way. However, one of the major challenges that we face is taking all of that forward against an age-old backdrop of strained relationships with the Prison Officers' Association. As I have said, discussions with the POA have begun but are, for now, strained. We recognise that we need to work on that and we, at the senior level of the Prison Service, are committed to doing what we can to improve the situation.

I have outlined to the Committee the progress that has been made since the prison review team published its interim report earlier this year. While we believe that progress is being made on a wide range of issues, progress is certainly not speedy and, at times, making any progress is really tough. However, if subjected to external scrutiny, am I confident that the progress we have made to date will be judged to be enough? Has what we have achieved so far moved the service on significantly in the months since PRT published its interim report? Probably not. However, we need to put it in context.

The SEE programme is a four-year programme of major fundamental end-to-end reform on a scale not dissimilar to Patten, which took 10 years to complete. So, we are three months into the first phase of the SEE programme, which, as I have said, is about preparing for structural change to come. That phase of preparation and planning is an integral and fundamentally necessary part of the process of transforming the Northern Ireland Prison Service, and that is why I and my colleagues appreciate and recognise the important role that the Justice Committee has to play in the process.

I am certain, as are my colleagues who are here today, that it is imperative for the future success of the Northern Ireland Prison Service that the members of the Justice Committee, the wider Assembly and the Executive engage with us and lend support for the work that my management team and I are striving to drive forward in the face of not insignificant challenges. With the support of the Committee and the wider Government, we will drive forward this reform programme. We will deliver, by the end of year 4, significant and substantial change for the benefit not only of NIPS and those who work for it and reside in it but for those whom we serve

the wider community of Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson:

Thank you for the information, which has been helpful to me and other members. I declare an interest as I have a family member in the Prison Service. The exit scheme is being reviewed, and other proposals are being finalised. You accept that it will be challenging to get 600 people to be part of the scheme, and the report considers whether to focus on having 200 staff exit. It states that that would reduce the budget by around only £10 million, rather than the £17 million that is required. Where are we in the process of getting people to take up the offer, and, if you were not to achieve the numbers that you are talking about, would you have to implement a compulsory scheme?

Mr Ronnie Armour (Northern Ireland Prison Service):

As you correctly said, Mr Chairman, we are finalising proposals and looking at our options. We hope to get our exit scheme out as quickly as possible, and we aim to do so by the end of October. As the paper indicates, we think that it will be challenging and demanding to attract 600 staff to the scheme. Our proposal is that we will put the package out and assess the numbers of applications. Our fallback position is to run a second scheme in 2012. As the Committee probably knows, compensation arrangements are changing. We are operating under the current scheme in Northern Ireland, which is due to change in 2012. Colleagues in DFP are working towards that. In all probability, we will bring forward a second scheme under the new arrangements for staff who are under 50. We will need to see what we will get as a result of that before we take a final decision on compulsory redundancies, but, clearly, that cannot be ruled out at this stage.

The Chairperson:

You propose to change the management structure by removing a number of levels. What is the rationale behind the proposal to do away with the principal officer (PO) post?

Mr Armour:

We are not looking at the principal officer post in isolation. We are looking at our entire management structure, which has seven tiers. That is quite a bureaucratic and cumbersome system, and we believe strongly that it needs to be de-layered to ensure that people have quality jobs to do and that there are clear lines of responsibility and accountability. We have looked

carefully at the PO grade, and we do not feel that it is making a significant contribution that is sufficient to justify retaining it, and we would prefer to remove it and have what we are calling a team leader role, which would be a uniform grade that would operate under three layers of management under the old governor grade.

The Chairperson:

Finally, the report talks about some of the areas that may not be core functions. The dog function is one of them, and learning and skills is another. I did not see your escorting unit mentioned in the report. People have felt that that is under review. Where does that fit in?

Mr Armour:

That is the prisoner escorting and court custody service. We have a CJINI report from last year, which indicates that escorting needs to be reviewed with a view to market testing. The management team accepts that recommendation and is committed to moving ahead with it. I expect that we will be doing that in 2012. However, it is slightly separate, in that it is not part of the review of some of the other areas that are new to this.

Mr Dickson:

Article 51 tells us about the change management team, and the importance of all this change being led at a high strategic level. You tell us that the recruitment process is under way. Is that not a delay? Should you not have completed that, instead of being only at this point now? Can you tell us why it was delayed?

Mr McConnell:

Ronnie will want to comment in more detail, but, essentially, the recruitment process had to be suspended in the first phase simply because we did not get it right. There is no way of packaging that up in a nice way: we just did not get it right. So we relaunched the recruitment process.

Where have we got to? Within the next few weeks, we will be recruiting the first tier of project managers who will be imbedded in each of the directives, and I am working with the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) to appoint a programme manager who will work to me and will supervise the work of the project managers. Ronnie will give you more detail on where exactly we are at.

Mr Armour:

There are two elements to this. As Colin has indicated, there are the programme managers who will be imbedded in each directorate, and then there is the overall strategic change manager. We advertised for all four posts back in June. Then, on reflection, we decided that the job description for the strategic manager was not appropriate and was not challenging enough for that role, so we suspended that competition. That is the one that Colin has been in discussion with SIB about. It has since been re-advertised. We continued with the competition for the other three posts, and, as director general, I have said that we are interviewing for those three appointments in October, so we hope to make appointments quickly after that.

Mr Dickson:

Are you confident that they will hit the ground running to deal with the task in front of them?

Mr McConnell:

Certainly. I have seen the job descriptions, and the advert has gone out. Whereas I am not directly involved in the recruitment process, I have seen the shortlist of candidates and they are high-quality candidates. I am confident that we will get the right people on the ground.

Mr Lynch:

I thank the witnesses for coming before us today to give us an update. Colin mentioned in his briefing that one of the key challenges was cultural change and he said that relations with the POA were strained. To go back to the context, one of the documents stated that there has been:

“a history of restrictive work practices, poor industrial relations”,

and

“a culture of resistance and “a security-led culture”.

With the strained relationship that you say that you have at the moment — and we know that the POA is a major component of the prison system — how much will that stand in your way? I do not doubt your commitment to bringing about fundamental change.

Mr McConnell:

I will give an overview, and Ronnie can talk in more detail. I do not think that we should be at all surprised that relations are strained. The Northern Ireland Prison Service is facing probably the biggest reform programme in its history. I am a member of the staff association and a trade union, and I fully understand and expect trade unions to represent the staff in a way that they

think best serves their needs. I had no expectation at all that any of the staff associations would simply roll over and agree to everything that we propose. So the fact that relations are strained is no great surprise and I do not think it should come as a surprise to anyone else.

Do I think, however, that, in the scheme of things, reform is ultimately achievable? Yes, I do. Do I think that, with some keen, focused and determined work, we can find a way through this? Yes, I do. But, of course, the person who has to manage it day to day is Ronnie Armour, so it is probably best that I ask him for his view.

Mr Armour:

We opened negotiations with the Prison Officers' Association and the Prison Governors' Association in August this year. We outlined to both organisations our core proposals and how we intend to move forward with the change programme. As Colin said, it is no surprise that the Prison Governors' Association and the Prison Officers' Association want to discuss the detail of our proposals with us. The POA put forward alternatives to our proposals, to which we have responded. We continue to meet, by and large on a weekly basis. There is an awful lot more work to be done but we are clear that we are moving ahead with the reform agenda.

Mr Lynch:

You mentioned the imminent release of the Owers report. How do you see that impacting on the SEE programme?

Mr McConnell:

As I said to the Committee at my first briefing, and it is in today's briefing paper, we have kept a close relationship with the Owers team and I doubt that there will be a significant shift away from what was set out by the prison review team in its interim report in February. For quite good reason, the skeleton of the final report was laid out in February, so we have been working on developing the approach to the SEE programme around the issues that Dame Anne set out in February. This is my judgement, but I really do think that the report that she and her team will produce in October will go further and flesh out in more detail the nature, scope and scale of the change that she recommends for the Prison Service of the future. I am confident that we are on the right lines to support that change, going forward.

Ms J McCann:

Again, thanks for your presentation. I want to follow up on Seán's question. Obviously, the review is welcome, as will be the report that we await from Anne Owers. Hopefully, the two combined will lead to the fundamental root-and-branch change that is needed in the Prison Service. You talked about people who are resistant to change and the difficulties that you face. You also said that you are committed to taking forward change. Do you feel that, at leadership level, there is commitment to reform, as envisioned in the SEE strategy and the Dame Anne Owers report?

Secondly, how will you measure whether there is that sea change, particularly in the service's culture? You mentioned cultural change several times in your presentation and it is one of the aims of your strategy. So, how will you measure that? How will you test and monitor whether that progress is made in prisons?

Mr McConnell:

As I said, one of the major pieces of re-engineering that we have engaged in is to start to bring forward new performance targets and measures. We are refining and redefining our corporate delivery standards, which is why we have put together a standards, order and compliance team. We envisage having a robust mechanism for measuring and reporting on performance internally. I imagine that the Committee will continue to scrutinise our progress, and Criminal Justice Inspection, under Dr Michael Maguire, will also take a keen interest in what we are doing. I encourage that because I think that the Northern Ireland Prison Service now and in the future would only benefit from wider engagement and increased scrutiny.

Mr Graeme Wilkinson (Northern Ireland Prison Service):

I would just like to add to that. On the wider change programme, we are developing a business case that actually sets out both the financial benefits and the non-financial benefits. It is very important to capture what we are trying to achieve as an organisation. Cultural change is very important. Those benefits will be set out in the business case. They will also be monitored through the SEE programme board, which Colin, as the senior reporting officer, will monitor. Therefore, over the four years, we will monitor progress against those very important non-monetary aspects to the change programme.

Ms J McCann:

Chairman, I have just one more question. Under the heading “Core Day”, where it mentions weekend lock-ups, you are basically saying that prisoners will be locked up for longer than they are at present. Do you not feel that that is counterproductive? Is that purely a financial consideration?

Mr McConnell:

They will not be locked up for longer than they are at present because we currently run a hugely inefficient and ineffective delivery model. We seek to get the maximum impact from the time that prisoners are out and about. We need to get to grips with a distinct reality, which is that the more regime content we want and the longer that prisoners are out of their cells, the more we have to be prepared to pay for it. There is a direct relationship. In bringing forward our design, our judgement is that it gives the best balance of opportunity to access quality activities that, first and foremost, will help prisoners — if I may say — pass their time in prison. More importantly, however, it will help prisoners who really want to change and improve themselves through engaging with highly trained and skilled prison officers. That will give them maximum time and opportunity to do that.

Ms J McCann:

You have said that they will not be locked up for longer than they are at present. However, that is because of the regime that is being applied. Compared with how long prisoners should be locked up on a normal day, it definitely means that there will be longer lock-ups on Saturdays and Sundays. That is what I can see in the programme.

Mr McConnell:

As I said, the issue is that we could consider proposing extended periods of activity at weekends. That will have significant increased costs. We have to keep in mind that we want prisoners to be out of their cells for periods when they can engage in purposeful, consistent activity. The history of prisons tells us that when there are idle hands, things tend to go wrong. Therefore, we must be careful not to design a Prison Service regime that has lots of periods of inactivity while prisoners are out of their cells. Therefore, as I said, we think that the design that we have brought forward strikes the best balance between competing imperatives. The weekend, in particular, is a time, more or less, for social activity. We think that our design addresses the needs and concerns in the most balanced way possible.

Mr A Maginness:

Thanks for the report. I am not sure whether this is the right time for you to be at this Committee, with the Owers report due out reasonably soon. Looking at the substance of your documentation, two things stand out. One is the staff exit scheme; the other is the new target operating model. That seems to be the core of what we are talking about. The model has not as yet been perfected or produced. Although you have outlined its detail, it is interesting and one would, generally, agree with it, if you have not properly developed the staff exit scheme, I am not sure that you will make any progress with the POA or other staff members.

If I were the POA, I would not be talking to you until such time as I saw the colour of your money, and the staff exit scheme. I know that relationships have not been very good for a long time, but is that part of the strain between management and the POA?

Mr McConnell:

Again, I will ask Ronnie to comment on the general issue, but it is not specifically a strain with the POA, although the POA has a view. It is a strain on the whole workforce, without a doubt. Uncertainty in a time of change is never a good thing, but we are working diligently to try to bring forward an exit scheme that properly reflects the history of the organisation and the needs of our workforce, and that has the best possible chance of delivering as near as possible to the exit numbers that we really need to begin to flex the service.

There is no way that I can look in a crystal ball and come up with a direct relationship showing that, if we could offer X, we would get Y. Some of it is about experience and judgement. The reality is that it is not a Prison Service exit scheme. It is an exit scheme that is laid out for us, and so we have to make sure that, appropriately, all of the bodies that have a view are given the opportunity to express that view and that all the permissions are in place before we can launch that scheme.

Mr Armour:

There is no doubt that our trade union partners want to see the detail in order to get into that level of discussion. The POA has made its position quite clear by rejecting our proposals and putting its own proposals forward. I think that it will be helpful when we get to the point of putting out the exit scheme. I think that that will bring certainty to a lot of it, and I am hopeful that, at that

point, we will be able to get into the detail, as you suggest. There is no question that they want to see the colour of our money.

Mr Wells:

The disadvantage of speaking almost last is that some of my questions have already been asked, but there are a couple of issues. Underpinning this is the fact that it costs hugely more money to keep a prisoner in Northern Ireland than it does in the rest of the United Kingdom. Efficiencies are desperately needed. I have been on this Committee only for a few months, but every day that we meet, we see examples of things that were allowed to be perpetuated under direct rule, when our money was being wasted, and are now coming out into the open under the devolution of justice. I shudder to think, when it is all added up, how much money has been wasted in the last 30 years in what is now the Department of Justice.

If you are successful in achieving all that you are trying to implement, and you get the POA under your wing, as it were — pigs might fly — or at least get tacit support, where would we stand when measuring efficiency in the Northern Ireland Prison Service against that in Wales or Scotland?

Mr Wilkinson:

You are quite correct about inefficiencies. Our current target for the cost per prisoner place for this year is just over £75,000. When you compare that with somewhere like Scotland, where they are currently achieving £34,000 per prisoner place, we are considered a very inefficient service, and very well resourced. Given the financial climate that we are in and the cuts that we are trying to achieve over the next four years, I project that our cost per prisoner place will be just over £60,000.

Mr Wells:

It will still cost roughly £25,000 more.

Mr Wilkinson:

Absolutely, we are more expensive, and part of that is because of the diseconomies of scale that we have in Northern Ireland. We are a very small geographical area, whereas Scotland has many more prisons to spread the costs across.

Mr Wells:

Can we argue any longer that it is legacy of the Troubles, when we had some seriously dangerous terrorist criminals behind bars who required greater supervision? Surely the proportion of those individuals is now tiny in comparison to what are called the ordinary decent criminals — ODCs — I hate the term, but I think it refers to the thieves, speeders, drink-drivers, and so on. What proportion of that extra £25,000 can be explained by our legacy, and how much is because we are just not as efficient as our colleagues in the rest of the UK?

Mr Wilkinson:

I think that you are right. Managing that is more expensive, but only marginally so when you consider the size of our population. We have over 1,700 prisoners in the different establishments. We have a much smaller number of separated prisoners, but there is a higher prisoner:staff ratio, which drives up the costs.

Mr Wells:

How much of the inefficiencies does that explain? Obviously, some of those prisoners who are separated have committed dreadful atrocities. They will cost more to house, and we accept that. How much of the inefficiencies can we lay at the feet of that problem?

Mr Wilkinson:

I do not have the exact figures for that, Jim, but I can come back to you with that information.

Mr McConnell:

Although we can come back to you with the figure, it is large. However, given the overall spend of the organisation it is a small proportion of that overall spend, and it is not overly skewed by the operation of separated conditions.

There are fundamental issues that are historical. As a recent student of Northern Ireland's past, I understand that those historical drivers have got us to where we are and that they were most likely necessary at the time. However, now that Northern Ireland is moving on, our task and challenge is to modernise, reform and rebalance the organisation.

Mr Armour:

Between 71% and 72% of our costs are for staffing. The salary scales for our officers fall into

two camps: pre-2002 and post-2002. In the pre-2002 figures, the main grade officer (MGO) scale maximum is in the region of £37,000. We have 745 people on that salary and virtually every MGO is on the maximum salary. Those salary scales are higher than they would be in other parts of the United Kingdom.

We also have a lot of legacy costs for our practices, and we said in the document that we want to deal with issues such as the framework document. That framework makes provision for reserve hours, and there is a cost for that of somewhere in the region of £500,000. We also want to move leave hours into actual hours, and the cost for that is also in the region of £500,000. There are lots of inefficiencies that we need to drive out, and our proposals are aimed at trying to do that.

Mr Wells:

I am intrigued at your proposed exit scheme, in which 600 staff will go out the door and 400 will come in. Presumably, you will monitor that carefully, and, if it is not balancing out to achieve the net reduction of 200, one or the other can be stopped, slowed down or accelerated.

Mr Armour:

Recruitment will be dependent on the numbers that exit the service. The two need to be balanced, and they will be monitored as we move forward.

Mr Wells:

Presumably, you will be bringing in people at a lower grade. You will be taking out a lot of very experienced officers and bringing in custody officers who are less senior and less well paid.

Mr Armour:

The new recruits would be much lower on the pay scale. We still have a fair bit of work to do on pay-band modelling, but, in principle, that is exactly what we will do. As to the experience, it is our intention that those who come into the service will be adequately and appropriately trained. For example, we are examining requiring new staff to have a certificate of competence. In other words, it would not just be a case of sending them on a six-week course and them being ready to go. There would be ongoing monitoring and they would be required to get a qualification as a result of that training. That is the focus in professionalising the service.

Mr Wells:

I am absolutely certain that you will have no trouble in attracting new applicants. In fact, in the current economic climate, I think that you will be swamped. Is there not a danger of what happened with Patten also happening in the Prison Service? One of the criticisms of Patten was that it beheaded the old RUC and the PSNI of an awful lot of very experienced and knowledgeable officers and replaced them with rookies. We all know why that happened, but if you were successful in getting your 600 exits, what controls do you have to make sure that you do not leave yourself without literally thousands of years of experience?

Mr Armour:

There is no question; we are putting out the scheme for people who are over 50. We have indicated that we would be prepared to allow up to 600 to go. As we explained to the Chairman earlier, we do not think that that is likely to happen, but we do not have any way of preventing that loss of experience. That would undoubtedly happen if you let that number of people go. It would happen even if you let a smaller number go.

Mr Wells:

Will that leave the Prison Service bereft of people who have been through it all and know the ropes?

Mr Armour:

No; I do not think that it will.

Mr McConnell:

We have to keep in mind that we have a service that has too many people working in it for the task that it faces. It is an approach to not just drive economy in the business; it is an approach to right-size the business. We are looking to run a more efficient and effective business in future, so the balance between new blood and experience will be retained in the business probably as a more reasonable proportion of any normal business model moving forward, where you have experience and a significant throughput of people joining and leaving the service. At the moment, just about everybody in the business is probably about as experienced as you could imagine. We are heading for a more invigorated, realistic model for the business than what we have currently.

Mr S Anderson:

Thank you, gentlemen. I am interested in the comments that were made about the strained relationships with the POA. Colin, I think that you said that you had some dialogue with staff in small and large numbers to get feedback, but obviously you got good feedback from the POA. At the June meeting, the word that was being floated about was “dignity” for the staff. Losing 600 staff would be a big change for any organisation. I think that I asked that day whether it was 500, and I now find that it will be 600. We are talking about 600 human beings, and I do not want those people to be seen in any way as being dumped on the scrapheap because they are of no significance. They are officers who were needed, and they and their families stepped up to the mark when they were needed in this community.

At the end of the day, it is all about savings and money and how the service will be better by getting in lower-paid staff. That is the way in which the numbers game is going. How do you propose to allow 600 staff to go with dignity when there are strained relationships? You talked about preparing the way; I think that Alban used the phrase “the colour of your money”. There is a confrontation, and it will come up because it is probably still going on. I think that your phrase was giving X to get Y. Can you see that happening? I am concerned about the way in which individuals are respected in the job and what they gave to the service.

Mr McConnell:

Ronnie will comment on the details. It is absolutely impossible to put a value on dignity. I made that point to Alban earlier. That is not just about imagining that putting figure X on the table will generate 400, 500 or 600 people to go because it could well generate them to go because it gives them an opportunity to do something else. It might imply nothing about their dignity or how they feel about themselves and the business. It is a really tough call for us to try to put any sort of value on that. For those who decide, for whatever reason, to leave the service, the crucial factors will be the way that we introduce an exit scheme and what we will build around it.

The dignity issue is about how we handle that, how we present it to the staff and how we engage them and assist them through that process.

Mr Armour:

I share your concern. These are individuals, and let me assure the Committee that that is how we see them. This is not about pushing people out: it is a voluntary scheme. We are required to

operate within the statutory guidelines.

Mr S Anderson:

There is a compulsory scheme as well, Ronnie, coming in behind it if you do not get enough volunteers.

Mr Armour:

That is a possibility, and I am not shying away from that. At this stage, it is a voluntary scheme. We are constrained in what we can do in relation to public-sector workers. There is a statutory compensation scheme, which is what we have to work with. We are not trying to push people out.

However, Colin is right: the issue is how we do this. We want to do this sensitively and compassionately and work with our trade union partners to make this as easy as possible for those who want to go at this stage. It would be wrong of me to mislead the Committee: compulsory redundancies are a possibility down the line, but we are some distance away from that.

Mr Max Murray (Northern Ireland Prison Service):

It is a difficult question. From the point of view of dignity, a lot of staff perhaps do not see themselves in the future Prison Service. It is interesting that we have had the discussion today, but have not mentioned the offender. The focus of the change programme, and the net beneficiary of it, has to be the on the offender, because it deals with the quality of regimes, the time a prisoner spends out of the cell, quality and constructive activities and analysing whether there are proper risk assessment procedures and proper interventions in place.

All of that goes towards improving public attention. However, that cannot be achieved without the staff. It is the staff who will carry out that work, commit to that work and have that high-level engagement by working with the prisoners in the landings. That is not to say that we do not have some good work taking place at present, because we do, but is it consistent, is it embedded across the organisation and does everyone display those skills? We know from our scrutiny reports, never mind what our own immediate managers and governors say, that that is not the case. So, there is an issue about how we treat staff.

To me, dignity for staff is making sure that they are aware of what the new Prison Service is

going to be. For those who are staying, dignity is making sure that they are appropriately trained for the role that they do and that they know what is expected of them and are appropriately skilled. However, equally, it is about making sure that they know that there will be performance management systems in place and proper accountability for performance. So, dignity is more than just entering or leaving; it is about the wider remit and role of staff across the service.

Mr S Anderson:

I take your point, Max, but I am more concerned about the ones who are leaving and how they and their families feel. I hope that whatever exit scheme is finally arrived at, those people who leave want to leave and do so in a favourable set-up.

Mr McConnell:

You will know that we had planned to launch a scheme at the end of this month. It was in the public domain, and I wrote to staff about it. I have been going around, talking to staff face to face, as has Ronnie and some of the other directors, and, frankly, they were really angry about what was on offer. That was hard to take. So, we postponed launching the scheme so that we could take another look at it and make sure that all the issues had been properly considered. We still hope to bring forward a scheme by the end of October.

Mr S Anderson:

Jim raised issues about the skills that we are losing through the loss of 600 officers. Ability comes with experience, and we are losing a lot of experienced officers. Will there be an exodus of people at the governor grades and at management grades? How do you propose to replace those people quickly? Ronnie, you talked about upskilling a number of the new ones who are coming in, but how do you upskill someone to governor grade so quickly?

Mr Armour:

You are absolutely right. The scheme is not just open to uniformed officers; it is open to governors as well. We accept that we will lose a number of governors who will avail themselves of the package and go. That will undoubtedly mean a loss of experience, as you say. However, we believe that we have a surplus of governors at the moment, and that we will still be able to operate the service adequately and effectively with fewer.

We have made it clear that we would like to have graduate recruitment in the longer term,

because there has been no recruitment to governor grades for quite some time and we think that it needs to be refreshed. However, there are issues around doing that when a severance scheme is under way, and that is why I say that that will be a long-term aspiration. We believe that we will be left with the correct number of governors to run the service.

The Chairperson:

Colin, thank you and your team for coming along. We look forward to future engagement with you.