



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Social Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into allegations, arising from a BBC NI
'Spotlight' programme aired on 3 July 2013, of
impropriety or irregularity relating to NIHE-managed
contracts and consideration of any resulting actions:
Briefing by Stephen Brimstone

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Alex Maskey (Chairperson)
Mr Mickey Brady (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister
Ms Paula Bradley
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Mr Fra McCann
Mr Sammy Wilson

Witnesses:

Mr Stephen Brimstone Special Adviser to the Minister for Social Development

The Chairperson: We have with us Stephen Brimstone, special adviser to the Minister for Social Development. I formally welcome Stephen to the inquiry this morning. We had asked Stephen to brief the Committee on matters outlined in his written brief in relation primarily to the meeting on 16 April and any other attendant matters around that. I formally remind the Committee and you, Stephen, that Ms McConaghie will be presenting evidence in the next session under a declaration that is similar to an oath. There will be overlap in some of the questions. I am just advising you of that for the record. Stephen, you were asked to provide some commentary to the Committee, which you have done. That is on page 14. Just to make the point again: it clearly states that the meeting was scheduled for Turkington's and not for the Glass and Glazing Federation (GGF). Sorry, it is on page 82. Stephen, do you want to make your opening remarks?

Mr Stephen Brimstone (Special Adviser to the Minister for Social Development): Thank you, Chair. Following the Minister's announcement in late 2011 that, as part of its Programme for Government, the Northern Ireland Executive gave a commitment to have all Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) homes fully double-glazed by 2015, I was approached by a representative of Turkington Holdings, who asked whether they could meet me to share how they believed this Executive priority could be delivered with significant savings to the public purse. I agreed, and I met representatives of Turkington Holdings on 25 January 2012.

Although I cannot recall the detail of the meeting, I do recall forming the impression that Mr Young was going to write to the Department on behalf of the Glass and Glazing Federation asking for a meeting with the Minister in relation to realised potential savings.

Subsequently, I updated the Minister verbally on the meeting that I had held and indicated that it was likely that the GGF would request a meeting with the Minister. I was aware that I was likely to be taking leave, so I informed the Minister's private secretary verbally that a letter from the GGF requesting a meeting was to be expected, that the Minister was interested in what it had to say and that, as it was ultimately a matter for the NIHE, the chief executive should also be invited.

I attended a meeting on 16 April 2012 with the Minister, departmental officials and NIHE officials Mr Young and Mr McKeag. My role in attending was as special adviser to the Minister. I had been on leave when a letter requesting the meeting was cleared by the Minister and had not seen that the meeting was being requested by Turkington Holdings as opposed to the GGF. I did not see the letter until about July 2013.

In April 2012, I believed that, although the meeting was attended by staff from Turkington Holdings, they were, in fact, representing the GGF. The only communication that I had sight of, or in which I had a role in drafting or amending, was a letter to the Chair of the Committee for Social Development on 24 May 2012. The Minister's recollection of the meeting on 16 April 2012 was that, although staff from Turkington Holdings were present, it was the GGF and its standards that were being discussed. The Minister also had a recollection that there had been a separate meeting with Fusion 21 where some of the same issues were discussed. He asked me to note the suggested amendments on the letter, and it was sent back via private office to officials. An amended letter, which reflected the Minister's amendments, was subsequently sent back to the Minister with no concerns or alternative suggestions being raised.

The Chairperson: OK, Stephen, thank you. You met Turkington's earlier in the year. Can you explain how and why you met them because that goes to the heart of this? You did not refer to meeting them as representatives of the Glass and Glazing Federation, so I take it that you met them on other business. I am trying to work out how you jumped from —

Mr Brimstone: No, that is absolutely right. Turkington's approached me towards the end of 2011 — I do not recall exactly when — and asked for a meeting. They believed that they were aware of ways in which significant savings could be made as part of the double-glazing programme, and they gave an indication of, I think, £30 million or £40 million. I did not go into any more detail at that point. I agreed to have a meeting, which was set up for 25 January 2012.

Mr Brady: Thanks for the presentation, Stephen. I have a few questions. Had you met Turkington's previously? In their evidence, they indicated that they had met you when the Minister was the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure. That is going back a while. Had you been familiar with Turkington's before this? Did you have contact with them in any party political sense, in a social way or anything like that?

Mr Brimstone: No, I had no contact in a party political sense, and I had no contact socially. My recollection is that Trevor Turkington's son was involved in touring car racing. An event, or a meeting, was requested back in 2009. I have no other recollection of it; I think that it might have had something to do with Nutt's Corner. That is where I would have met Trevor Turkington. There was a subsequent event, after we came into the Department for Social Development, to discuss Marlborough House. Minister Attwood and Minister Wilson were at that meeting.

Mr Brady: Who commissioned the pre-meeting briefing for the meeting? On what basis was it commissioned? John McPeake gave evidence to the effect that he was contacted to attend the meeting, but, unusually, was not asked for a briefing. That seemed unusual, because, obviously, it was something that related specifically to issues that concerned the Housing Executive. Who prepared that briefing? On what basis was it commissioned?

Mr Brimstone: I have no idea; I would not have been involved in that.

Mr Brady: So, a briefing would have been done for a meeting that had been arranged with Turkington's, and you, as a special adviser to the Minister, would not have had any sight or knowledge of that beforehand?

Mr Brimstone: No. If you want, we can go back to the pre-meeting that we had. The essence of that pre-meeting was to ask whether it would be appropriate if they were to ask the Minister for a meeting. The outcome of that meeting was that I agreed that it would be appropriate that they request a

meeting with the Minister. Subsequently, they wrote to request that. To be perfectly honest, from the end of the pre-meeting, I had no other contact until the meeting itself.

Mr Brady: So, presumably, this briefing for the meeting just appeared. Presumably, somebody had to commission it.

Mr Brimstone: I am sure that someone from within the officials, the housing division or the Department, once the Minister had agreed to have a meeting, would have been commissioned; absolutely.

Mr Brady: The briefing mentions Turkington's throughout; it does not mention the Glass and Glazing Federation.

Mr Brimstone: That is correct.

Mr Brady: In relation to Turkington's representing the Glass and Glazing Federation, they were specific and clear in their evidence that at no time did they indicate that they were representing the Glass and Glazing Federation. Furthermore, when the Glass and Glazing Federation gave evidence, its representatives indicated, very clearly, the protocols. We have been talking about protocols quite a lot this morning. They said that there were protocols and that if anyone was to represent them, certain procedures had to be gone through. I think that the only reference in their evidence was that Mr Young had, at one stage, been chair back in 2005-06. So, you were not involved in that pre-meeting briefing note, which, subsequently, was presumed to have been given to the Minister on what was going to happen at the meeting and who would be attending.

Mr Brimstone: This is in relation to the submission that the Minister got as part of the meeting from officials?

Mr Brady: Yes.

Mr Brimstone: I had no role in that at all.

Mr Brady: Normally, for meetings of this kind, pre-meeting briefing notes are given. Do you normally have access to those? Do you normally see them?

Mr Brimstone: I normally see them; absolutely. I normally see them in advance of the meeting. It so happened that that meeting was on a Monday afternoon. That Monday, the Minister had questions for oral answer, so, between party business in the morning and preparing the Minister for questions for oral answer, I did not have a chance that week to look at that week's folder, which would have held the submissions for that week. I had no opportunity at all. I believe that we came straight out of questions for oral answer and into the meeting with, as it now turns out, Turkington's.

The Chairperson: Stephen, can I press that a little bit before I bring in Jim? Page 14 of the tabled pack is the briefing that was presented, and which, I think, you are now saying you did not have a chance to read, because of Question Time. You are listed as the first recipient of the letter, and the Minister is number two.

Mr Brimstone: Yes.

The Chairperson: The heading of the meeting is, clearly, "Meeting with Turkington Holdings". I understand, if I am correct, that there was a pre-meeting briefing.

Mr Brimstone: I do not believe that we had one in that instance.

I had a personal appointment. It turned out that was unable to stay for the whole meeting that took place with Turkington's. I had a personal appointment after that meeting — I had to leave the meeting early, actually. I cannot recall whether, in fact, we went straight into that meeting. I cannot recall whether the Minister felt that he knew the issues that were to be discussed and went straight into the meeting. I cannot recall. It is possible that we went straight into the meeting and that there was no pre-briefing before it. That would happen on occasion.

The Chairperson: You received that briefing on 11 April. The meeting was not until 16 April.

Mr Brimstone: I did not know. I got that as part of my submission pack. That is the date on which it was produced. I would not have seen it until the actual meeting itself or until it was part of my pack for the week.

The Chairperson: OK.

Mr Allister: I will go back to the end of 2011, when you said that a representative from Turkington's asked to meet you. Who asked to meet you?

Mr Brimstone: It was either Trevor Turkington himself or a PA who was working for him. Jim, I cannot recall exactly who it was.

Mr Allister: How was that done?

Mr Brimstone: I think that it was done by phone call.

Mr Allister: To the Department or to your mobile phone?

Mr Brimstone: To my mobile phone.

Mr Allister: Therefore, Turkington's had your mobile number.

Mr Brimstone: It had it, I believe, from 2009, from the time of whatever happened with that DCAL sports centre.

Mr Allister: And you cannot help us on whether you spoke directly to Trevor Turkington.

Mr Brimstone: On the phone in late 2011?

Mr Allister: You cannot help us on that?

Mr Brimstone: No. I cannot recall, no.

Mr Allister: You cannot recall.

Mr Brimstone: No. I cannot recall.

Mr Allister: Why do you think that it might have been him at all?

Mr Brimstone: He had my mobile number. He was the one who, in 2009 —

Mr Allister: He had your mobile number. Had he phoned you before?

Mr Brimstone: No. He had my mobile number from 2009, from the earlier event during the DCAL time.

Mr Allister: This is a man whom you had never met otherwise.

Mr Brimstone: No. I had not.

Mr Allister: But he had your mobile number.

Mr Brimstone: Yes. A lot of people have my mobile number.

Mr Allister: Who, then, did you meet in January?

Mr Brimstone: Trevor Turkington and Ian Young were at the meeting on 25 January.

Mr Allister: Where did that meeting take place?

Mr Brimstone: It took place in the Radisson Blu Hotel, next door to the Department's headquarters.

Mr Allister: You seem to have some difficulty remembering details of that meeting. Did you not take any notes?

Mr Brimstone: I did not, no. I was listening. I felt that I had taken the main point away from the meeting to report back to the Minister. Your question is whether I took any notes: no, I did not take any notes.

Mr Allister: Is it your custom and practice not to bother taking notes?

Mr Brimstone: Not if I am in a listening exercise like that, no.

Mr Allister: If you are a listening, do you not want to be able to recall?

Mr Brimstone: If I feel that I will not be able to recall before I report to the Minister after the meeting, I would take a note, yes.

Mr Allister: So no notes were taken.

Mr Brimstone: No notes were taken.

Mr Allister: Did you know what the meeting would be about before you went there?

Mr Brimstone: Other than about the potential for savings as part of the double-glazing programme? No.

Mr Allister: Would it not have been of particular interest to note what those savings might be?

Mr Brimstone: I reported to the Minister what the reported savings were after the meeting.

Mr Allister: The product of that meeting was a letter from Turkington's to the Minister.

Mr Brimstone: That is correct, yes.

Mr Allister: Had you any part in drafting that?

Mr Brimstone: I had no part in drafting it.

Mr Allister: In suggesting its content?

Mr Brimstone: No.

Mr Allister: Had you any part in suggesting that it should be cc'd to DFP?

Mr Brimstone: No. In fact, I did not see that letter. I believe that we had our second child the day before that letter arrived with the Minister, so I was off on paternity leave for a number of weeks. I had other things on my mind.

Mr Allister: When Turkington's representatives gave evidence to us, they were very clear — it is on page 11 of the Hansard report — that nothing was said at that January meeting with you that could have given the impression that they were representing the Glass and Glazing Federation. Do you recall reading and seeing that evidence?

Mr Brimstone: Yes.

Mr Allister: Do you challenge that?

Mr Brimstone: In preparing for the briefing for the Committee [*Inaudible.*], I have given a significant amount of consideration to recalling the precise detail of that meeting, which took place some two years ago. I recall the discussion around the GGF and Mr Young's roles in that organisation. I recall the significant potential savings that they reported there would be if the methodology with which we fit windows was adopted. Tens of millions of pounds would be saved. That is my recollection of the meeting. I accept what Mr Young said in his evidence. I can give you only my impression.

Mr Allister: If you accept what he says, you accept that nothing was said by them at that meeting that implied or could cause anyone to conclude that they were representing anyone other than Turkington's.

Mr Brimstone: No. I can only give my recollection of that meeting.

Mr Allister: Turkington's came along and had these great ideas to save money, etc. They were talking about how the Housing Executive should do things. Why did you not simply set up a meeting for them with the Housing Executive?

Mr Brimstone: They claimed that they had attempted to meet the Housing Executive. Bearing in mind the history of where we are coming from in 2011, the Minister's view of the Housing Executive and its handling of contracts and its ability to spend money or save money, whichever way you want to look at it, I felt that my responsibility was, first of all, to tell the Minister that there was this opportunity. He wanted to have a meeting. I suggested to his private secretary that, as this was primarily to do with the Housing Executive, the chief executive of the Housing Executive should be invited along to that meeting.

Mr Allister: But we now know, Mr Brimstone, that three other contractors asked for meetings and were refused. Is that not right?

Mr Brimstone: When was that?

Mr Allister: We have it in our papers that three other named contractors asked for meetings and were refused. It is on page 67 of the tabled documents. The contractors were PK Murphy's, Paddy McIlhatton and Super Seal Windows. They asked through Sandra Overend and were refused, and when they asked through William McCrea they were granted a meeting. Do you see that?

Mr Brimstone: Yes.

Mr Allister: So, these were all parties that had an interest in the specifications, as Turkington's had, but only Turkington's got a meeting. Why was that?

Mr Brimstone: When we talk about specification, the four other meetings, with PK Murphy, Paddy McIlhatton, Super Seal Windows Ltd and Super Seal — are they both the same? — were, from my recollection, to do with the specification of the hinges on this casement type, or whatever it was, but the Turkington's issue was about the methodology of fitting the windows. It was about whether the plaster around the window frame is torn out or whether a different methodology is used that saved all that happening.

Mr Allister: The heading is a list of all companies with an interest in specifications who had requested a meeting. Would it be quite wrong for the Committee to draw any inference from the fact that, of all the companies who asked, the only ones who got a meeting were Turkington's and Super Seal Windows Ltd after they came through the DUP and not through another party? Should we draw any inference from access to the Minister about that scenario?

Mr Brimstone: None of that came through me.

Mr Allister: We now know that on 16 April 2012 there was a great flurry of activity in the Department about altering minutes and diary entries, and that on that day, for the first time, on the sixth version of the minutes, they were altered to proclaim the meeting to be with the Glass and Glazing Federation, and the Minister's diary was retrospectively altered on that very day to proclaim that the meeting was

with the Glass and Glazing Federation. Can you cast any light on what was the catalyst for that flurry of activity on that day?

Mr Brimstone: I cannot. We keep hearing reference to the four — now the six — drafts of the note of the meeting. I had no sight of any of those, and I would not have.

Mr Allister: Are they not on the TRIM system?

Mr Brimstone: I do not have access to the TRIM system.

Mr Allister: You do not?

Mr Brimstone: No.

Mr Allister: I thought that special advisers were all-knowing and all-seeing. You do not have access to the TRIM system?

Mr Brimstone: I do not have access to the TRIM system.

Mr Allister: Is there a prohibition on special advisers accessing the TRIM system?

Mr Brimstone: Maybe there is, but I do not have access to the TRIM system.

Mr Allister: I assume that your evidence to this Committee would be no different if you were giving it on oath.

Mr Brimstone: I try to tell the truth about everything that I say.

Mr Allister: Your evidence is that you had no lot or part, directly or indirectly, in altering or having altered the minutes or the diary entry. Is that right?

Mr Brimstone: Yes. I will go further than that. I have no recollection of having made or requested any changes to any private office meeting note. It would not be normal practice for me to be involved. That applies to both DCAL and DSD. To be perfectly honest, my sense of all of this was as the Minister outlined in his opening remarks:

"As is the usual process, the note was drafted and was then amended to more accurately reflect the discussion. As I, at that time, believed that the attendees were representing the Glass and Glazing Federation, the note was finalised to reflect that position."

Mr Allister: So you cannot help this Committee whatsoever on the question as to what caused that flurry of activity on 16 May.

Mr Brimstone: No, I am sorry, I cannot.

The Chairperson: If I could, maybe helpfully, intervene at this point. That flurry of activity that you described actually occurred on 16 May.

Mr Allister: Sorry, did I not say May?

The Chairperson: You said April. That was on the basis that a letter was sent by me, on behalf of the Committee, electronically to the Department seeking clarification from the Minister. I suggest that that was the reason for the flurry of activity. I would just like to set that on the record.

Mr Allister: OK — 16 May. When did you become aware, Mr Brimstone, of the letter from the Chairman of this Committee covering these issues?

Mr Brimstone: It would have been whenever the Minister saw that letter. I was not aware of that letter from you, Chair, until the Minister and I were sitting in an office together and it arrived up as part of the pack.

Mr Allister: On that same day, the sixteenth?

Mr Brimstone: No, it would not have happened until after whatever time it took for officials to go and draft a response to it and everything else. I would not have seen your letter and the Minister would not have seen your letter, Chair.

Mr Allister: Could the catalyst have been the three Assembly questions tabled on 10 May by Mr McKay asking for details of all meetings with groups from the glass and glazing industry in the last year, asking to whom he spoke in the glass and glazing industry that led to his concern about value for money, prior to his announcement in the Assembly about postponement, etc? Could that have been the catalyst for the flurry of activity within a week, on 16 May?

Mr Brimstone: There were written questions and meetings were had in the Department about what the response of housing professionals in the Department was on the back of the meeting with Turkington's, as it now turns out. The Minister was very keen for those issues to be looked at to see if there was any merit in them. The Minister continually, throughout all of that — whoever was in the room will have heard it — referred to the representatives of the Glass and Glazing Federation. That was his impression, that was my impression, and anybody who was in the room at the time —

Mr Allister: Until 16 May, a minute that had been through five versions referred to it as Turkington's. The Minister's diary, until that date, referred to the meeting being with Turkington's. I am trying to invite you to help the Committee to find what the catalyst was for that flurry of activity on 16 May that suddenly wrote Turkington's out of the script and wrote the Glass and Glazing Federation into it. Was it the Assembly questions? Was it something else? Can you help us at all?

Mr Brimstone: As I said before, Jim, I had no role in changing that note. I have no recollection of changing a note on any meeting that happened in the Department. You raised one other point there that I was going to come back to you on, but it has slipped my mind now.

Mr Allister: While you are thinking about that, so that we are clear, you are saying expressly to us that you gave no instructions, took no actions yourself, had no one else give instructions and can shed no light on why those changes were made.

Mr Brimstone: I have no powers to give instructions in the Department. I have no powers at all to give instructions to anyone. The only action —

Mr Allister: That was not the question. The question was this: did you give any instructions? Did you have anyone else give instructions?

Mr Brimstone: No, I did not. The reason why I did not and cannot is that I have no powers to give instructions. The Minister is the only person — I could give instructions until I am blue in the face in the Department, but unless the Minister —

Mr Allister: Did you give advice to the Minister that the minute should be changed, that the diary should be changed, and that the trail should be converted from Turkington's to the Glass and Glazing Federation?

Mr Brimstone: No, because I was not aware of what was in the note of the meeting.

Mr Allister: But you were aware when it came to drafting or redrafting the letter that the Minister was sending back to the Chairman.

Mr Brimstone: Absolutely.

Mr Allister: And it is in your hand.

Mr Brimstone: It is in my hand, yes.

Mr Allister: Is that because the idea originated with you?

Mr Brimstone: No. Quite often, we all work together in the office, whether that is the office in the Department or the office in Parliament Buildings. Generally, what happens is that the papers arrive with me, I will make comments, and if there are any questions to be put back to officials or anything else, I will put them on the papers. You will see if the special adviser makes a comment on something, it is classified as the special adviser has queried this or the special adviser has asked for this to be changed. When this letter came up, my first recollection was: hold on, this meeting was with the Glass and Glazing Federation, was it not? At that point, I would have asked the Minister what his recollection of the meeting was. His recollection of the meeting was that it was with the Glass and Glazing Federation. Another point —

Mr Allister: So you sowed that idea, did you?

Mr Brimstone: No. I asked the Minister whether my recollection of the meeting was the same as his. At which point he agreed. Another point was raised about whether there had not been a meeting with Fusion 21 around similar matters.

Mr Allister: Mr Brimstone, was there any sensitivity with you or the Minister, given that Turkington's were known to be party supporters of the Minister's party? Was there any sensitivity about the meeting with Turkington's?

Mr Brimstone: No, not at all. I have no knowledge of who party supporters are or are not. I have no knowledge of that at all.

Mr Allister: Are you a member of the DUP?

Mr Brimstone: I am a member of the DUP, yes.

Mr Allister: On 28 June, Susan McCarty — do you know who that is?

Mr Brimstone: Yes.

Mr Allister: — advised the Housing Executive that the meeting had, in fact, been with the Glass and Glazing Federation. Have you any evidence to give as to how that came about?

Mr Brimstone: No, I do not.

Mr Allister: As far as you are concerned, if Barbara McConaghie made the changes to the minutes and made the changes to the diary on 16 May, you can shed no light that would suggest that she did not just do that on her own volition.

Mr Brimstone: No. The private secretary would have been sitting in on any meetings that the Minister would have had with officials. The private secretary would have been fully aware of what the Minister's view of that meeting was, and that is the only thing that I can assume.

Mr Allister: Was she sitting in on the meeting when the letter back to this Chairman was amended?

Mr Brimstone: That was not a meeting. We were just working together in the room.

Mr Allister: So she was not there then.

Mr Brimstone: No.

Mr Allister: The Glass and Glazing Federation has claimed — has boasted — that a relationship was established with you. What can you tell us about that?

Mr Brimstone: I have no idea what they are referring to. I can only assume that they refer to the previous special adviser in the Department. I have had no communication with the Glass and Glazing Federation. In fact, I will go further: my first introduction as to who the Glass and Glazing Federating

were — I had never heard of them before — was at the pre-meeting with Turkington's in the Radisson Hotel at the end of January 2012.

Mr Allister: So, you are in the hapless position, Mr Brimstone, of having access to the top and heart of the Department but being totally unable to help the Committee as to how significant changes were made to minutes and to diaries and writing a particular company that it had a meeting with the Minister out of the script and writing someone else in.

Mr Brimstone: That was the point that I forgot earlier on, Jim. Apologies. I had no role in this, but, looking at the note of the meeting, even in its final draft, Turkington's are clearly referred to in the first paragraph. A written answer to a question, I believe, from Daithí McKay, in early September also clearly identifies Turkington's as being the company that the individuals whom we believed at that point represented the Glass and Glazing Federation worked for. I do not see any — I have no sense of how there was any attempt to cover up the fact that Turkington's were at that meeting.

Mr Allister: There were certainly changes made on 16 May —

Mr Brimstone: Absolutely.

Mr Allister: — to headings, minutes and diary entries. There were retrospective changes to a diary, which might seem rather bizarre.

Mr Brimstone: Yes. They reflected Minister's take on the whole thing.

Mr Allister: Yes. Does that suggest that that direction came from the Minister?

Mr Brimstone: I had no sense that the Minister directed it. He may well have done.

Mr Allister: He may well have done.

Mr Brimstone: But —

Mr Allister: Thank you.

Mr Brimstone: — the Minister has said that he is not aware of that note, either.

The Chairperson: We are going to return to that when we have our next evidence session with Barbara McConaghie because it is a relevant testimony. I remind you, Stephen, as I remind every witness to this inquiry, that the Committee took the view that we would take every witness on the basis of professional integrity and that we would not require people to take an oath or swear a declaration or an affirmation but that, where we, at any time, had any conflicting evidence, we would do so. We have done so, which will manifest itself later this morning. I am just making the point that, at any time, if we come across what we see as conflicting evidence — we already had that provided to us before today — we will not hesitate to bring people back under oath or with an affirmation. For the record, I remind the wider public of the implications of that, the potential legal requirements of all that and the potential legal outcomes of that, because it goes to the question of perjury.

Before I go to other members, you are saying, Stephen, that at no point did you seek to change any references to Turkington's to refer to it as Glass and Glazing Federation representatives. I put it to you that we are being asked to accept information that basically tells us that, despite all the other evidence, verbal and written, that was at your disposal, you still had a recollection that you were dealing with the Glass and Glazing Federation.

Mr Brimstone: Yes.

The Chairperson: There has been no explanation of how you got that impression. Turkington's have made it very clear that at no stage did they represent them. In fact, they were emphatic about that. We had the letter from Turkington's requesting a meeting. We had the briefing paper for the meeting that was held on 16 April. We had the flurry of activity, subsequent to that, on 16 May. I am less concerned about the 'Spotlight' programme, but it wrote to you, I think, in June. That was a very controversial programme, to say the least. I am more concerned about the information provided to the

Assembly and this Committee. We are being asked to accept that, notwithstanding all the evidence that has been presented, written and verbal, you still have an impression that you were dealing with the Glass and Glazing Federation, despite the fact that nothing anywhere indicates that that was the case.

Mr Brimstone: Absolutely. I left the meeting on 25 January 2012 with the clear impression that a request was going to come to the Minister from Ian Young, but in his role with the Glass and Glazing Federation and as its former chair. It was a shock to me when I first saw the letter in July 2013 and the logo at the top of that letter was Turkington's as opposed to the Glass and Glazing Federation.

The Chairperson: You are also saying that you had no part or part in amending the aide-memoire or minute of the meeting. We were advised in at least the written submission from Barbara McConaghie that she had seen only a final version. It was then described as the final version, but it is version 4. It was presented to her by the departmental Assembly liaison officer (DALO). The DALO specifically asked Barbara that question, but you are saying that you certainly had no role —

Mr Brimstone: I would not normally, either.

The Chairperson: OK.

Mr F McCann: I will be brief. A memo or letter sent to you and the Minister on 11 April by Susan McCarty quite clearly says that you have accepted a meeting with Jim McCabe and Ian Young from Turkington homes. There is no mention of the Glass and Glazing Federation. A memo sent by Margaret Gibson quotes Declan Allen from the Housing Executive. It is on page 85 of the tabled documents. He said that at no time did Declan think that Turkington was representing the Glass and Glazing Federation. Where do you think the confusion came from in all of this?

Mr Brimstone: The confusion clearly came on the back of the pre-meeting that I had had with Turkington's and my expectation, and I briefed the Minister to this effect, that Ian Young would be writing to him as being from the Glass and Glazing Federation. The confusion also arose because I was off when the actual letter arrived requesting the meeting; I did not see that letter until July 2013. I had no sight of the letter requesting a meeting until July 2013.

Mr F McCann: It is a bit strange that a series of meetings took place. As the Chair touched on, everyone is adamant that the Glass and Glazing Federation was not represented. It is a bit strange to believe that you initially met them, you organised a meeting and that the Minister was advised that, as you say, he was meeting representatives of the Glass and Glazing Federation.

Mr Brimstone: I did not organise the meeting with the Minister. I suggested to them that it would be worthwhile their writing to request a meeting with the Minister. On the back of that, I briefed the Minister that I had met two staff members from Turkington's. One was Ian Young, who had a role in the Glass and Glazing Federation. I briefed the Minister to expect a letter. I outlined as well the potential savings and the idea behind how windows are fitted in a house. It was all through the Glass and Glazing Federation; it was all to do with its specifications and standards. It was nothing to do with a particular company, and I was —

Mr F McCann: They never said it.

Mr Brimstone: Sorry?

Mr F McCann: They never stated that they were representatives of the Glass and Glazing Federation. Ian Young and —

Mr Brimstone: At which meeting?

Mr F McCann: The initial discussions that you had with them.

Mr Brimstone: No, at the initial meeting that I had with them, they were there as members of staff from Turkington's. I was under the understanding that a letter was to come not from them but from Ian Young requesting a meeting as the Glass and Glazing Federation, speaking on behalf of the wider industry.

Mr F McCann: Did he say that he was going to send you a letter that stated that he was coming from and representing the Glass and Glazing Federation?

Mr Brimstone: Sorry, Fra, can you repeat that?

Mr F McCann: Did he say to you that he would send a letter saying that he represented the Glass and Glazing Federation?

Mr Brimstone: That is my recollection of the meeting: that was what was going to happen.

Mr F McCann: I tried to broach another thing earlier. Do you not think it unusual that a contractor or a subcontractor of a contractor who has an interest in glazing or in other contracts would have access to the Minister and, as a question touched on earlier, would not be advised to talk to the body in charge, which is the Housing Executive?

Mr Brimstone: That is why I suggested that the chief executive of the Housing Executive should be at the meeting, if the Minister agreed to have it.

Mr F McCann: Jim asked a question this morning about Turkington's being given access to the Minister, yet three other firms were not. Following through with that could be seen as a conflict of interest.

Mr Brimstone: I would need to check up on that. However, I believe that the reason why two of the three subsequent firms did not have access to the Minister was because the Minister had already listened to what the issue was around the hinge and that and passed it on to the Housing Executive. It was a matter for it to deal with. He had no role at all in deciding the specification of a window, and that is why he felt that he had no role in meeting the other two organisations.

Mr F McCann: Are the savings that Turkington's talked about transparent?

Mr Brimstone: I believe that it is £15.1 million.

Mr F McCann: There have been savings of £15.1 million.

Mr Brimstone: Yes.

Mr F McCann: We have been given a number of figures of what savings may —

Mr Brimstone: I believe that it is £15.1 million.

Mr Wilson: Will you just go through the chronology of events again, Stephen? You had met representatives from Turkington's in the late part of the year. Before that, had you ever heard of the Glass and Glazing Federation?

Mr Brimstone: No, not at all.

Mr Wilson: So, it did come up in conversation with Turkington's —

Mr Brimstone: At length.

Mr Wilson: — that either some of the people there were members of the Glass and Glazing Federation, were representatives, had held some standing in that organisation and they also talked about the standards that are normally set down by the federation. You are saying that that was what planted the idea of the Glass and Glazing Federation in your head.

Mr Brimstone: That was the first that I heard of the Glass and Glazing Federation. I genuinely came out of that meeting with the impression that a letter was to be sent to the Minister from the Glass and Glazing Federation.

Mr Wilson: Just so that we can get the sequence, because it is coming out in some of your answers. From that, it was agreed — as was quite usual for a special adviser — that you would then go to the Minister and say that you thought that you believed it to be worthwhile having this meeting.

Mr Brimstone: Yes.

Mr Wilson: And, between that and the meeting, were you aware of the letter coming in, who the letter came from, what the letter said or anything like that?

Mr Brimstone: I am not even sure that I queried it up until the point that the meeting happened. I will be perfectly honest: we had just had another addition to the family. I was back from leave and catching up after being off on leave. I had no sense that I was aware that that letter had arrived.

Mr Wilson: So, the next contact, I suppose, was the meeting.

Mr Brimstone: Yes.

Mr Wilson: At that meeting, all of the issues that had been discussed at the pre-meeting were discussed, so it was quite reasonable to assume that these were issues that would have been of concern to the Glass and Glazing Federation.

Mr Brimstone: Absolutely. The same issues as discussed at the pre-meeting were discussed with the Minister and with the Housing Executive and with the senior departmental staff in the housing division.

Mr Wilson: Much has been made of the fact that Turkington's were granted this meeting. Were you aware of whether other organisations associated with this contract had sought meetings, first of all with the Housing Executive?

Mr Brimstone: Will you repeat the question?

Mr Wilson: Yes. Were you aware that some of the contractors had sought and been refused meetings with the Housing Executive?

Mr Brimstone: I believe that that was one of the issues that led to Turkington's requesting the meeting with me.

Mr Wilson: And can you give any explanation for the fact that Turkington's was granted the meeting — because a bit has been made about that — as opposed to the others that were not granted meetings?

Mr Brimstone: The Turkington meeting was requested much earlier in the year. The other meetings that were requested were around a particular issue, in which I believe that the Committee was quite heavily involved as well. That was around a separate but closely linked issue, but the other companies were all seeking meetings about the same but particular and separate issue.

Mr Wilson: There has been a suggestion that this was an attempt to write Turkington's out of the script, to use the term that I think Jim used. How could Turkington's be written out of the script in this? Will you take us through the trail that you are now aware of that very clearly pointed to Turkington's being part of the script anyway?

Mr Brimstone: Yes. A letter arrives from Turkington Holdings and Ian Young, who I believe is a managing director of a subsidiary company within Turkington Holdings, requests a meeting with the Minister. The meeting is held with departmental senior officials and with senior Housing Executive officials. I do not see how anybody could interpret that as an attempt to write something out. I saw nothing shady, dodgy, or inappropriate in any way about it.

Mr Wilson: Not in the letter, of course, but the briefing —

Mr Brimstone: Absolutely, the briefing as well, yes.

Mr Wilson: So any allegation that is being made here that somehow or other you or someone else contrived to write Turkington's out of the script just does not bear any relation to the facts or all of the paper evidence.

Mr Brimstone: The only change that was made — I am aware of this change now — was to reflect what was clearly the Minister's opinion. That was a change to the note of the meeting to state that the meeting was with the Glass and Glazing Federation as opposed to Turkington's.

Mr Wilson: If you, the Minister or an official believed that the meeting was actually with the Glass and Glazing Federation, it would be quite in order to change the minute to reflect that; would it not?

Mr Brimstone: In the interests of accuracy; absolutely. I would have thought that it would be expected that that would be changed to reflect the Minister's view.

Mr Wilson: Fra McCann said that it is unusual for someone who is involved in a contract to ask for a meeting with the Minister. Do you find that unusual?

Mr Brimstone: No; I do not. As you can see, there were a number of requests from companies involved in contracts to see the Minister. Of the four companies listed, the Minister has seen two, and that is just on the windows issue.

Mr Wilson: Have you had any other experience — I had experience of this as a Minister — where firms feel that they have not made any traction with officials and then seek to go to the top?

Mr Brimstone: Absolutely. I can give no examples off the top of my head now, but that is quite often what happens. An individual or a company, having tried all other avenues, feels that they have no other recourse but to go to the Minister.

Mr Wilson: Any party affiliation that you know of or do not know of should not be a reason why people should not have access to a Minister; should it?

Mr Brimstone: Absolutely not. I will state again that I am not aware of who are the Democratic Unionist Party's financiers, supporters or anything else. It was news to me when Mr Allister declared that Turkington's had provided some funding for vans or whatever for his election campaign. The 'Spotlight' programme identified that Trevor Turkington had some role in Stephen Moutray's nomination. That was all news to me. I was not aware of any of that.

Mrs D Kelly: I will pick up on a couple of points. People have talked about an attempt being made to write Turkington's out of the script. On page 91, Turkington's were very literally written out of the script in the letter to you, Chair. Mr Brimstone, may I ask you to confirm that the handwriting to amend and remove Turkington's from the script of the letter is, in fact, your handwriting?

Mr Brimstone: I already did that with Mr Allister earlier, but absolutely, Dolores: that is my handwriting.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you. On whose direction did you amend that, given that you were aware that the meeting request was with Turkington's?

Mr Brimstone: I was not aware that the meeting request was with Turkington's.

Mrs D Kelly: At all.

Mr Brimstone: No.

Mrs D Kelly: So you did not see any reason why that would be changed or to ask any questions of anyone in relation to that.

Mr Brimstone: I believed, and the Minister believed, that, in reality, the meeting was with the Glass and Glazing Federation as opposed to Turkington's. It was purely in the interests of accuracy and

nothing else that that letter was changed to reflect that. The Minister had some recollection that Fusion21 had some role in all of this as well, although not at the same meeting. Bear in mind that, quite often, the Minister makes amendments to letters or I make suggestions; there is a difference there. They go back to branch. If there are any issues — sometimes there are and sometimes there are not — those issues will come back to the Minister. No issues came back from officials around any of those changes, and the Minister continued in the belief that this meeting was with the Glass and Glazing Federation.

Mrs D Kelly: Perhaps I misunderstood, but I understood that you said at the outset that you never made any amendments to letters and did not initiate those. Maybe I took you up wrong.

Mr Brimstone: I was talking about departmental meeting notes. I have no role in any of that at all. Day and daily, I get papers that come up to me for the Minister. I will put queries and suggested amendments on them. That happens on a day-and-daily basis, as a part of the approval process by which it goes to the Minister.

Mrs D Kelly: So it is very separate from the departmental —

Mr Brimstone: Absolutely. That is a private office issue, and I am outside of that.

Mrs D Kelly: Four companies wanted a meeting but only two were granted one. What criteria were used to agree to meetings with two companies and not with the other two?

Mr Brimstone: It was the Minister who agreed to those meetings. I —

Mrs D Kelly: So you have no influence over the Minister on whether he should meet any particular companies?

Mr Brimstone: Generally, the Minister will take decisions based on a combination of things. There may be departmental official advice and there may be advice from me on an issue as well. That is all I can really give on that, I am afraid.

Mrs D Kelly: So there is no reason why two companies would have got meetings and two would not?

Mr Brimstone: Other than the reasons I have already outlined.

Mrs D Kelly: Were the amendments that were made to the draft letter ever discussed with Mr Michael Sands?

Mr Brimstone: They were sent back to the branch that Michael Sands is part of. That is a part of the private office. So, in essence, a paper comes back to the private office from the Minister with suggestions, amendments and whatever else on it. The private office sends it back to the branch to verify and check that. It came back up, and there was no issue. The letter was amended, reflecting the Minister's requests. The Minister went on to sign it and, Chair, it arrived with you.

Mrs D Kelly: Do you not find that very strange, given that the diary entry was subsequently amended to tie in with the amendments to the letter and the aides-memoires, or minutes, were drafted six times? Do you not find that strange, looking back?

Mr Brimstone: To be honest, it is outside. I have no sight of or connection with that at all.

Mrs D Kelly: But you can understand the wider perception?

Mr Brimstone: Absolutely. I can understand the wider perception of that. I cannot give any insight into it, I am afraid.

Mrs D Kelly: You cannot give us any insight into the influence of the freedom of information requests that were received by the Department in relation to the minutes or the meetings, and whether or not that influenced the timescale that Mr Allister was talking about, and the flurry of activity from Mr Daithi McKay? I believe that, on the DSD website, the freedom of information request came in from Mr McKay MLA as well. You are not aware of that? No?

Mr Brimstone: Sorry, I am not aware of what?

Mrs D Kelly: The freedom of information requests in relation to meetings, as well as the AQs?

Mr Brimstone: At the time, I would have been aware of it. You are asking me today whether I am aware of a particular freedom of information request and my reaction, or the Minister's reaction to that FOI request. No. Bear in mind as well that FOIs come in and it can take some time before they arrive up with the Minister to clear as well.

Mr Wilson: I got hundreds of them.

The Chairperson: Fra McCann and Stewart want to come in briefly on the back of that. Can you keep it brief please?

Mr F McCann: It is just about something that Sammy said. He spoke about the move to write Turkington's out of the meeting, but the fact is that others, who did not take part in the meeting, were being written into it. Did you realise at the time, when Turkington's had asked and even given their briefing, that other members of glazing companies were seriously questioning the information given and the lifetime of the specifications given?

Mr Brimstone: Is that the hinge issue you are talking about?

Mr F McCann: Yes. I am talking about when the double glazing people wanted to talk but were not given the opportunity.

Mr Brimstone: I think that the methodology of fitting a window is separate from the hinge issue. To be honest, at the time of the meeting with what is now Turkington's, none of those other issues were on the table at all. I do not think that the Minister would have had any sight of those.

Mrs D Kelly: Just one point. Thank you, Chair, for your indulgence. Mr Brimstone, am I right in recollecting that you suggested that the Minister would have no part to play in relation to the specifications for the windows? The Minister would have had no active part to play in deciding the specifications for the windows and the hinges?

Mr Brimstone: That would be a technical decision for the Housing Executive.

Mrs D Kelly: So are you not shocked, then, when you read on page 20 that, in an email from DSD's Thomas O'Reilly on the double glazing programme, he says in the opening line:

"I wasn't aware that the Minister was going to approve the window specification!"?

That would suggest that the Minister had full authority in that level of approval, which, I suggest, contradicts what you said earlier.

Mr Brimstone: I do not believe that the Minister has any role in the approval of technical specifications.

Mrs D Kelly: It is quite clear that both DSD and others think that he does.

Mr Clarke: Picking up on that point, Stephen, I do not know whether you have a copy of this or not.

The Chairperson: What page number are you referring to?

Mr Clarke: Dolores is referring to page 20. Stephen might like to look at pages 17 and 20, because page 20 originates from page 17. Read page 17 first, Stephen.

The date of that email, from memory, is the day after the meeting with the representatives of Turkington's, or whatever you want to call them. Michael Sands contacted Norman. Could it be construed from that that Norman was getting a wee bit concerned that the Minister was showing them

the error of their ways, that there were potential savings and that he and his Department had got it wrong?

Mr Brimstone: On page 20, the response is sent to Norman from a Thomas. I am trying to see who this Thomas individual is.

Mrs D Kelly: Thomas O'Reilly.

Mr Brady: The chief executive of the Social Security Agency.

Mr Brimstone: I do not think that it is the same person.

Mr Brady: Is it not the same one?

Mr Brimstone: He is a multi-skilled individual, but I am not sure —

Mr Clarke: Michael Sands sent the email on page 17 to Norman and a list of others. This came a few days afterwards, referring to the meeting that happened on 16 May. I can understand the point, and I am sure that you do as well, Stephen, that Ministers do not normally get involved in specifications, but they are responsible for the money that is spent in their Department.

Mr Brimstone: Absolutely.

Mr Clarke: If someone from the federation or someone who fits windows and wants to talk to Turkington's comes forward and shows the Minister how he could save millions of pounds, would it not be normal for the Minister to be concerned and pass that to his Department?

Mr Brimstone: Absolutely, but the Minister would have passed that to technical experts to make a decision. He would have listened, and it sounds as though a legitimate case was being made, and asked the experts to investigate to make sure that the proposal was as it sounded.

Mr Dickson: Going back to the little piece that Mr Allister talked to you about earlier on and the press statement from the Glass and Glazing Federation, you said that you thought that it was referring to a previous special adviser. Is that right?

Mr Brimstone: The SDLP special adviser. I had been in the Department only a number of months at that time.

Mr Dickson: When did you join the Department?

Mr Brimstone: May 2011. I had no communication with or from the Glass and Glazing Federation. My first introduction to the Glass and Glazing Federation was at the meeting on 25 January 2012.

Mr Dickson: I heard what you said about the potential for the Glass and Glazing Federation to have been referring to a previous special adviser. However, the press statement is from October 2011, when you were in office, and it states: "a relationship is being established". There is a clear implication that that is with the new adviser.

Mr Brimstone: I can say only that I have had no contact with —

Mr Dickson: So it would be unfair to suggest that they were referring to a previous special adviser.

Mr Brimstone: No, I was suggesting only what could have been happening. I had had no contact with the Glass and Glazing Federation: I was not even aware of its existence before 25 January 2012.

Mr Dickson: Did you see that press release?

Mr Brimstone: No.

Mr Clarke: May I make a supplementary comment, Chair?

Mr Dickson: It is about the date of the press release. I am not quite sure where the press release is.

The Chairperson: It is on page 98. Is there a specific point that you want to make about that?

Mr Dickson: It refers to the fact that a relationship is being developed. Mr Brimstone had indicated that he thought that it was not him that was being referred to, but, given the dates, it probably could not be anybody other than him.

Mr Clarke: Given that Stewart maybe wants to hang a suspicion around Stephen on that particular aspect —

Mr Dickson: I was just trying to ask —

Mr Clarke: Sorry, Chairman.

The Chairperson: Let people —

Mr Clarke: Should we write back to the Glass and Glazing Federation and ask it to establish who that individual was? That may be useful in ruling Stephen in or out. It may also bring in someone else, perhaps a previous special adviser. You never know.

The Chairperson: I understand that we did that, but that we have not yet received a response. But you are right. We will follow that up. I am happy enough to do that.

Mr Wilson: Chair, I want to ask one question. Stephen, do you see any significance in the fact that, after the meeting, the memo from Michael Sands had at least two or three references to the Glass and Glazing Federation?

Mr Clarke: It is on page 17.

Mr Wilson: On page 17. You had a meeting in January at which Glass and Glazing Federation guidelines were discussed and the associations that Ian Young has with them were mentioned. You had no knowledge at all of the letter that came from Turkington Holdings. The meeting was held and, quite clearly, there were liberal references to the Glass and Glazing Federation at that meeting. Would that not indicate and perhaps not have reinforced in your mind that it had something to do with the Glass and Glazing Federation? It certainly seems to have played quite significantly in Michael Sands' report.

Mr Brimstone: My recollection of the meeting between the Minister and Turkington's, as it now turns out, was that the only thing that was discussed was glass and glazing standards, guidelines and the differences between how the Housing Executive would carry out work and the Glass and Glazing Federation guidelines and standards. From my recollection, those were the only issues that were discussed at that meeting. It was all about the Glass and Glazing Federation.

Mr Wilson: The memo was dated the day after the meeting, which would, again, indicate that it was fresh in the mind of the person who sent the memo that there had been significant discussion about Glass and Glazing Federation standards.

Mr Brimstone: Yes.

Mr Wilson: Just on the other issue —

The Chairperson: OK. I will let you in. You are jumping the queue.

Mr Wilson: Sorry.

The Chairperson: Go ahead. Finish it off.

Mr Wilson: My question is on the other people who had sought meetings. Once a Minister receives an application from somebody to talk about an issue, others will then say that they also have a view on the same issue. I have received such requests on many occasions. It would not be unusual for a Minister to say that he has heard the issues, has taken them up and does not need to meet additional people. Will you also explain to us that, when it comes to setting up meetings with Ministers, sometimes a conversation with the special adviser or directly with the Minister helps to explain what meeting might be more relevant?

Mr Brimstone: Absolutely. I do not have the facts around my Minister to say to pick one meeting as opposed to another. I can only assume that that was the reason behind it.

The Chairperson: A number of members have indicated that they want to come in again. In the interests of making sure that everybody has their say, we will do that. Do not worry; your name is on the list.

I want to make two points, Stephen. There is not one letter or memo until the later iterations of Barbara McConaghie's minute that suggest that the meeting was with anyone but Turkington's. That is important and goes to the bottom of all of this.

Mr Clarke: That is wrong.

The Chairperson: I am sorry, Trevor.

Mrs D Kelly: No, it is not.

Mr Clarke: If you look at page 17, Chairman —

The Chairperson: Sorry —

Mr Clarke: That has been your opinion since the start of this inquiry.

The Chairperson: Let me finish what I am saying, Trevor. If you want to go to page 17, the email starts off:

"I attended a meeting yesterday with the Minister and Turkington's Builders".

It refers to the Glass and Glazing Federation. That is not a difficulty at all, and I am not taking issue with that whatsoever. What I am pointing out is that, throughout a fairly protracted and publicly controversial period, but, more importantly, through business with the Assembly and the Committee, not one person gave evidence — particularly, I have to say, from Turkington Holdings — nor was there one piece of correspondence that suggested anything other than that the meeting was with Turkington's. I need to establish that for the record, again.

Mr Brimstone: I accept that.

The Chairperson: You accept that. Further to that, in the midst of it, even going into June when the BBC was contacting you — I put this question to the Minister — at no time did anybody come to the Minister to correct him on the information that he stated publicly and to the Assembly that the meeting was with the glazing federation. We dealt with this earlier with Will Haire and will return to it with other witnesses. You are a special adviser with a particularly important role, as you understand. So, at no time did anybody ever believe it appropriate to go back to an official or the record to say, "Excuse me, Minister, we have got this wrong, because actually the meeting was with Turkington Holdings."

We are being asked to accept evidence that at no time did anybody ever go back to anybody and say no. In fact, the reverse is the case, because even if you follow the Susan McCarty and Housing Executive email trail, the Housing Executive was quite clear that the meeting was with Turkington Holdings. Michael Sands was quite clear in his evidence, and said in his evidence, that he was prepared to accept an inaccuracy when he was asked to change the letter to me as the Chair of this Committee. That was in your handwriting and, based on your evidence this morning, done on the instruction of the Minister. We are being asked to accept the proposition despite the fact that there is not a single piece of documentation, until the last two iterations of Barbara McConaghie's note, that the meeting was with anybody other than Turkington Holdings.

Mr Brimstone: I accept most of that, Chair. This all goes back to my expectation, coming out of the meeting on 25 January, that a letter was to be sent to the Minister from the Glass and Glazing Federation requesting a meeting with Ian Young from the Glass and Glazing Federation. If I had seen the letter that arrived at that point, flags would have been raised in my mind as to who was actually asking for this meeting. If I had seen it at the point in April when the meeting was held, flags would have been raised in my mind. I do not believe that that letter was part of the pack that the Minister got on the day. Even during the meeting, you can sometimes scuttle through the submission when the meeting is happening. I did not see that letter, and, therefore, up until very recently, I was of the impression and entirely convinced that the meeting was requested on behalf of the Glass and Glazing Federation.

The Chairperson: OK. As I said, a number of people want to come in.

Mr Brady: It goes back to that point, Stephen, because you said that, after the meeting of 25 January, you were under the impression that a letter was going to come in from the Glass and Glazing Federation. I alluded in previous questions to the pre-meeting briefing. It says very clearly "MEETING WITH TURKINGTON HOLDINGS". It then goes on to say:

"Issue: You have accepted an invitation to meet with Jim McKeag and Ian Young of Turkington Homes."

It then goes on about the detail. So, whoever prepared that briefing was very clear that it was from Turkington's. Presumably they must have had access to the letter if they arranged the meeting. I know that you had to leave the meeting. It was on a Monday, and you said that you did not see this. If they were there as Turkington's, did you not at any stage think — and you were present, I presume, at the initial stages of the meeting. Would it not have occurred to you to say, "My understanding was that you are here to represent the Glass and Glazing Federation as opposed to Turkington's". You were certainly under the impression — you stated that — that they were sending in a letter as representatives of the Glass and Glazing Federation. Declan Allen from the Housing Executive, who also attended that meeting, said at no time was he aware that they were from the Glass and Glazing Federation, and Turkington's were very clear in their evidence — Jim McKeag and Ian Young — that they had never mentioned it.

Mr Brimstone: They did mention it.

Mr Brady: They said that they never mentioned the fact that they were representing the Glass and Glazing Federation. They said that they had been members of the Glass and Glazing Federation. The Glass and Glazing Federation representative from England said very clearly that a protocol would have to have been gone through for them to represent the Glass and Glazing Federation at any meeting. I just wonder whether it occurred to you at that time to say, "Are you representing the Glass and Glazing Federation or are you representing Turkington's?" It is a moot point, but it seems to be a relatively straightforward issue.

Mr Brimstone: Absolutely. In hindsight, a lot of things would probably have been done differently.

Mr Allister: You have already accepted that Turkington's evidence is to the effect that they said nothing at the meeting on 25 January that could have left you with the impression that they were representing the federation, yet you ask the Committee to believe that you left that meeting believing that they were. That is rather inexplicable, if their evidence is to be believed. You said that you expected the letter to come from the federation.

Mr Brimstone: From Ian Young.

Mr Allister: Yes, on behalf of the federation.

Mr Brimstone: Yes.

Mr Allister: At the meeting on 25 January, did you suggest at any time that that is who it should come from?

Mr Brimstone: No, they were the ones who brought up the Glass and Glazing Federation. I had no knowledge of the Glass and Glazing Federation before that meeting.

Mr Allister: There is no question but that the Glass and Glazing Federation's guidelines have been part of many of these discussions. Nobody disputes that: the dispute is about who was representing whom. Turkington's was very clear to the Committee in its evidence that it said nothing to you that could cause you to believe that it was representing the federation, yet you come to us without any notes of the meeting to tell us that that is the impression that you left with. It is rather inexplicable.

Mr Brimstone: It is, but I was asked by the Committee to give a briefing as to what my understanding was, and you will see in the expanded version of what I was asked by the Committee to provide that I have given that. I can only give that. That is my belief as to what happened at the time. Up until very recently, that was my belief going into the meeting on 16 or 17 of April.

Mr Allister: But it is not rooted in anything, according to Turkington's evidence of what it said to you.

Mr Brimstone: I accept that.

Mr Allister: You accept that?

Mr Brimstone: I accept that.

Mr Allister: Is it the case, Mr Brimstone, that, in a way, you are kicking up some dust — not to be the fall guy — but to try to provide an explanation as to how the federation ever came into the picture in order to soften the blow in respect of the Minister? Is that what you are at?

Mr Brimstone: No, not at all. I am providing honest, truthful answers to the Committee to the best of my ability. I left the meeting on 25 January, which the Minister was not at, with a clear impression that a letter was to come to the Minister from an Ian Young representing the Glass and Glazing Federation requesting a meeting. After that meeting, I briefed the Minister on the meeting that I had had and told him that I expected a letter from an Ian Young from the Glass and Glazing Federation requesting a meeting with him .

Mr Allister: But that impression was not based on anything that Ian Young had said, according to the evidence that he gave us.

Mr Brimstone: I can only give you my interpretation.

Mr Allister: Are you calling Ian Young a liar?

Mr Brimstone: I am not calling anybody a liar.

Mr Allister: Right, so can we believe his answer that they were equally clear when they met you that they were just Turkington's?

Mr Brimstone: I can only give you my impression of what was going to come on the back of that meeting.

Mr Allister: And I am just probing how you could possibly have that impression if Ian Young's evidence is to be believed.

Mr Brimstone: I clearly was led to believe during that meeting — it is two years ago now — that a letter was to come from the Glass and Glazing Federation. I was clearly under that impression.

Mr Allister: I do not want to labour this, but I suggest that that impression could not have come, if Mr Young is to be believed in his evidence, from anything that Mr Young or Mr Turkington said to you at that meeting.

Mr Brimstone: I can only tell you my impressions on leaving that meeting.

Mr Allister: You said that, on 16 April, nothing was discussed except the specifications. Were no health and safety issues described?

Mr Brimstone: The note clearly says that health and safety issues were discussed. I do not know whether that happened after I left the meeting. As I said earlier, I left the meeting early as I had a personal appointment, so I do not know whether they were discussed after that.

The Chairperson: I have one final point. Stephen, I will put this point later to Barbara McConaghie. There was an email from Barbara McConaghie on 22 February and it relates to a meeting regarding an invitation from Turkington Holdings, with a PDF attachment from Turkington. Further down the page, we then have reference to an invitation from Ian Young, Turkington, and the subject is Turkington Holdings. I am looking for some explanation as to why and how there can be any misunderstanding around this correspondence and referring to this request and to the ultimate meeting. Here, again, we have a complete and utter example of how all the correspondence relates specifically to Turkington's.

Mr Brimstone: After I briefed the Minister on the meeting that I had with Turkington's, I knew that I was going to be going off on paternity leave, as my wife was expecting a child any day, and I updated the Minister's private secretary that I expected a letter to be coming in from the Glass and Glazing Federation. I was not going to be here when it arrived. I had let her know that the Minister was keen, following my briefing with him, to hear the issues being raised, and I had suggested that, when the letter arrived, the chief executive of the Housing Executive should be at that meeting as the issues were largely to do with Housing Executive matters.

The Chairperson: I appreciate that, but this is 22 February. This is not April, May or June.

Mr Allister: Perhaps Mr Brimstone can tell us when he came back to work.

Mr Brimstone: It was two weeks. I went off on the 27th, I think it was.

Mr Allister: Of?

Mr Brimstone: Of February.

Mr Allister: Of January?

Mr Brimstone: Of February.

Mr Allister: Then, you were there when the letter came in on 2 February.

Mr Brimstone: You misunderstand how the private office works. I would not have seen the letter until it came to the Minister's desk.

The Chairperson: Stephen, you were cc'd into this email on 22 February. There is total, exclusive reference to Turkington Holdings.

Mr Brimstone: Absolutely, and if you know the way that the email system in the Department works — in fact, the Department has taken steps to try to do something about it — there are lots of cc'd emails that I never read. I cannot read them because there are literally hundreds of them.

The Chairperson: So, you did not read the email.

Mr Brimstone: I never read that email.

The Chairperson: So, you did not see the email, you did not read the letter, and you did not read the briefing in your role as a special adviser, despite — and I will repeat this for the third time — despite all the public attention, Assembly inquiries, this Committee writing and all of that?

Mr Brimstone: I have never seen this email, Chair, or I would have seen the document attached to it. Anybody will confirm that, until recently, I was cc'd into hundreds of emails and it was impossible to read them. All the evidence that I have given so far is as honest and as clear as I can be.

The Chairperson: OK. There are no other indications that any other member wishes to speak at the moment, so I am happy enough to adjourn and leave it at this juncture. Thank you for your evidence here this morning. We will reflect on all this and may well return to you for further information.

It is now 1.05 pm. Before we go into the next evidence session, I propose to take a 15-minute comfort break.