



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:
Minister for Social Development

3 April 2014

Chairman, if I could just point out at the start, when I attended the Committee meeting on 13 March, the meeting was adjourned before I could properly conclude my evidence. Before the meeting was adjourned, Chairman, you had been asking me about a meeting I held with my officials on 28 June 2013. Your letter to me on 28 March — the one that invites me here again today — indicates that you would like to discuss that meeting with me again. I would, therefore, like to begin just by reiterating something that I previously told the Committee on 13 March.

I advised the Committee on 13 March that, around the time of the meeting with my officials on the 28 June 2013, there had been a series of letters that went back and forth between myself and the BBC and that, in relation to this meeting with my officials on 28 June, I couldn't recall the details or the conversation at the meeting. It was 10 months ago, and that is still my position.

I also advised the Committee that, having had sight of the documents forwarded to this Committee earlier this year in relation to the meeting, the only conclusion that anyone could reach was that the letter I signed late on the afternoon of 28 June to the BBC 'Spotlight' programme would appear to be the result of that meeting. That is still my position.

On 13 March, you also questioned me on a number of occasions in relation to my reply to 'Spotlight' on 28 June, as you thought it was unusual that I did not specifically mention the on-camera interview in the letter. However, I don't see anything unusual about that. The letter that was issued on 28 June clearly references, in the very first sentence, the BBC's letter dated 27 June, and, if you read the BBC letter, you will see that it asked me to take part in an on-camera interview.

I had also been previously asked by the BBC, for example in their letter to me on 7 June, to consider an on-camera interview, and you will note from my reply to that letter on 26 June that I did not specifically refer to the request for an on-camera interview. There was no need to, as I wasn't prepared to do an on-camera interview. I have, therefore, nothing further really to add in relation to the meeting with my officials on 28 June last year.

Chairman, also in your letter to me on 28 March you indicate that I have been asked to take an affirmation today in light of the apparent contradiction in the evidence provided by my former private secretary on 9 January 2014 and my evidence previously to this Committee on 12 December last year. This relates to the revisions to the note of the meeting on 16 April 2012. In my briefing to the Committee on 12 December, I said:

"I did not see the note until much later. I had no input into it. I do not know anything about whatever changes were made."

In my former private secretary's briefing to the Committee on 9 January, she said:

"Well, I'm assuming that the instruction came from either the Minister or special adviser since they were under the impression that the meeting was with the Glass and Glazing Federation."

I advised the Committee on 13 March that, in relation to Ms McConaghie's statement, she had said that she was "assuming" and that she also had repeated on a number of occasions in her evidence on 9 January that she could not recall this incident at all.

I have, therefore, nothing further to add to my briefing to this Committee on 12 December last year, when I advised the Committee that I only became aware of the various drafts and the fact, indeed, that there were actually drafts in the few weeks before I came to the Committee in December. I had never seen those earlier drafts, I was not aware they even existed and I had no input into the drafts of the note of the meeting on 16 April 2012. Thank you, Chairman.

The Chairperson: Thank you. At the last session, when we concluded the last session, Jim Allister had the Floor, so we will just resume with Jim Allister.

Mr Allister: OK. Minister, just to pick up, on the last occasion I had been — we had established that Ms McConaghie, who had been your private secretary for many years very successfully, had a good recall for detail and then I was putting to you that that was the source of the difficulty that the Committee had to try and disentangle: that she told us that, nonetheless, she couldn't remember precisely who told her to change the minute, though she was very clear she didn't do it of her own volition. She said that — she mentioned three possibilities and of her own evidence essentially dismissed one of them and said that she assumed that the instruction came from either you or from

the special adviser. I was at the point of asking you: given that that evidence had been given to the Committee, had you, in any intervening time, had a discussion, for example, with your special adviser to see if, together, you could cast any light on that, as to whether it was one or the other of you that had given that instruction? Have you had any such discussions?

Mr McCausland: Well, Mr Chairman, the special adviser has given his evidence to the Committee. I have given my evidence to the Committee. The members are well aware of what the special adviser said. They are also very much aware of what I have said; that I have no recollection of changes to the aide-memoire. And I've really nothing to add to that.

Mr Allister: Yes, but, Minister, my question is not about that. My question is: in an effort to get to the bottom of this, have you had any discussions with your special adviser to see if, collectively putting your recollections together, you could shed any light on this?

Mr McCausland: There are no recollections to put. I've stated quite clearly I have no recollections.

Mr Allister: Well, have you had any discussion with your special adviser to see if collectively you could shed any light on it?

Mr McCausland: Well, I would direct members to what the special adviser said to the Committee, and I'm quite happy to allow him to speak for himself.

Mr Allister: Do I take that as a no, that you have not had any discussions of that nature?

Mr McCausland: He simply reiterated to me what he said to the Committee, and that is his recollection, as best he can, of matters. I have said my position very clearly to the Committee. So, there's no — nothing really to discuss, because I've no recollection of it.

Mr Allister: Well, Minister —

Mr McCausland: Mr Chairman, I think there's a point comes where you have answered a question, and —

The Chairperson: There are questions being asked, so —

Mr McCausland: Yeah, but I think there is a point, Chairman, that, in regard to inquiries, it is normal practice that, if you answer a question, the thing moves on to something else rather than —

The Chairperson: Well, the member is entitled to probe a response.

Mr McCausland: Indeed, he is entitled to probe, Chair.

The Chairperson: Sorry, but the member is entitled to probe a response, and that is what he is doing. So, let's just keep this —

Mr Allister: Minister, do you not want to get to the bottom of that, as to who gave the instruction to make the change?

Mr McCausland: There are many things that one might want to know, but I've nothing really to add to it, because, as I say, I don't know that one would ever get to the bottom of it. I've no recollection, and I have said that clearly. The special adviser has made his position absolutely clear. My private secretary's position was also — she said she did not recall. And there the matter sits.

Mr Allister: But you told us on a previous occasion that some things in life remain unknown. You seemed to happily tell us that. So, it seems that now that you don't want to get to the bottom of who gave that instruction to change a minute to your private secretary, nor do you want this Committee to get to the bottom of it. Is that fair?

Mr McCausland: I think the position in regard to all of this was made fairly clear in my initial statement to the Committee, which was back in December, on 12 December, when I gave my evidence. And,

again, I've really nothing to add to that. I think the position there was set out very clearly in the evidence to the Committee on 12 December.

Mr Allister: Minister, is it can't help or won't help?

Mr McCausland: Well, I'm not quite clear what that question [*Inaudible.*] spell it out.

Mr Allister: Well, let's be very clear. Are you, are you, deliberately trying — is it that you can't help this Committee unravel that mystery of who gave that instruction or that you won't help this Committee unravel?

The Chairperson: I would ask members to be very, very mindful about straying into subjective commentary. There are appropriate questions to be asked and probed, and I would ask members to stick to a line of questioning.

Mr McCausland: I can only give the facts as I know them. If I don't know something, I'm not going to invent it.

Mr Allister: See you told us in December that you only — you told us that it was only about December you became aware that there'd been various drafts of the minutes.

Mr McCausland: That would be correct. I'm not sure of the exact date, but around the winter period, yes.

Mr Allister: Yes. And you told us that — I'll get you the quote if I can —

Mr McCausland: Presumably it's a quote from Hansard.

Mr Allister: Presumably it is, except I have misplaced it. As I recall, you told us that:

"As I, at that time, believed the meeting had been with the Glass and Glazing —"

Mr McCausland: Could I ask where in Hansard this occurs so that I know exactly what I am referring to? Rather than —

The Chairperson: No, I know. It's very appropriate.

Mr Allister: I will get you that. Bear with me one second.

The Chairperson: We are just looking for that now. Do you not have the Hansard folder on your desk?

Mr Campbell: Do we need a short adjournment, Chairman, no, to find this?

The Chairperson: It's always possible.

Page 2 of Hansard.

Mr Allister: [*Inaudible.*]

The Chairperson: Just a second now. Claire, can you indicate that to the Minister, please, when you are on your feet? Thank you.

Mr McCausland: I have got the note here. Which page? Page 2. Right. OK.

The Chairperson: Got that?

Mr Allister: Do you remember telling the Committee:

"The Committee has been provided with a copy of the note of the meeting. This was an internal note that my private secretary prepared in order to keep some degree of an internal private office record of the meeting. 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."

I think we now know, if I recall correctly, that happened in the month of May that the note was finalised. Now, when you said:

"As I, at that time, believed that the attendees were representing the Glass and Glazing Federation, the note was finalised to reflect that position."

How would your private secretary have known to alter the note to reflect your belief that the meeting was with the Glass and Glazing Federation?

Mr McCausland: I have been very clear with the Committee and with the Assembly, and I made that position very clear in my evidence on 12 December that, at the time, I mistakenly believed that the meeting was with the Glass and Glazing Federation. Subsequent to the evidence presented by Mr Young and Mr McKeag, I realised that that was incorrect. I accept that I was wrong in my assumption, my belief that it was the Glass and Glazing Federation. However, at the time, that was my belief. As to how that note was finalised to reflect that position — all we know is that it was finalised to reflect that position. As to how that happened, I have no knowledge; I couldn't comment because, as was stated earlier, I am under affirmation, I will be very precise in what I say and I am not going to speculate.

Mr Allister: But, would you agree that, if the note was changed to reflect your position, that would strongly suggest that you had a hand in the changing of it?

Mr McCausland: No. That is not an assumption that one should draw from that.

Mr Allister: But —

Mr McCausland: I know the Member — Just pause until I actually get —

The Chairperson: Just deal with it —

Mr McCausland: — to speak without being interrupted.

The Chairperson: OK.

Mr McCausland: The position was that, as the Minister in the Department and therefore responsibility at the top of the Department, I was under the impression that it was the Glass and Glazing Federation. That then obviously became what I would describe as the accepted narrative, and the note was finalised to reflect that. As to how that happened, I have stated, Chairman, on a number of occasions, that I do not know how that happened. There's no point in members quizzing me about something when I can quite clearly say I have no knowledge of how that happened and, likewise, the private secretary could not recall how it happened. So, the Committee could go round for a long time in circles. I've apologised to the Committee. I've made it clear that I was wrong. I accept that I was wrong. It was a mistake. It was a genuinely inadvertent mistake, and there the matter rests.

Mr Allister: But we know that departmental officials didn't think the meeting was with the Glass and Glazing Federation. We know that two people did think it was, namely yourself and your special adviser. So, if the minute is changed to reflect your position, that it was with the Glass and Glazing Federation, is that not very strongly suggestive that the instigator of that change had to be yourself or the special adviser, the two people who held that view?

Mr McCausland: Mr Chairman, the word in the question there that strikes me is the word "suggest". I'm not going to speculate, and I've repeated that on a number of occasions, about something of which I have no clear knowledge and recollection.

The Chairperson: That's fair enough. Obviously, you're entitled to give the response that you deem to be accurate and appropriate, and that's as one would expect. The issue here that we have, we are dealing — Members will, and there are other questions, members are entitled to identify dates or times or evidence which might then — disparity of evidence, if you understand. So, these are relevant questions, and you will answer, obviously, as you feel appropriate to yourself. And that's the only way we can conduct the business.

Mr Allister: But you do see my point, Minister, do you not, that if there is only two people, it seems, who think the meeting was with the Glass and Glazing Federation, and the minute is altered to reflect that view, it has to be almost inevitable, does it not, that the instruction to make that change came from one or the other of the people who held that view?

Mr McCausland: Mr Chairman, I've already given my answer.

Mr Allister: You can't remember.

Mr McCausland: Well, it is quite clear that the member's memory is somewhat limited as well, because he can't recall the fact that I've already stated that on a number of occasions.

The Chairperson: OK, so —

Mr Allister: I can well recall that. I also am very well aware that "can't remember" is the frequent refuge for the dissembler. I am aware of that as well.

The Chairperson: OK, so we are dealing with — sorry —

Mr McCausland: Mr Chairman —

The Chairperson: Sorry. I am sorry, Mr McCausland. I'm just going to make a ruling here on this. We appear to have exhausted that line of questioning.

Mr Allister: Can I move on?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr Allister: You told the Committee that:

"No one had come forward earlier with information to the contrary."

Earlier than when you realised you'd made a mistake. No one had come forward earlier with information to the contrary that the meeting in fact wasn't with the Glass and Glazing Federation. Do you recall that?

Mr McCausland: I would ask again if the member could direct me to the quotation.

The Chairperson: Page 21.

Mr Allister: Page 21 of the Hansard of 12 December. Do you see that?

Mr McCausland: I do indeed, yes.

Mr Allister:

"No one came forward to me earlier with any information to suggest anything to the contrary."

But, in fact, you had had four letters, I think it was, from the BBC suggesting to the contrary. You'd had the programme itself. You had the Northern Ireland Housing Executive FOI information. So, there'd been lots of people had come forward with information to the contrary that the meeting had, in fact, been with Turkington's, were there not?

Mr McCausland: First of all, I did not dispute the fact, and I made it clear in an answer to the Assembly — The member had an opportunity to peruse some papers there, so I would just also take the opportunity. The programme went out on 3 July. There was no firm evidence, in my view, on the matter. I saw — I have seen since, rather, a note taken by one individual in regard to the meeting. There were suggestions here and there, but there was nothing firm about this until after the programme — a considerable time after the programme, in fact — until the point where Mr Young and Mr McKeag came to the Committee and stated it clearly. And I accept their word.

Mr Allister: But I'm just pointing out to you, that to say no one had come forward with information that, in fact, it was with Turkington's not the Glass and Glazing Federation. The BBC has long been making that allegation to you in letters. The programme and the FOI Housing Executive information—

The Chairperson: Sorry.

Mr McCausland: The correspondence between myself and the BBC dated back to November 2012. Then there was a raft of correspondence there: 7, 20, 26 and 27 June, then finally 1 July. This particular issue only arose there at that late point: the issue of the meeting with Turkington's only arose there in June. It was not raised at the very early stage. It was something that was thrown in at the very end. It did not seem to be particularly important, in so far as the only thing that mattered for me was the fact that, at that meeting, whoever it was with, there was the opportunity to save a substantial amount of money that we now know to be around £15 million of savings to the public purse and also get a better outcome for tenants. If the request for that meeting had come in from Turkington's, as indeed, we now know it was, and I had realised that at the time, I would still have held the meeting because the important thing is to have the best service for tenants and the best value for money.

Mr Allister: So, for example, when your special adviser, in his evidence, told us that he was shocked in July to find that, when he saw the Turkington letter, that in fact the request was for a meeting with Turkington's, did he not draw your attention to that, in July? He was shocked by it. Did he not go to you as Minister and say, "In fact, Minister, it looks like, contrary to what we thought, this meeting was not with the Glass and Glazing Federation, it was with Turkington's." Did he leave you in the dark about that?

Mr McCausland: The evidence, and I have spoken to my special adviser, and I am sure the member and others will question the special adviser in due course this morning. The member, or sorry, the special adviser has made the point to me that, on reflection, the word "shocked" might be better "surprised" because he was under the impression that there was going to —

He was under the impression that there was going to be a request made, that is in the light of his earlier meeting, that there was going to be a request from the Glass and Glazing Federation. There, that is really all I can add.

Mr Allister: But whether he was shocked or whether he was surprised, he'd made a discovery, which was in conflict with what he and you to that point believed. Are you telling the Committee that he never drew that discovery to your attention and left you, as the Minister, in the dark on that? Is that what you are telling us?

Mr McCausland: Could the member advise me of what date, or at what point, the special adviser was surprised?

Mr Allister: Well, he told us that, in July 2013 — I don't think he specified a date — in July 2013, he discovered, he saw, the letter from Turkington's and was "shocked" to realise that it, in fact, was a letter from Turkington's. Simply, did he never draw that to your attention?

Mr McCausland: I was — we were aware that the letter was on Turkington notepaper. That's quite clear. I've never sought to deny that. I wouldn't attempt to: it's quite obvious that that's the case. But when you read the letter at the time, I believed that it was indeed from people who were representing the Glass and Glazing Federation. That was my assumption.

Chairman, could —

Mr Allister: We'll not go down that road. But, just, it was sufficient shock for the special adviser to discover something that you apparently already knew.

Mr McCausland: Sorry —

Mr Allister: It caused him to be greatly surprised, and he didn't discuss that with you. And drew nothing to your attention in terms of how he interpreted it.

Mr McCausland: The member seems to delight in mulling over and over again this word "shock". I have said already that I think the special adviser, when he comes to give evidence, will say that, in reflection, he would prefer to use the word "surprised". I don't think the word "shock" was appropriate. He doesn't think it's appropriate. It was really the word "surprised".

Mr Allister: So —

Mr McCausland: Sorry, I know —

The Chairperson: Sorry, Minister McCausland. I mean the key point here is that your special adviser discovered that he had been mistaken, or his understanding was that —

Mr McCausland: He was surprised that the —

The Chairperson: Sorry, let me finish, because the key point here — the salient point is here: did the special adviser at any time express that new understanding to yourself? That's the key — that's the question, whether we term it "shock" or "surprise", so that it's a direct answer to yourself. I mean, the special adviser will answer it himself, but you're being asked, if I am correct, Jim Allister, just a simple question: did the special adviser, on his becoming aware that his —

Mr McCausland: All I can say is that we were under the impression still, until that late point, where Mr McKeag and Mr Young gave their statement to the Committee, we were under the impression that it was with the Glass and Glazing Federation.

Mr Allister: You see, Minister, I want to suggest to you that, when you said that no one had come forward to you earlier with information to the contrary till you read the evidence from Turkington's in December, and you said no one had come forward earlier with that information to you, that is untenable, because you had the BBC letters, you had the programme, you had the FOI information —

Mr McCausland: I am happy —

Mr Allister: Now that your special adviser in July —

Mr McCausland: I would be happy —

The Chairperson: Minister, let the question be put.

Mr Allister: You now had the special adviser in July discovering the error in that regard. So, how can you say that no one had come forward to you earlier with information to the contrary that the meeting wasn't with the Glass and Glazing Federation?

Mr McCausland: The letter was, on paper, from Turkington's, and was, I now know, from Turkington's, but it made a number of references to the Glass and Glazing Federation, and the nature of the conversation at the meeting led me to that belief. As regards evidence that I was mistaken, the only clear evidence — the only firm evidence — is the evidence that came from the lips of Mr Young and Mr McKeag. I don't necessarily believe everything that I hear from the BBC, and I'm sure the member doesn't either.

Mr Allister: So, you told us that your mistake was inadvertent, unintentional. Does this saga of knowledge and means of knowledge, of changing answers to delete "Turkington's" and insert "Glass and Glazing Federation", does that not all suggest that your mistake was anything but inadvertent and unintentional, but that you simply had run out of road come December when the people who you claimed you'd met as Glass and Glazing Federation had told this Committee no such thing, "We met

him as Turkington's"? You'd run out of road, Minister, and then you take refuge in things like "inadvertent" and "unintentional", but you were a Minister very determined throughout those months to create the impression the meeting was with Glass and Glazing Federation, to the very point of having draft answers changed in the Assembly to say that.

Mr McCausland: The member can make all the assumptions and assertions and suggestions that he wishes. All I can do is stick to the facts.

The Chairperson: Yeah. Again, I'm going to counsel members against straying from asking questions. People may want to make assumptions or draw conclusions. They can do that at a later stage. I'd prefer, and I want — I will ensure that people ask direct questions, clear questions, and it'll also require that those questions be answered. So, again, I want to just sort of advise people not to be straying into subjectivity. It may well be a bit difficult, and there has to be a certain amount of latitude, but I think we all know that there are lines over which we're not going to cross.

Mr Allister: OK. Can I move on? You told us that, if other companies —

Mr Campbell: Chairman, just, is there —

The Chairperson: Sorry.

Mr Campbell: — a limit on the number of questions? It's just there seems to be a prolongation of this questioning —

The Chairperson: There's no —

Mr Campbell: — about the assertions.

The Chairperson: There's no limit on the number of questions, but what I will do, I mean, I'm mindful of wanting to make sure that other members get in, so what I'm —

Mr Campbell: It's just I didn't get in at the last meeting, Chairman, and I made it very clear —

Mr Allister: Well, I'm happy to wait till later. I have a couple of other questions.

The Chairperson: There's not a difficulty. I mean, if members are probing a particular line, I think it's fair enough that we allow that member to ask a number of questions.

Mr Allister: I've finished that line.

The Chairperson: Fair enough, and I thank you for that. I'm just going to make just a general observation here in terms of the conduct. If someone is following a particular line, then there may be a number of questions attached to that, and that's fair enough. But, I am very mindful that other members will want to come in. So, no member — and Jim has willingly accepted this before I even make the ruling on it — but no member will just have the whole meeting to themselves. This inquiry will take as long as it takes, and I will want to make sure that every member gets in as often as needs be. Again, I will allow a certain latitude if people are probing a particular line, but then I will want to move on to other members, and that will not stop me, obviously, coming back to members when they want to come back in again with a particular, maybe different, line of questions or even if they want to follow on some of that at a later stage. So, if, Jim, you are finished that particular line, then I want to move on to the next member, which is Gregory.

Mr Campbell: Yeah. Just, I want to bring everybody back to the issue of requests for meetings with Ministers, and a number of members, but certainly not all, would have had previous ministerial experience and would know the number of requests, but can you give the Committee a rough idea? I know there is no such thing as an average day, but in a week, how many requests would there be for meetings, on average, if there is such a thing as an average week?

Mr McCausland: I think it's helpful for members, because, with the exception of two on this Committee, the rest have not held ministerial office, but I think it's helpful just to give a sense of the scale of the workload. And, in that context, taking that particular month of June 2013, I had in the

course of that month 69 different meetings and events. There were 98 Assembly questions that were dealt with. There were 271 submissions, invitations, correspondence, and I think that gives some sense of the scale of the work within the Department in the course of a single month. And, some of those submissions would be very, very lengthy documents as well, and members will appreciate that, in addition to ministerial responsibility, we all have a constituency responsibility. They will know the amount of work that they do in their own constituency, and they will appreciate, therefore, that, on top of what I have listed there, I was also carrying out my own constituency work. But, in the course of the month there, I had, in terms of meetings and events, 69.

Mr Campbell: Just, if we stick with that month, and, obviously there were a period of months between the actual meeting that's being referred to and then you being asked to recall with whom it was and what was your understanding. For example, that 69. Would there be pre-briefs involved in all of those or most of them?

Mr McCausland: For most meetings, yes, there would be. If you're meeting an outside group, there would normally be a briefing and normally two. Even if you're just meeting officials in the Department, there would be a briefing as well.

Mr Campbell: So, would it be the case then that, if we just take 60 or 70 for that month and then multiply it by the number of months, if you have pre-briefs for most of those events and then the meetings themselves, in my view anyway it would stretch credulity to expect people to remember each and every event, what was said at the pre-brief as well as what was said at the meeting. Do you have a clear recollection of every meeting and every pre-brief?

Mr McCausland: Unless you were omniscient, you wouldn't have that.

Mr Campbell: Yeah, I thought that. The issue, and this keeps coming up, Minister, and you have answered as clear as you can. But, the issue of Turkington's being members of the Glass and Glazing Federation. At the time of the meeting, between that meeting and the programme going out, had there been any approach to you by anyone wanting to know was there a meeting with the Glass and Glazing Federation?

Mr McCausland: The — I will just refer here — substantial amount of paperwork around here. There were questions. There would have been — I thought I had — . There were questions that came in in the form of written questions, and there were responses to those.

Mr Campbell: I think I remember questions from a North Antrim Sinn Féin MLA.

Mr McCausland: Yes. I thought I actually had those to hand. I don't seem to, but there were a number that came in.

Mr Campbell: From recollection — I haven't got them to hand —

The Chairperson: We might be able to draw it down. If you just wait for a second, we should be able to locate those. Sorry, we're struggling.

Mr Campbell: OK. I vaguely remember. They were quite general in nature, from what my recollection is. So, did that — I mean was there any sort of approach following that? Sometimes whenever questions are posed and then the answer is given — I know I do — you then see information, which you weren't aware of, and you then follow that up. Was there any sort of rigorous pursuit following those public questions, public responses in the public domain?

Mr McCausland: No. The answers were given out and they made clear that we were — of course we put them out saying that we were meeting members of Turkington's who were there, as we believed, representing the Glass and Glazing Federation, but there was nothing came back subsequent to that other than the questions being asked and answered.

Mr Campbell: OK. Another question, Minister. Obviously there is a completely different context now compared to at the time because of the intervening programme. Can I ask you what — I mean, what is your view regarding the Committee's processing of this inquiry and what you think, in terms of your recollections, should be the outcome of the inquiry, in terms of what you've said, the intensity of the

meetings, you can't recall the precise nature of the meetings being specifically referred to and the duration of the inquiry as it obviously goes on, now into its ninth month, I think?

Mr McCausland: In the period between all of those events and then the current date, if you bear in mind that, in the course of one month — and I've outlined there the number of items of correspondence, submissions, meetings etc. As the months go by, the amount of activity that has happened in the interim increases very considerably, month on month. I can only say that, for me, a tremendous amount of scrutiny is being given to something which, a meeting which, really, was extremely beneficial. About the details of it and the precise nature of everything that was said at that meeting and subsequently, I've already set out what I can remember and what I can't. And it's not surprising, in view of the amount of time that has passed and the number of events that one would attend during that period. You tend to remember the key things that are going to be beneficial, and that was where the savings came in.

Mr Campbell: Just a final question, Chairman.

The Chairperson: I would just draw your attention, just for your information, for the record, in your revised timeline of known events — it's in tab 2 of your pack — there is a reference from 10 May 2012, a question from Daithí McKay to ask the Minister, so —

Mr Campbell: Yeah, I thought that was it. OK.

Just in terms of the concentration of time in relation to the inquiry, Minister, obviously your former secretary in the private office was asked to give evidence. You have now returned again. Your special adviser was asked and has returned again. The permanent secretary likewise. Can you give us an indication of the length of time that it has taken to prepare for each of these sessions that you've come before the Committee?

Mr McCausland: Yeah. To source out all of the paperwork that has been put to the Committee, and members will be aware of the amount of paperwork that they have received, and I assume that they are still receiving paperwork in regard to later stages of this inquiry. That is a very time-consuming piece of work that diverts people away from other work that they would otherwise be doing in the Department. On the value or otherwise of that, people will form their own opinion, but it is very considerable and is, in a sense — I found it to be — an unnecessary diversion.

The Chairperson: Dolores Kelly.

Mrs D Kelly: Thanks, Chair. Minister, It is just — I think I'm right in saying that in Mr Brimstone's evidence he said he was shocked in July 2013 that the meeting was with the Glass and Glazing Federation and not Turkington's, so how does that explain all of those amendments from May 2012 on the back of requests? I mean, I find it quite surprising that nobody lifted the phone to Turkington's and said, you know, "Could we just clarify here, before we go into all of these amendments to minutes, to memoires, AOs, letters to the Committee Chair, just for the point of clarity, who that is with"? I mean, it's just surprising that no one did that.

Mr McCausland: The member may be surprised: I'm not, because it was my firm belief that it was the Glass and Glazing Federation.

Mrs D Kelly: And yet, the headed notepaper, as you said yourself, was from Turkington's; all the pre-meeting in the Radisson Blu hotel with Mr Brimstone was with two representatives of Turkington's, and yet questions suggested that they were all around — everybody else believed they were Turkington's. The only people that appear to have been kept in the dark was yourself and your special adviser.

Mr McCausland: I dispute the phrase or think it inappropriate to use the phrase "kept in the dark" to suggest that somebody was wilfully keeping someone in the dark. There was a misunderstanding on my part.

Mrs D Kelly: Just on your part? So, did you have a conversation, then, with Mr Brimstone, as Mr Allister asked, subsequent or in preparation for the inquiry, in relation to how this misunderstanding came about?

Mr McCausland: I have already, I think, made the point on several occasions that — I'm sure Mr Brimstone will make the point himself in due course — on reflection [*Inaudible.*] I suppose, we were looking at the matter there and talking about it in more recent days, he would suggest the word "surprised" was probably a more appropriate word than the word "shocked". But, there was nothing to suggest that the meeting was not — He had not been at the meeting. He was off on paternity leave, as the member would be aware, at that time. I was at the meeting. I left the meeting with a particular conclusion. It was incorrect, and I have apologised for that.

Mrs D Kelly: But, you see, the problem is, in earlier statements, you've said that it was December 2013 before any clarity was sought, and yet, throughout the latter part of 2012 right through to 2013, there were numerous opportunities to seek clarification, but no one did that. Given the significance of this and the fact, Minister, that other MLAs, on behalf of companies within their constituencies — Mrs Overend's letter, for example: the people whom she sought to represent stated that the proposals, if I am correct, put forward in relation to the hinges and the cost savings were not accurate, and they had major concerns about them. So, are those other companies, then, not also members of the Glass and Glazing Federation? I am just wondering, you know, how do three firms writing to you and contradicting the evidence presented to you by Turkington's or, as you believe it to be, the Glass and Glazing Federation, and saying that those savings actually weren't cost-effective, that there was no, you know — there just appeared to be no —

Mr McCausland: There are two points there that I'll pick up on. The first is that I don't know whether particular companies are or are not members of the Glass and Glazing Federation, because it was made clear by the people who are members of staff at Turkington's that their company was most definitely a member of the Glass and Glazing Federation. I couldn't comment on the others; I don't know their Northern Ireland membership.

The second thing is that, if someone comes and says to me, "I think you can save £15 million" — or whatever figure it be in terms of millions of pounds — "by following Glass and Glazing Federation guidelines", I'll have a meeting about that, because, I think, to me, that is something that it would be totally inappropriate for me not to have a meeting about. If I couldn't — if I passed away an opportunity to save money — the members of this Committee and others would be very much, I would say, fairly irate about the fact that I hadn't taken that up. So, it is right and proper that I should take that up.

There was — it is worth just reiterating again — at that meeting, the Housing Executive were represented, officials from the Department were there. The issue before us at the meeting was largely around the savings to be made around fitting windows whether you do it internally or externally and whether you can save on redecoration grants. That was the big saving. I simply said — at the time to myself — "I have no expertise in this field. It is a matter for officials in the Housing Executive and my own officials. They are the people who are the housing experts. You go away and look at it". And so they did. In fact, if the members recall, at the meeting, the Housing Executive — I think it's in their evidence to this Committee — at the meeting, they made clear that it was something that they were already looking at, because Turkington's had already approached them prior to that meeting. So it was not something new. I wasn't saying, "You must do this". I don't have any role in awarding contracts or anything like that.

Mrs D Kelly: But, Minister, at that meeting, it now transpires that you and your special adviser were the only two people in that room who believed the meeting was with the Glass and Glazing Federation and not Turkington's, and you have just stated that Turkington's had already approached the Housing Executive in relation to the specification and, when they were unsuccessful, then went to yourself.

Mr McCausland: Look, first of all, could I correct the fact? The special adviser was off on paternity leave, so he couldn't have been at the meeting.

The Chairperson: Sorry, is this the 16 April meeting? I mean, I don't want to be letting the meeting go off on a diversion here, but there would appear to be a conflict here now, because all of the evidence to date tells us that Stephen Brimstone was at the meeting.

Mr McCausland: Sorry, at that meeting, the 16 April meeting.

Mrs D Kelly: Yes, yes, yes.

Mr McCausland: Sorry, my meeting — I wasn't at the first meeting.

Mrs D Kelly: No, no, no, not the prebrief.

Mr McCausland: You were implying — your question suggested that both of us were at the same meeting.

Mrs D Kelly: At the 16 April meeting.

Mr McCausland: The 16 April meeting was — my meeting was with Turkington's on —

The Chairperson: 16 April.

Mr McCausland: 16 April. Yes. And on the 16 April —

Mrs D Kelly: Mr Brimstone —

Mr McCausland: — Mr Brimstone was on paternity leave.

Mrs D Kelly: So, you —

The Chairperson: No, he was at the meeting.

Mr McCausland: Sorry, at the meeting that I had with Turkington's.

The Chairperson: That's 16 April.

Mr McCausland: Members, I think [*Inaudible.*] — I haven't got the — My meeting with them was on 16 April.

Mrs D Kelly: With the Housing Executive —

Mr McCausland: Yes.

Mrs D Kelly: — yes, and the others that you outlined.

Mr McCausland: And at what point was Mr Brimstone on paternity leave.

Mr Allister: You told us April.

The Chairperson: It was February.

Mrs D Kelly: February he was on paternity leave.

Mr McCausland: Right —

Mrs D Kelly: It was the last week in February, I think, beginning — running into early March.

Mr McCausland: I don't even — well, I should have it — if I look at the note, what does it say as — sorry, we are getting into so many different meetings, to be quite honest.

The Chairperson: I think the issue here is that, at the meeting on 16 April, because it is an important point —

Mr McCausland: Sorry, if I have — I am looking here for the minute — the note, rather — of the meeting on the — which I don't have with me. The note of the meeting in April with Turkington's. Sorry, if the member could just go back over the question again — the actual question.

Mrs D Kelly: Well, it really. Minister — it transpires now that the aide-memoire or the minute of the meeting of 16 April was changed up to six times. I think some of those were fairly elementary changes. However, subsequent to that, the minute was changed to reflect who actually was in attendance, with handwritten amendments by your special adviser and a direction to Mr Sands and others to change the minutes. As a consequence of that, Assembly questions were changed to reflect that it was not with Turkington's but with the Glass and Glazing Federation.

Mr McCausland: First of all, the —

Mrs D Kelly: I think it was 16 April.

The Chairperson: Could I just draw your attention, Dolores Kelly, that the previous references to the letter being changed by Stephen Brimstone, I think in his earlier evidence — we can check that later on — not the minute/aide-memoire.

Mrs D Kelly: The aide-memoire — yes, it was to it.

The Chairperson: Stephen Brimstone wasn't — It wasn't suggested that he changed the aide-memoire. It was the letter.

Mrs D Kelly: Oh, the letter. OK, sorry. It was the letter.

The Chairperson: Changed the one with the handwriting on the single letter, if you remember correctly.

Mr Campbell: It's the passage of time, you see, Chairman.

The Chairperson: The key issue here was in the question put, which is why I had to draw your attention to that because I didn't want, by default, incorrect evidence being regurgitated, even by default. So, that's why I drew to attention that Stephen Brimstone was at the meeting on 16 April. The question that you had put was that, with the exception of yourself and Stephen Brimstone, all the other participants —

Mr McCausland: Chair, can I have a copy of —

The Chairperson: Let me finish the point.

Mr McCausland: Sorry, apologies.

The Chairperson: — with the exception of all the other attendees, the two people — yourself and the special adviser — were working on the basis that it was the Glazing Federation. That was the point.

Mrs D Kelly: Yes.

Mr McCausland: Would it be possible to get a copy of the final note of the meeting in April?

The Chairperson: We'll see what we have.

Mr McCausland: Right, I've got the note in front of me now. The member's question I am happy to take now.

Mrs D Kelly: It was just really a point that I was making that everybody else who attended the meeting, with the exception of yourself and your special adviser, were clear that the meeting was with Turkington's and not the Glass and Glazing Federation.

Mr McCausland: First of all, could I just apologise, Chairman, there? Questions can become convoluted in the asking. They tend to steer round quite a lot of ground. If you don't have the paperwork in front of you, it is, as I'm sure members will understand, complex at times remembering all the details of everything that happened and the sequencing of events.

The position there was that at that meeting on 16 April — I have it here with me. I do apologise: I was in error in what I said earlier about who was at what meeting. I was not at the first meeting, which was the meeting with Turkington's that the special adviser had. At the second meeting, on 16 April, the list of people there — yes, Stephen Brimstone was at that meeting. I apologise for that error, that mistake there. The meeting was focused very much on just the issue of savings. At that stage — and I hadn't the figure in front of me earlier on — the figure they were quoting was, over 40,000 homes, could be a saving of £26.8 million.

But I had no role whatsoever in the awarding of any contracts. I simply sent officials off and said, "You're the experts. You go away and look at it". That was the end of the matter as far as I was concerned.

Mrs D Kelly: Except that other MLAs wrote on behalf of some of the firms within their constituency who were contractors to the Housing Executive and stated that their information was wrong and had requested meetings but failed to get a meeting, except much later on, whenever Mrs Overend, representing Super Seal Window Systems Ltd, had not been requested a meeting, but whenever they went to Mr McCrea and Dr McCrea, they were requested — were granted a meeting. In fact, it states that the special adviser decreed that a meeting be granted. I think that is an interesting choice of word.

I was just wondering why this didn't ring any alarm bells, that you had established contractors to the Housing Executive and some saying that you're going to save a huge amount of money and others saying that you weren't —

Mr McCausland: I think it is important to remember there are two elements to savings. One is around the method of fixing the windows or installing the windows; the other was around hinges. I think this is something that I touched on at some length in the initial evidence I gave. The large saving was purely in terms of how the windows were installed, internally or externally, and the saving in redecoration grants. That was why, when the meeting was requested with Turkington's, it was clear to me that, if there is a way of installing windows that's better than the current method, has a better outcome, well, let's hear about it.

When you come to those other requests, they were about a very specific thing, and, in fact, if the members bear with me for a moment, I should have here the correspondence in that regard. Oh, yeah, there it is. In reply to an Assembly question about this matter, I did say:

"In June 2012 Mrs Sandra Overend, MLA, requested a meeting on behalf of Super Seal Window Systems Ltd to discuss the situation regarding the company's double glazing contracts. However, as I had previously written to Mrs Overend MLA, on 31 May 2012, confirming that the six double glazing contracts with Super Seal Window Systems Ltd could proceed,"

— and that was the purpose of the Super Seal meeting —

"I decided that a meeting would not be required at this time." —

There was no point having a meeting about something that had already been resolved, and it's been made clear to the company that their work would proceed.

I subsequently then received a request to meet with Super Seal from Dr McCrea. I agreed to this, as this was to discuss, not the other matter of whether the six contracts would proceed or not, but the review of the specification and savings relating to the alternative type of hinges and casement windows, which were being proposed. That was put on record away back there in —

Mrs D Kelly: May 2012.

Mr McCausland: That was on 21 January 2014.

Mrs D Kelly: OK. Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you. Sammy.

Mr Wilson: So far, the session seems to have been centred on this fixation about who was the meeting with. What relevance that is, I'm not quite sure. I think that it would be better, maybe for the record, if we could have some discussion or some information from you, Minister, as to what was the meeting actually about?

Mr McCausland: The meeting was about the potential to have a better method of installing double glazing, because, when I came into the Department, I actually had made it a priority that we had double glazing installed in all social housing, all Housing Executive properties, by 2015. The Housing Executive had said that they could not complete that work until 2021. I said I wanted it done by 2015, and that will be achieved.

The issue then arose about the cost, and they said that there would be a very, very high cost, and, when I heard, therefore, that there was a way of doing it more cheaply and more easily, I was impressed by that possibility, particularly as I had seen a number of examples of windows being installed in Housing Executive properties in a way that was not particularly good. It was very disruptive to tenants, particularly if the work was being done in cold winter weather, and the impact on them if you could do this work in a better way and avoid the need for all sorts of plaster work and so on, redecoration grants, if all of that could be done, then you were in a situation where you had a better outcome for tenants, better value for money, and that was the sum and substance of the discussion. At that point, I said, "Well now look, I'm not" — I would say on all of these occasions — "I'm not a housing or building expert; the officials are there in my Department, the officials are there in the Housing Executive, go away and look at this and see what you make of this". And it was a matter that was left then to the Housing Executive.

Mr Wilson: Would it have had any more significance if that meeting had been requested by Turkington's as an individual firm or people from Turkington's as representatives of the glass and glaziers federation?

Mr McCausland: It wouldn't have mattered who came and brought the information at all. It would've had no impact whatsoever. Made no difference at all, because the key thing was the information that there was a general guidance issued by the federation, which seems to be the general practice within the trade. I know that it's the way that most people have the windows installed in their homes and therefore it made no difference who came, whether it was Turkington's, the federation or any other company or any other individual.

Mr Wilson: Would any individual firm have benefited from this? I mean, the kind of things that were being discussed would have been of benefit, in particular, for example — would Turkington's have had particular benefit from this? Or any other firm?

Mr McCausland: No firm would have had any benefit over anybody else. In fact, Turkington's didn't benefit from it.

Mr Wilson: Why do you think there's this fixation about whether it was Turkington's that asked for the meeting or the Glass and Glazing Federation that asked for the meeting?

Mr McCausland: Now, that's drawing me into an area of opinion and speculation. I can only stick to the facts as I know them and state categorically that it would have made no difference whether it was company A, company B, company C or a federation — no difference at all. The question as to why some people have a fixation about it, I think, is probably better directed to the people with the fixation.

Mr Wilson: But, given the records that you would have had in the Department and, indeed, the records which we have here, the letter and the briefings for the meetings etc, it'd be correct to say that there was never any attempt to hide who was involved in the meetings.

Mr McCausland: That is correct. In all of this, it's quite clear that the people were members of staff at Turkington's. There was no attempt to hide that. The only issue was around in what capacity they were there.

Mr Wilson: So, really — this all comes down — the last hour of questioning all comes down to what is the interpretation of who the people were actually representing — an individual firm or an organisation.

Mr McCausland: That's correct.

Mr Wilson: Maybe just explain to us again, in terms of the relevance of this to your Department, did it make any difference whether they were representing a firm or whether they were representing an organisation?

Mr McCausland: It made absolutely no difference whatsoever in what capacity they came — none at all.

Mr Wilson: What was the outcome of all of this?

Mr McCausland: That the officials from my Department and the Housing Executive went away and looked at this and concluded that the installation method used in the guidance was the better way to do it. It would result in significant savings, and that's now how the work is done.

Mr Wilson: And the savings have been — for the record.

Mr McCausland: There was a figure quoted at one point of £15.1 million, which I think is a worthwhile saving.

Mr Wilson: And did the firm which made representations to you gain anything from this?

Mr McCausland: No, they are not one of the companies that install windows, so they have gained nothing — not one penny. The only gainers — the only winners — are tenants and taxpayers.

The Chairperson: OK, Sammy. Thank you for that.

Mr Copeland: Thanks, Chair. Thank you, Minister, for your answers. You said just a few moments ago that the savings had been £15-odd millions. Is that up to now, or is that by the time the entire window replacement scheme is done?

Mr McCausland: I would need to come back to the members on that. I think — well, I would rather not speculate. They would only really probably have the figures up to the present time. I will come back to members on that.

Mr Copeland: Thank you. You have been round the block a long time with the public service and elsewhere, and, when people come to you with a proposal that sounds, on the face of it, to be very laudable and very worthwhile, experience sometimes teaches that there is always a downside. Were there any examinations or discussions at the meeting, with whoever it was with, as to any potential downsides or any potential difficulties that might arise should the method of replacing windows be shifted to the new method as opposed to the old one?

Mr McCausland: As I have indicated already, I am not a building expert —

Mr Copeland: No, no, I know.

Mr McCausland: — and, therefore, there would be no point in having a detailed discussion about the methodology etc. The point was that I immediately said to officials from the Housing Executive and the Department, "Go away and look at this. You're the people who know. You go away and have a look at it, and ultimately the Housing Executive will make their decision".

Mr Copeland: But, wearing your other hat as an elected representative in an area that has substantial deprivation, you would be aware, as well as I do, that there had been an expectation that, when work was carried out to your home, if your home suffered any material damage, that there was an expectation that you would be compensated. Because the Executive, for the very laudable reasons led by yourself to aid the public purse, that doesn't necessarily mean that putting the windows in the new way would lead to the removal of that expectation. And within the Executive, are you aware of any discussion that took place that would smooth the changeover?

The Chairperson: I mean —

Mr McCausland: I think we are wandering away from —

The Chairperson: I am sympathetic with you, Minister. I mean, Michael, at the end of the day, Sammy has put it on the record with the Minister this afternoon again — or, this morning again — as appropriate. I mean, part of that overall consequence of some of this work was savings to the public purse. The needs of the contract and so on is really not —

Mr Copeland: What I am really asking you is: was there ever any notion that money that had been previously paid to, almost on demand, to people who had double glazing fitted using the old method that there would be claims arise even using the new method and that it wouldn't be —

The Chairperson: Sorry, Michael. You really are straying way off —

Mr Copeland: I will put them as AQs.

The Chairperson: — the agenda. The Minister is making that clear. The Minister has given a full response in terms of making as best he could do. In fact, he said he would give further information in regard to savings as — get them up to date. So, I appreciate that.

Mr F McCann: Some of the questions that I was going to ask have been answered. I know the Minister has said that there, I think, it was £15.1 million savings, and, again, it would be interesting to find out if that is over the lifetime of the contract, but most of the savings was due to the denial of redecoration grants to people that normally would have, as Michael said, been able to apply for the thing. I think that probably run into multimillions and made up the bulk of the savings —

The Chairperson: It's already been covered, Fra, so —

Mr F McCann: I have to say that Sammy had opened the door by coming in and asking what the savings were for, when I am trying to say how the savings took place. I know they are saying that it had stopped, but there are some that still get paid, but the bulk of it — In terms of the meeting with Turkington's, again, Sammy had also said — I think the reason we are sitting here is on the back of the BBC 'Spotlight' programme. I think in the 'Spotlight' programme —

The Chairperson: Sorry, Fra. Can you move to questions? I mean, we are here because it is a statutory inquiry. We have terms of reference. We're giving a certain amount of latitude with respect to everybody as best we possibly can do. So, we know why we are here, so try and direct the questions to Mr McCausland.

Mr F McCann: Why were you so convinced that the people from Turkington's were meeting you as members of the Glass and Glazing Federation, given that they're a well-know company that provide that type of work, and secondly, from what has now transpired that they were also subscribers and supporters of the DUP?

Mr McCausland: I dealt with that final point at the previous — or the initial — session back in December. There are certain things that I would have no knowledge of in terms of that. As regards the fact that they are members of a trade body — the Glass and Glazing Federation — a trade body, by its very nature, is made up of people from companies. So, the fact that people are from a company would not raise any questions in my mind. If I was meeting the Quarry Products Association, there would be people there from company A or company B or whatever. That would not occur to me at all as unusual. It would be expected; in fact, it would be natural that people are from companies. So, I think the general thrust of the question around what led me to believe that it was the Glass and Glazing Federation, that is something that I have answered, I think, quite fully back in December. It was around the fact that, as noted, they said they were members of the Glass and Glazing Federation. They talked about the Glass and Glazing Federation guidelines, and I believed, on that basis, that they were there representing the Glass and Glazing Federation.

Mr F McCann: Chair, they said they were also members, and there were some questions raised about that at the time. But, to move it on, in your letter of 28 June to the BBC, you accused them of telling lies and, I think, also in a letter on 26 June, you said that, unless they withdrew their allegations, that you would initiate legal proceedings against the BBC, and especially given the level of allegations that had been made in the programme. Did you take legal action?

Mr McCausland: There was no need to take legal action. I think if you look carefully at the — The Member obviously has the correspondence in front of him; I'm just looking for it here now. 26 June. In their letter to me on 20 June, twenty sixth —

Mr F McCann: Twenty eighth maybe.

Mr McCausland: I am trying to find — I think it's — There were letters on the twentieth, twenty sixth, twenty seventh from me and then letters from them on the twenty sixth, two letters on the twenty sixth. Sorry, we received letters from them on the seventh, the twentieth, the twenty sixth and the twenty seventh. Now, just go back to your point again: which letter are you referring to?

Mr F McCann: On the twenty sixth and on the twenty eighth, you threatened —

Mr McCausland: Wait just a moment — If the Member —

Mr F McCann: — to take legal action against the BBC.

Mr McCausland: Sorry. Just until I find the letters.

The Chairperson: Let's get it clear which one we are referring to.

Mr McCausland: There was a letter from the BBC dated 26 June. Yes.

Mr F McCann: There was two letters advising the BBC, unless they withdrew the allegations, that you were going to take legal action against them.

Mr McCausland: I conclude that there was no need to take any legal action.

Mr F McCann: Why was that?

Mr McCausland: I don't think that that's of any relevance to this particular Committee. That's a personal — *[Inaudible.]*

Mr F McCann: But if they're making strong allegations, Minister, I have to say that you would think that, after you make the threat of legal action to get them to refute the allegations, that you would follow through with it.

Mr McCausland: If I felt that there was need to do something, I would decide to do it. If I don't, I decide otherwise, that's personal matter. It's not within the remit of this Committee.

The Chairperson: To be fair, that —

Mr F McCann: Could I just ask — I would have thought that, given the allegations that have been made in the programme and the fact that you said to them that they were all lies in the correspondence, that that would be the logical course. But if you have said that — I just can't understand why you didn't follow through given the level of allegations.

The Chairperson: He has given the — The answer has been given. So.

Mr F McCann: The other thing, and it goes back to the meeting with Turkington's or the Glass and Glazing Federation, that you —

Mr McCausland: I was just going to make the point — It is worth noting that, in the actual programme, the presenter did say it's possible Mr McCausland thought that the men from Turkington's were there as representatives of the federation. So, the programme itself actually acknowledged that that was a distinct possibility.

Mr F McCann: Anything's possible. Do you see in terms of the savings that Turkington's or the Glass and Glazing Federation brought in terms of the type of hinges, the fitting of the hinges, were they

asked what type of guarantees would be given on the hinges over their lifespan? Because I think one of the other things, Chair —

The Chairperson: We're straying into something which is nothing to do with this inquiry.

Mr F McCann: But Chair, I have to say that the Minister has said here that it led to £15 million worth of savings. There were other companies — another member had raised this — that had wanted to come to refute that those savings could be made and that they were saying that they were fitting superior hinges with guarantees. Those meetings were denied, and yet there were two meetings that took place, one with a company that had subscribed to the DUP and the other at the request of a DUP member when other companies were refused that same request.

The Chairperson: I take your point, but to me those questions have been answered in this session. You may not like the answer, but the answer has been made. I am just making that point. We are not going into "What was one contract about?". The issue of whether those savings are substantive or will be realised by the end of the contract is something that we will evaluate at a given time.

Mr F McCann: Are we going to get an opportunity to pursue that?

The Chairperson: The Committee will have an opportunity to pursue that, but it's not part of this inquiry.

Mr F McCann: It's part of the inquiry, and it's been emphasised on a number of occasions that there were £15 million of savings. There are people who would say that, over the lifetime of a hinge, there would be far more savings because there were certain guarantees given them hinges.

Mr F McCann: It is fair enough to make that point, Fra, but I'm just saying, by the time you get to the end of a contract, then obviously there will be evaluations of the contract, whether the work was done, whether there were savings and so on and so forth. It is another day's discussion. It's a very valuable discussion, and you have made it on the record, so we are happy enough that that point be made. Have you another question, Fra? No. Stewart, were you looking back in — or in, rather?

Mr Dickson: Yes, Chair. Thank you. Minister, you helpfully described to us what a month is like in terms of your hours and time and the number of things that arise. How many ministerial months would there be when an outside organisation would come to you and say to you that they could make these savings? I mean, would you get many £15 million savings offers coming in off the street to you?

Mr McCausland: I wish I was getting more opportunities to save £15 million. There are companies and trade bodies that would come periodically. I don't have in front of me the details of how many or how frequently, but periodically companies come up and say, "This would be a better way of doing it than another way".

Mr Dickson: But £15 million is a substantial amount of money.

Mr McCausland: That was indeed why I agreed to the meeting, because it would have been remiss of me not to do so.

Mr Dickson: And at that meeting, presumably they explained and you listened to the explanation of how that £15 million could be achieved.

Mr McCausland: The —

Mr Dickson: Or thereabouts.

Mr McCausland: Yes.

Mr Dickson: Given all of that, that is a significant amount of money, it is a significant conversation. I'm really coming back to the point that Mr Allister was trying to get at: if you didn't change the note, Mr Brimstone didn't change the note, Mrs McConaghie says that it could really only be a ministerial instruction, can you help us by suggesting anyone else who could've changed the note?

Mr McCausland: I think it is important not to paraphrase what Ms McConaghie said.

Mr Dickson: Let me see what she said. She had no recollection as to why the aide-memoire and diary were never —

Mr McCausland: Correct. That's the key point. The member left out that bit: she had no recollection.

Mr Dickson: Yes. But, she did also say that —

Mr McCausland: I merely make the point it's important to —

Mr Dickson: She would not have changed any of these documents of her own volition and she assumed the instruction came from either the Minister or the special adviser. If it wasn't you and it wasn't the special adviser, can you perhaps tell us who it was?

Mr Clarke: You've still left a bit out.

Mr McCausland: I don't know how frequently I've had to repeat it, but I will repeat it again in answer to the question: I cannot recall. I have said that very clearly and made that point many many times. And Chair, it is —

The Chairperson: The question has been asked and answered several times this morning.

Mr McCausland: Indeed. More than several, I think.

Mr Dickson: It is just, Chair, the sum of money is a substantial sum of money, it was a significant meeting and it is difficult to understand why, in those circumstances, three key and important people cannot help us reach a conclusion as to how the note was drafted.

The Chairperson: Well, I just draw your attention to —

Mr McCausland: Could I respond, Chair, to the —

The Chairperson: Well, actually, you don't need to respond in so far as, obviously, a number of questions have been put to yourself, some repeatedly —

Mr McCausland: If —

The Chairperson: Sorry, let me finish making the point and the ruling. You've answered the questions. Members will draw their own conclusions, but they'll not be drawing them in the middle of a meeting, because this is an evidence session and a question-and-answering session. People are given a little bit of latitude. You have rightly said you have answered those questions on a number occasions this morning under affirmation, and I intend to leave it at that point, because, as I say, the questions have been answered. Anybody wants to draw inferences or conclusions, they'll have to do it at a later stage, in a considered manner, with the rest of the members.

Mr McCausland: Could I just make a factual point, Chair, which may be helpful? The member said it is an important issue and an important meeting. When you have a Department whose remit covers the entire welfare system — the Social Security Agency — and also covers all of the work of the Housing Executive, social housing and other matters related to housing, and urban regeneration, and dealing with neighbourhood renewal and deprivation, and social policy, there are many, many important meetings. This was important, but it was only one of many important meetings.

The Chairperson: That's a fair point.

Mr Dickson: And, Chair, all I was attempting to get at was at how many of those meetings would an outside body approach the Minister with a very important issue which would save the Department £15 million? I'm trying to differentiate between — I wholly accept the absolute importance of all your ministerial remit, but I'm just trying to get an understanding of how many occasions when you would

have a meeting of this nature, when an organisation or an individual or someone from outside the Department would approach you with a scenario where a substantial sum of money could be saved.

Mr McCausland: I've answered the question.

The Chairperson: The question has already been answered, Stewart, OK? So, Jim Allister.

Mr Allister: Yeah. Just a couple of points I wanted to particularly pick up on. Three or four times this morning, Minister, you asserted that the meeting you had with Turkington's — that your special adviser wasn't at it.

Mr McCausland: Chairman, I corrected that. It was a — the question I was asked by Mrs Kelly, with respect — I'm not in any way being disrespectful — was quite convoluted, and in answering it, I — and I corrected that.

Mr Allister: I don't think it was at all convoluted. Mine might have been, but —

The Chairperson: Sorry, Jim. Sorry, folks.

Mr Allister: Can I ask you this?

The Chairperson: Sorry, Jim, just a second. Everybody just hold on a wee second. We are doing well here this morning. Again, just to remind people, no subjectivity; just put the question to the Minister.

Mr Allister: OK. Had you any meeting with Turkington's at any time that your special adviser wasn't present at?

Mr McCausland: I have stated in a previous session — the Member is well aware of it — that I only ever in this regard had this one meeting with Turkington's when they were — there was a meeting, to which I referred — I don't have the details of it in front of me at the moment — along with a number of other Ministers in regard to a totally different matter. But, in regard to this and similar matters, it's the only meeting I have ever had.

Mr Allister: In terms of —

Mr McCausland: Can I just — if the member wants to check that back, it's in Hansard from the first session.

Mr Allister: Well, I know what you said at the first session. I'm just looking reassurance in light of what you said this morning: that, in fact, you only had one meeting.

Mr McCausland: I only had one meeting, and I've made that clear, and —

Mr Allister: Yes. In terms of a situation where a contractor to the Housing Executive comes along with ideas which produce savings, is there an arrangement of recompense with a contractor, whereby they secure some gain from that?

Mr McCausland: Chairman, that is a question which was asked at my initial session in December, but I know the member is very careful at producing every detail for everything; I thought he would have recalled that. I can — I think I'm probably not the only person in the room who can remember it being asked back in December.

Mr Allister: Help me, if you would. Indulge me, Minister, by reminding me.

Mr McCausland: Well, if the Member obviously can't remember back to December, well, I can on that regard, because I actually read Hansard. And Hansard was very clear that there is no recompense at all for any company.

Mr Allister: So if a contractor saves money, there's no recompense at all.

Mr McCausland: And the answer to that, which I've just given, was no, just as I gave the same answer in December: no.

Mr Allister: And, just for the record, Turkington's, at the time they saw you, were in fact subcontractors to Mascott, who were Housing Executive contractors. Isn't that right?

Mr McCausland: The member may well be right; I'm not clear. I can't recall their exact role in —

Mr Allister: You can't recall that.

Mr McCausland: But I can remember the fact that — as I've said there. But I don't see the relevance of that particularly.

Mr Allister: Something totally different —

The Chairperson: Now, Jim, before you go off that, I just want to keep the thread on this here. As I understand it, I think that we were advised that there are — I'm not suggesting that this impacted in any way with Turkington's — but I do understand, in terms of some of the contractual arrangements, there is an incentivisation for companies if they can provide savings by different methodologies.

Mr McCausland: That may be in regard to something else, but in regard to this, there is none and there hasn't been any.

The Chairperson: OK. It's just that I do believe there is —

Mr McCausland: I was informed by the Housing Executive that there weren't — sorry; by my officials that there weren't.

The Chairperson: We'll establish that later on again, but it was introduced into evidence prior to this, but that's no problem.

Mr Allister: Just to be sure on that; there can be an incentivisation arrangement, but you're saying it didn't apply at this time to Mascott's?

Mr McCausland: Well, they didn't come to see me: it was actually Turkington's.

Mr Allister: Yes, their subcontractor came to see you. Was there an incentivisation arrangement with Mascott's at the material time from which they would benefit if, through their subcontractor, there was a saving of x million pounds?

Mr McCausland: No.

Mr Allister: Absolutely not?

Mr McCausland: I simply told officials — I repeat this again: I simply told officials to go away and look at the method by which windows were fitted and I left it there to get back a report in due course from those who are the experts in the field.

Mr Allister: So, we're quite clear: no incentivisation, reward, to Mascott's on whatever contracts they had at this material time.

Mr McCausland: I was informed by officials that there was nothing paid to either Turkington's or Mascott in regard to this matter at all.

Mr Allister: Or to be paid?

Mr McCausland: Or to be paid. That is my understanding of it.

Mr Allister: OK.

Mr McCausland: I can only go on what — I haven't gone away to check people's bank balances. I just don't know their details. All I can say is that I've been informed by my officials that that's the case and that is what I would presume to be the case.

Mr Allister: But you are aware of and have heard of incentivisation?

Mr McCausland: The first I heard that particularly was in regard to what the Clerk raised this morning.

Mr Allister: Just now? I see. OK.

Can you tell us who drafted the replies to the BBC?

Mr McCausland: Replies are normally drafted by a number of people who would have input into them and then it comes to me and I put my signature at the bottom; therefore it's my reply.

Mr Allister: Yes. Would the permanent secretary have been involved in the drafting of the replies to the BBC?

Mr McCausland: A number of people would be involved in drafting replies. I don't know and I couldn't comment on who was involved in drafting individual replies.

Mr Allister: You don't know that?

Mr McCausland: Well, I've just said that.

The Chairperson: OK?

Mr Allister: Thank you.

The Chairperson: OK. There are no other members indicating to ask a question, so I just want to try to summarise this for my own sake here and for the inquiry as a whole.

Mr Campbell: I'll look forward to this, Chairman.

The Chairperson: There's a number of — well, I'm entitled to ask questions myself. We're doing well.

Mr Campbell: No, I understand that. It's the summary.

The Chairperson: We're doing well. Well, it's actually questions because, as I say, like everyone else, I will not make my mind up until we conclude all of this. But, what I'm trying to work out is the essence of all of this for myself, to try to come to terms with and to rationalise, is the information that I have looked at and heard evidence on. It really settles around the meeting on 16 April and the meeting on 28 June and then the letter which came to myself on behalf of the Committee in mid-May, late May, and I'll just put this to yourself, Minister, that — I know obviously you've answered some of these questions before in different formats — but for me to try to rationalise in my own mind all of the written evidence, the letters, the correspondence, the emails and the evidence, including from Michael Sands in his previous evidence session, was clear that the meeting was in respect of and with Turkington's with the exception of yourself and your special adviser. You're saying that you believed it was the federation. I'm just trying to work out how is it against the evidence that we have in front of us in terms of written, oral and electronic, including from Turkington's themselves, that yourself and your special adviser were firmly of the view that the meeting was with the glazing federation. There was quite some activity generated to make sure that minutes and aide-memoires, and so on, and the letter to me reflected the glazing federation as opposed to Turkington's. That's further compounded in my mind the difficulty around this, when Stephen Brimstone, in his own evidence, said that he was surprised when he made a discovery — let's us put it that way — that his information or his understanding was wrong. I am trying to work out, with the exception of Michael Sands who, in his evidence, said that he had tried to point out that the meeting was with Turkington's not the glazing federation. That was in respect of the letter. I am asking you this: did nobody else, including your special adviser, nobody, any official, any other person, advise you at any time post 16 April to 28 June, putting a letter together for the 20-odd of May? Did no one advise you, at any time, until when you came to this Committee recently and said that you had inadvertently made a mistake? So, I am

just trying to put this formal question: at no time did anybody go and try to correct your understanding of that?

Mr McCausland: Perhaps it would be helpful, Chair, if I just made a couple of closing remarks addressing that and one other point, if I may.

The Chairperson: I would like you to give the response to the question.

Mr McCausland: OK. No. That was the position. I believed it was the Glass and Glazing Federation. I did not pay that much attention to who it was with at the time, particularly because the key point for me was the financial saving, but I was of the view that it was the Glass and Glazing Federation. Whilst I did not attempt to conceal the fact in any way that the people were members of the staff at Turkington's, my belief was that they were there representing the federation. I was wrong in that assumption.

The Chairperson: Yes, but the question is this: did nobody else tell you that you were wrong in that, other than Michael Sands?

Mr McCausland: If somebody had come to me with evidence, saying that there is clear evidence that you are wrong there —

The Chairperson: Well, Michael Sands did, in his correspondence.

Mr McCausland: I — Mr Sands, at the moment, is ill in hospital. I have not been talking to him about that, so —

The Chairperson: No, but I am making the point that, in his toing and froing around the letter —

Mr McCausland: I would need to go back and look at exactly what he said.

The Chairperson: He did make it clear. I am just saying that it is on the record. He did make it clear that he had pointed out that the meeting was with Turkington's, not the glazing federation. He made that clear in his evidence.

OK. I have just asked the question. You are saying that no one else has told you.

Mr McCausland: No.

The Chairperson: Fair enough.

Mr McCausland: Could I —

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr McCausland: I am sorry. If we are concluding, can I just pick up on a couple of things that I think are important?

My special adviser told me that he had the meeting earlier with Turkington's about the Glass and Glazing Federation guidelines. The point of that was that there appeared to be a more efficient and economic way of fitting double glazing that could provide significant savings and a better service to tenants. He told me that he understood that the Glass and Glazing Federation were going to write to request to meet me. At that point, as I said earlier, he was then off on paternity leave.

The meeting was arranged. A departmental official and the Housing Executive's chief executive and the Housing Executive's head of procurement attended. At the meeting, we discussed the Glass and Glazing Federation guidelines and after the meeting my technical officials were asked to look at these and the Housing Executive were asked to review their specification.

In the following months, I answered correspondence and Assembly questions and advised that the meeting had been with the Glass and Glazing Federation. So that was my clear understanding at that time. I never sought to hide that Turkington representatives were at the meeting. Indeed, I advised of

this in an Assembly question in September 2012. However, on foot of this inquiry and the evidence provided by the Turkington representatives in November, I realised that I was wrong in my assumption that they were representing the Glass and Glazing Federation. I came to this Committee in December and told the members of the Committee that I acknowledged that I was wrong. I then took action to correct all the Assembly questions that I had previously answered in relation to the meeting on 16 April 2012.

Mr Chairman, I do not believe that there is anything more that I can do in relation to this matter. I am not clear why, after having given evidence back in December, some four months later the inquiry is still considering the matter. Indeed, I think, even if the Committee reflects on the 'Spotlight' programme that was the genesis for this inquiry, the lead reporter in that programme commented in relation to this matter:

"It is possible Mr McCausland thought that the men from Turkington's were there as representatives of the federation."

I have to say that is probably one of the few elements of accurate analysis in that programme, and it was absolutely right: it was possible. It is what I believed at the time. I acknowledged that it was incorrect, but the matter has now been clarified and corrected. Thank you, Mr Chairman.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you. I just want to draw attention to, since we are in the public session, just while you are here, Mr McCausland, it doesn't directly affect you, but it's just to make everybody aware that we had a letter in from the Department posing a number of questions about the procedures and so on around this inquiry. We also had a letter from Turkington's as well. The Committee considered those matters in closed session, and we agreed a response, but, in that response, we agreed to continue on with the evidence session. So, I'm just letting people aware of that in the public session. That was the basis of the conversation that the members had this morning.

So, could I thank yourself, Mr McCausland, for your presence here this morning —

Mr McCausland: Thank you.

The Chairperson: — and your evidence here this morning? Thank you for that.

Could I suggest a five-minute adjournment just for a comfort break before we move into the next evidence session?