Public Accounts Committee

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Inquiry into Major Capital Projects — Follow-up Report: Department of Finance; The Executive Office

30 January 2025

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:
Mr Daniel McCrossan (Chairperson)
Mr Tom Buchanan
Mr Colin Crawford
Mr Pádraig Delargy
Ms Diane Forsythe
Mr Colm Gildernew
Mr David Honeyford

Witnesses:
Mr Neil Gibson   Department of Finance
Mr Stuart Stevenson   Department of Finance
Ms Dorinnia Carville   Northern Ireland Audit Office
Dr Jayne Brady   The Executive Office

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): We welcome to this meeting of the Public Accounts Committee Jayne Brady, the head of the Civil Service (HOCS), and Neil Gibson, accounting officer for the Department of Finance. We also have with us Dorinnia Carville, the Comptroller and Auditor General from the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), and Stuart Stevenson, the Treasury Officer of Accounts from the Department of Finance. We are joined by Julie Sewell as well.

Dr Brady and Mr Gibson, welcome back to the Public Accounts Committee, and thank you for taking the time to meet us. We had a session just there with the Youth Assembly, which kept us well engaged. We apologise for the brief delay in starting this session.

We have a number of questions to ask you on the following key themes. The first is the role of the head of the Civil Service and accounting officers. The second is information requested by the Public Accounts Committee. The third is the workforce and capability plan. The fourth is the draft investment strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI) plan. The fifth is the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) board. The sixth is evaluation of the effectiveness of the NICS board. The seventh is the ISNI committee. The eighth is the ISNI enabling actions dashboard. The ninth is social licensing. There are also a number of questions in respect of the renewable heat incentive (RHI) in response to the recent update provided by the Department of Finance. The tenth theme is the implementation of outstanding recommendations, and the eleventh is the available documentation.

So that we can make the best use of our time this afternoon, I ask that we keep our answers brief and to the point. I reviewed the previous session, and there were too many witnesses to get to the nub of some of the core issues. If we find that there is any deviation from the questioning, we will have to

interject and come back to the point. We are very direct in this Committee, and we like to get down to business. I am sure that you will appreciate that we have a number of important questions.

With that said, I invite you both to make some opening remarks. You will know that the Committee is frustrated that we have had to have you both back to answer some of the questions that we do not feel were answered appropriately at the previous session or, indeed, in our follow-ups. We have been very clear with permanent secretaries and senior officials generally throughout each of our inquiries that, when we request information, we expect our questions to be answered in a timely fashion and do not expect to have to ask witnesses to return to the Committee. I appreciate you both being here, and, hopefully, today, we can make some progress on some of the issues of concern to the Public Accounts Committee. With that said, you are both welcome, and you are very welcome to brief the Committee.

Dr Jayne Brady (The Executive Office): Thank you, Chair. I will begin. I welcome the opportunity to be back following our previous attendance at the Committee. I cannot commit to being more interesting than your previous attendees at the Committee, whom I saw when passing through. We have not prepared any opening remarks, because, in the interest of time, we are here to listen to you. We understand the areas that you have identified and are very happy to give fulsome responses to them and to keep those responses brief. I also apologise if there is any perceived frustration about delivery of information. That is clearly not our intent, and we welcome the Committee's scrutiny of how we can improve and deliver in a better manner.

Mr Neil Gibson (Department of Finance): We are now happy to take questions.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK. Thank you. Before we go to Committee members, it is important that I point out, Dr Brady, that when you appeared before the Committee in October, you assured its members that you were showing leadership by offering to meet the Committee. You also said, however, that the constitutional position of your role meant that Ministers continue to have autonomy over their Department and their accounting officer and that you do not have a role in policy matters. You also outlined how you have shown leadership through the reconstitution of the NICS board, which has refreshed terms of reference, but you did not provide any specific examples of how that has delivered improvements for major capital projects in the three years since you have been in post. Given that accounting officers are accountable to their Ministers, and neither you, as HOCS, nor the NICS board has any authority over accounting officers, how can you and the wider NICS board be confident that you are providing effective leadership over major capital projects? Furthermore, when you gave evidence in October alongside a number of colleagues, as I mentioned earlier, despite a number of questions from members seeking examples of delivery, witnesses resorted to making broad statements about leadership and various boards that had been established. What evidence can you provide of effective delivery to address the issues that are impacting on major capital projects?

Dr Brady: Thank you, Chair. The PAC report made a recommendation based on the role of heads of the Civil Service in other jurisdictions, particularly in Scotland, where the accounting officer for the Scottish Government — the permanent secretary — is the overall accounting officer, but that does not reflect the constitutional reality of the governance structures of the Northern Ireland Executive. Those structures are a constitutional matter, and, as an official, it is not for me to opine on them. As the head of the Civil Service, however, I can say that the recommendation reflects the need for joined-up approaches to be taken across the service to ensure that we are doing all that we can at an official level.

The PAC recommendation to reflect that constitutional arrangement — recommendation 1 — was noted by the Executive but not agreed, as those are the constitutional realities. In acknowledging the issues that the PAC report raised — the need for joined-up approaches and to identify cross-cutting areas — I can say that it was the recommendation for the Civil Service board to establish a reconstituted NICS committee to include, as part of that, industry experts, within capability, in the areas that need to be addressed collectively as a board. I, and we, have done that. We met the chair of the ISNI committee at the previous evidence session. We looked at the root cause analysis of the PAC findings on the overrun. The analysis identified 12 enabling actions, and I understand that we will discuss those further.

We also analysed the 105 recommendations that came out of the PAC report, the CBI report and the Institute of Directors (IoD) report to make sure that we coalesce them by looking back to address the concerns and by looking forward to deliver the investment strategy for Northern Ireland, which the Executive are looking to put in place for this mandate and, indeed, beyond.

You also asked about the tangible impact that that has had. We now have a subcommittee that oversees the ISNI strategy, once it comes out. It is the vehicle and programme board for doing that, and it is also monitoring the enabling actions that we know will underpin it. We had a Civil Service board meeting just this week. On the actual actions that are coming through — you asked for tangible information about the actions that have been taken — I can say that the major projects were presented to that board, with recommendations from the subcommittee. It identified a number of consecutive reds as part of that reporting. The NICS board agreed that the ISNI committee should have a scrutiny function for those projects within a sector and that we should look at the root causes of the overspend and at what we can do to intervene to support the projects. That was the NICS board structure for identifying what we can do. The board also looked at what levels of reporting we should have from a scrutiny perspective, and we increased that to £10 million. We also agreed at board level — again, at that joined-up level — the methods of reporting. The Committee will have seen the documents. There is the process from the ISNI tool that was used for managing public projects, and it determined that there needs to be more up-to-date analysis and correlated data across the system.

We have, through one of those projects, delivered a data map function that was provided as part of the correspondence to the Committee. The Civil Service board agreed that that should be embedded in all the projects so that, as a corollary, we have all the information that we need in order to analyse them. Some of this, as, I am sure, you will have seen, is about how we get the information that is required to make informed decisions. Some of it is looking back at the root causes that have got us into this position. Those are clearly defined. How do we look at all the recommendations and make sure that we have a sense of what we are doing with them? Moreover, how do we get real-time data and evidence to understand how projects may be impacted on in the future?

I hope that that has given you some overview of the framework within the constitutional environment that we operate and of the areas that we are looking to progress. You are aware that Ministers direct their Departments, and rightly so, and that accounting officers are responsible for the committees. Accounting officers are under the direction and control of their Minister, but I am their line manager. The structures that are instituted as part of the monitoring that we will provide at the Civil Service board will therefore allow me to have forums to hold accountable my permanent secretary colleagues for the areas for which they are responsible. Qualified and quantified information will be provided through those committees to allow me to perform my line management role. Neil, have you any further examples?

Mr Gibson: I have a couple to add. There is a behavioural change when you have the level of scrutiny that Jayne has spoken about. As you will have seen, we have the enabling actions as a regular standing item at NICS board meetings and coming evidence from the ISNI subcommittee. Having those things for us to consider means that they are coming back to us every month. Although the Department of Finance does not have any capital projects on the list, it has seen projects come before its peers, which, through talking and collegiately leaning in, has led to its trying to help and to provide support. That has meant that some things have already been progressed in the Department of Finance that perhaps, in a previous time, would have taken a bit longer to progress. Those are things such as looking at procurement limit changes, which we are working through, at the practicalities of delegated limits to Departments and at accelerating processes, because they are coming out of the evidence reports. Although those are more in the policy framework, if you like, they are all coming about as a result of increased scrutiny at the NICS board.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK. I accept that the constitutional and legal position here and in Scotland differ, but it is the tangible impact that is important. That is a point of concern. What targets have been set, are they measurable and can you share them with the Committee?

Dr Brady: The targets are set through the key performance indicators. Those have been defined by the enabling actions. We can provide them to the Committee. A dashboard for the major projects was presented to the Civil Service board on Monday, as was the status of eight of the 12 enabling actions and the deliverables that had to be provided with each. We had five ambers in the previous report, which was provided in November. Those ambers, through the enabling actions that have been delivered, have now moved to green. We can absolutely provide you with those papers.

Mr Gibson: One of the enabling actions is to look at having better data mapping in order to make the exercise for the NIAO, and, indeed, for us on the NICS board, a little bit easier. There is a lot of information out there amongst the centres of procurement expertise (COPEs) and at departmental level. We are trying to get one version that would be much easier to look at in order to interrogate

some of the metrics. Each Department has COPEs. For example, I have two COPEs in my area, and they have their own KPIs, which are published and put on our website.

Dr Brady: It is our view that the major projects should be integrated with the projects in the investment strategy so that we have one common source of project and one common source of KPIs and data to inform them. Moreover, some of the reporting structures have been manually based via different mechanisms in Departments. It was agreed by the NICS board on Tuesday that there will be a standard format that perm secs have committed to seeing delivered within their projects so that we have an evidence base on which to make qualified judgements about where things are moving outside those boundaries.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Do you accept that the issues of note here have persisted and that the weaknesses have persisted for a considerable time?

Dr Brady: I absolutely accept that we have to do better, and the PAC report talked about the overspends. I am very clear that it is not just about the overspends, which are majorly significant, but about the lost opportunity, the deaths on our roads and the schools that are deteriorating. It is therefore not sufficient for me to come here and say that there is a governance structure in Northern Ireland that does not allow me to direct. I, and we as leaders, need to find a way in which to address those issues, but that cannot be done until we interrogate the information behind that. There were 105 recommendations in the PAC report. The Strategic Investment Board (SIB) root cause analysis identified some clear areas that we need to unpick in order to address them. We can talk about some of the delays, including with the A5. We can talk about the cost of the A5 and the loss of life associated with that road. In 2012, the estimated cost was £800 million by 2018, and the cost has escalated since then, not to mention the lives lost and the impact of that in areas. Much of that is not down to one individual's function. When we look into it, we see that it is largely about how we build planning and social licence into the process. That is done piecemeal across the service, and there are good examples of our doing it well, but it needs to be a collective effort. We therefore have to provide structures across the service. We had to interrogate very detailed analysis, based on the PAC reports, in order to determine the factors that underpin why that is happening time and time again.

The SIB did that. It identified three broad areas. One area was people. It included the capability that we have in the service and the training that we provide. A second area was the processes that we put in place, including how we look at such areas as the business plan process and procurement. Planning, of course, is part of that, including the immediate planning process and the structures that we have in place with the Planning Appeals Commission. A third area was policy. In order to get towards having 80% renewable energy by 2030 for net zero, fundamental changes are needed.

Those are the issues that we need to effect, and they need to be cross-cutting. The committee that has been established has leads for those, and it engages with all the senior responsible officers (SROs) so that, in a collective way, the business plan process asks how we look at making changes. Tangible outcomes came out of doing that on the NICS board. Some 105 our SROs attended an event. Some of them are delivering well on their projects, but it is about understanding where the areas are on which we need to focus and that we need to address. We then need to hold everyone to account and for them to report to the SIB and the NICS board on how we are driving things forward.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): The fact remains that those projects have overspent by billions of pounds now, and that results in a significant direct cost for a wide range of things. Without a doubt, there are elements that are beyond your control. Equally, however, you mentioned the A5. One of the main hurdles to the A5 project originally was that a core directive was not issued for it, and that caused it to be delayed. When I look at all the projects, what I am asking you, given what you have told the Committee, is why those issues persist today. Given all the structures and everything else in place, why do considerable issues persist?

Dr Brady: Some major capital projects have a timeline for progress to be made. Delivery cannot therefore be fixed quickly. Based on the estimated cost for them, there was a £3 billion overspend, over £1 billion of which was on the A5. Some 50% of that overspend is inflation-based. Moreover, as came out of some of the recommendations, the increases in the cost estimates are based on the outline business case (OBC), which could be viewed as being based on areas in which you do not have planning confirmed and in which procurement has not been provided. From looking at where the final business case is delivered towards that out-turn, we see that there is a 10% overspend. There are therefore some very significant differences. There is the global aspect and then the aspects to do with our processes, but the areas that we have identified — people, process and policy — have been

analysed. Some aspects, such as the global one, are outside of our control, but many are not, and those therefore require focus, analysis, an action plan and delivery.

Of course things should have happened faster. It was clear to me from the recommendations that the Civil Service board should be reconstituted to have experts on it. We did that, but, in bringing that information to the board, there was no way in which to unpick what the underlying issues were that had caused that to happen time and again. It was not about our saying, "This is a problem, and we can fix it", because doing that requires a collective approach to be taken across the service. Our constitutional structures do not allow that to happen, so we have provided the frameworks. I believe, and the proof will be seen as this plays out, that a fundamentally different structure and methodology is needed for addressing those areas. There is much more that we will have to do. We will scrutinise some of the projects that have turned red. There will be a different way of doing that, but I believe that it represents a marked shift away from the way in which we have been doing it over the past number of years.

Mr Gibson: It is coming up to three years for me in this post. Better data is the first thing that we need. Originally, it was almost impossible for us to put our finger on exactly what the data was telling us. That situation is getting much better, but we still have some way in which to go. Having better data will make it much easier for us to report continually. It will also allow us to spot things earlier.

There is also a leadership dimension involved, for which I, and all my colleagues, have responsibility. It is about making sure that people feel that they can bring areas of concern to us early and quickly. That is why we have gateway reports, which are certainly proving to be really valuable to me as accounting officer. We have highlight reports, which are much shorter and sharper reports. It is about people telling us early about the issues that they are facing. We are not trying to catch anyone out. It is about trying to see whether we can identify anything that is going wrong.

I will pick this up later during questioning, but we can learn some really good lessons from the SIB report and from some of the data that we have. Social licence is one of the obvious ones, but there are also some common themes. Equally, however, each project has its own story to tell. It is therefore important — this is why I think that the board structure is working better now — that all accounting officers can tell their story about exactly what happened on a particular project. Issues involved could have been inflationary pressures, a supplier that went bust or all sorts of other, complicated reasons. As I said, there are common themes across projects. If I look at all the new procurement that there is and the policy statements that we will do, I see those themes as being the need to have transparency, better data and information that is briefer and more to the point so that the system does not get clogged up. For me, that is the big change. There are 105 recommendations across all the reports. As the SIB report points out about planning regulations, it is impossible to think that anyone could sit and read them all without missing something. We therefore have 12 enabling actions, meaning that we can say to Committees such as this and to the NIAO, "This is on what we are going to try to drive performance improvement". Doing that will yield dividends.

As Jayne said, however, doing that takes a little bit of time. Those projects have a long gestation period. For example, by its very nature, social licence needs something that comes in at the very beginning. You will see that happen more with future projects. It has also been very important for me to offer support to our SROs. They do not get any additional reward for being an SRO, but they certainly get a significant level of extra pressure and scrutiny. We have really tried to bring all of them together at training, collective leadership and knowledge events in order to create a community so that they feel like they can ring one another for a little bit of support and help. We can supply metrics on the people whom we have put through more training. That work is really beginning to pay dividends as well.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I note that you said that it takes time to do some things, but a lot of the projects are outstanding as a result of their having been delayed for a significant time. There are major concerns, as you are aware.

Jayne, the Committee held an evidence session on 3 October 2024. I was absent, but we asked for a number of pieces of information on the back of it. Although we recognise that some of the requested information was delivered in October, some of it has been provided only in the past week. It therefore took from October until now to provide it. The draft ISNI list remains outstanding, with no indication forthcoming of when it was submitted to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister or of when it is anticipated to go to the Executive for approval. Will you give us some clarification about that?

I have a further question. We appreciate that you have furnished us with a copy of the workforce and capability plan, but, given the delay that can be seen in some of the other enabling work streams, do you expect that plan's delivery to remain on schedule?

Dr Brady: Again, apologies if it is perceived that the documentation was provided late. That was not our intent. I will ask Neil to discuss the workforce plan. The ISNI strategy, as with the ISNI work plan and the draft Programme for Government (PFG), is policy that is under review. They are draft versions, and, as such, they have not been agreed by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. On that basis, as is the protocol, there is no agreed timeline or scheduling for them to go to the Executive. Officials therefore do not have the ability to share documentation that is policy under development at this stage.

Mr Gibson: I am confident about the workforce plan. To return to a point that I made a moment ago, from a leadership point of view, we have Patrick Magee from the Executive Office as the non-executive direct leader. From my side, we have Sharon Smyth, with whom many Committee members will be familiar. We also have Scott Wilson from the Strategic Investment Board. There are a number of other individuals whom you will see named in the plans, but, with such people involved, I have every confidence that we will deliver.

You will notice in the workforce plan that we have really tried to focus our efforts. As has been said, we reduced the 105 recommendations to 12 enabling actions, because, otherwise, we would almost be taking on too much. One of the key things to do is to focus on the arm's-length bodies (ALBs) that have significant responsibility for delivering capital so that we can better understand the issues. It is likely that whatever lessons are learned from them about workforce issues will be relevant elsewhere.

Salary levels are a really critical issue in workforce planning at the moment. Of course, as a public service in the widest sense, if we are competing against one another, a situation arises of bidding up wages to an unaffordable position. It is therefore really important that we look strategically at the workforce issues rather than have me, for example, sit here and say, "I am responsible only for NICS staff". We cannot have a situation in which different COPEs are able to offer different remuneration packages. That tells us that we have a different problem, which is the overall quantum of skilled people. We need to be looking at training and developing people, and not allow pay to work its way into the problem. The right programme of work is to do workforce planning for the areas that make up the bulk of the capital spend. Hopefully, the lessons learned will then be able to flow out of that and into some of the smaller organisations, such as mine.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK. I want to return to a number of points. You said that it was a "perceived" delay, Jayne. It was a delay. The information was requested in October 2024, and it is now the end of January 2025. It took significant time for us to receive it, so we are not —.

Dr Brady: I will commit to following up on that in order to understand what the cause of the delay was. Again, I apologise, and I will come back to you with a response.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): The information arrived only three weeks ago. Waiting for it from the start of October 2024 until then is just not acceptable, to be honest.

I will now bring in members.

Mr Honeyford: Thank you, Jayne and Neil, for coming in. I will ask about the ISNI draft plan. Can you confirm the date on which the list of projects was referred to the First Minister and deputy First Minister? When is that list expected to be with the Executive for approval?

Dr Brady: As I said, we do not yet have a final version of any of the projects, so none of them has been referred to the Executive. They are all currently policy under development.

Mr Honeyford: A list of projects has been referred to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for approval.

Dr Brady: As is normal, when we go through the review process.

Mr Honeyford: On what date was the list sent to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister?

Dr Brady: It is still in draft format, so multiple versions will be reviewed. I can come back —.

Mr Honeyford: Are we talking weeks or months? I understand that there are drafts and various versions, but when was the latest draft referred to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister?

Dr Brady: There are various versions of that. I can come back to you with a response. There have been ongoing versions. The initial document went out to consultation, but there has not been an agreed version of the document. It is in draft format, and issues are still being resolved, so we are not in a position to have a —.

Mr Honeyford: Are those issues between the First Minister and the deputy First Minister? Is that the cause of the delay? I am trying to work out why.

Dr Brady: I guess that it is ongoing. What the issues are has not reached a conclusion. It is still policy under development, as is the status of many documents under review.

Mr Honeyford: My next question may follow on from that. In the previous evidence session, you said that the ISNI list does not cover all the major capital projects. That information was also provided to the Audit Office. Correspondence has, however, since advised that the draft list captures all the projects in the major capital projects portfolio that are committed to or ongoing. I note that some of the documentation that has been provided to the Committee refers to non-ISNI projects. Can you clarify the difference?

Dr Brady: Will you repeat the question?

Mr Honeyford: In the evidence session, you told us that the draft ISNI did not cover all major capital projects, and you also sent that information to the Audit Office. When correspondence came back, however, you were advising that the draft list covered all the ISNI projects and captured all the commitments. Can you clarify why the two are opposite positions?

Dr Brady: The ISNI will include the major capital projects. Apologies for that. The correspondence is correct. Apologies if the evidence gave you a different impression. Do you have anything to add, Neil?

Mr Gibson: It will contain all the major projects, so those above £20 million. You would not think that there could be ambiguity, but, for example, I have projects that one might imagine are capital projects that turn out to be revenue projects, because of their precise definition. For example, you might not create new software but are instead using off-the-shelf software. Some areas of spend would therefore not normally sit in the category. There is also the threshold for what is considered a major project, and that has to be kept under review. For example, if you have four sub-projects of the same value, do you add them together as one programme and include them? There can still be a need to fine-tune what is on the list, but the intent is that the ISNI will contain all major projects so that we can report singularly. Where we have projects that fall under the threshold but that still have a significant risk profile, we will continue to report on them using the same mechanism, albeit not in that strategy document. The subcommittee that we mentioned will get the information. In other words, any area in which we perceive to have a level of risk will be reported to the subcommittee of the NICS board.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I want to tease out something that David asked about. I am confused about the process for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. Jayne, was the list given to them in draft form and is a fluid document at present? I am a bit confused.

Dr Brady: Yes. The document is in draft form. It is not an agreed document.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): The Executive were re-established in February last year, and we are entering a year since our return. When did the First Minister and the deputy First Minister receive the initial draft? I am trying to establish the urgency involved. Did they receive it last week? Did they receive it six months ago? For how long have they been looking at the document?

Dr Brady: It has been looked at over a period of months, but, as you will appreciate, the Executive and Ministers are looking at other areas.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Yes. I know that, but I am not asking about that. I am asking about this particular area. I need to know when the document will be turned into a material document? When were the First Minister and the deputy First Minister given the draft?

Dr Brady: As is normal with policy development, we work with advisers and Ministers. I do not have the specific date. I am happy to take that under advice and come back to you.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Have they been given it at all?

Dr Brady: Yes. It has been shared within the Executive Office, and we have worked with them on it. It is a draft policy document that is under development, however.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I am just trying to get a sense of the urgency, given that you have said that you recognise how important it is.

Mr Gibson: I will say one thing that is relevant, Chair. Again, I cannot speak in too much detail, because, as Jayne said, it is under development. I will give you an example of the sort of thing that comes along that can change the direction a little bit. With the return of the Executive, a financial package was provided, alongside which there was a requirement for an investment strategy. At official level, we intended to make sure there was only one capital investment plan for Northern Ireland, not two separate documents. That required a different piece of work to go into the document that would not have been in there in the pre-Executive return gestation period. That is an example of some of the work officials have to do to provide more material for documents. Think about previous iterations of the ISNI. They can talk about the principles of development, about themes and about flagship projects, but this iteration has to contain a list of all the projects. That is a different requirement, and it was part of the requirement for the return of the Executive.

Mr Honeyford: If the ISNI is a living document, do we ever get to a point at which we have an actual document? You describe something that is always changing. Is there ever a point at which there is a document that can go to the Executive for approval?

Mr Gibson: Yes. There will be a document. Indeed, there is a requirement for there to be. You see all the time —.

Mr Honeyford: When is that date?

Mr Gibson: It is due imminently.

Mr Honeyford: It is due now. Does "imminently" mean within weeks or days?

Mr Gibson: Obviously, I cannot speak to the decision-making process politically, but, yes, it is due.

Mr Honeyford: I am asking about the point at which it goes from you as a finished document to the Executive Office. That is due to happen imminently.

Mr Gibson: Yes, but we will always keep it under review because, as you can imagine —

Mr Honeyford: Yes, I understand that.

Mr Gibson: — there are capital projects that have finished now that —.

Mr Honeyford: Yes, I totally understand that it is a fluid document. The question that I am asking is this: will the point at which it hits the Executive Office "imminently" be in days, weeks or months?

Mr Gibson: I do not know. I cannot speak to that.

Dr Brady: It will be for the Ministers to decide when it is ready for Executive consideration.

Ms Forsythe: Thank you both for coming back. My questions focus on the NICS board. You have answered a little bit of my first question. In your letter to us on 11 October, you stated that the biannual

report to the NICS board detailing projects and programmes is used not to monitor costs and times but to identify common themes behind the delays to projects. You have sort of touched on those themes, referring to people, processes, policy, data collection and those types of things. What corrective action to reduce delays has been delivered by the NICS board following the identification of those thematic areas?

Dr Brady: I think that I have referred to some of the actions that have been taken. Perhaps, this week, there is a good example. Some of the major projects that were presented had thematically concurrent red statuses, so it was agreed that the ISNI committee would engage with SROs and leads in a particular sector in order to understand the root cause of the delays and see whether any support or challenge could be provided to get them on track. That is one specific issue.

The NICS board agreed to increase the threshold for monitoring those reports to £10 million, and to undertake pilots of that approach. The permanent secretaries and the NICS board agreed, following analysis from the ISNI committee, on a data map function. They had already done a pilot to evaluate that issue, so it was a qualified exploration. They modelled the data that should be provided. The permanent secretaries agreed that that would be the data system that they would use in their Departments to deliver. Obviously, there will be follow-up on the issues that are raised in the tracking of red and red/amber projects, which will then feed back into that group and to the NICS board

Ms Forsythe: Thank you for that. Whilst those responses are all really good, they are very strategic and are about the bigger picture and the longer term. In our assessment of the NICS board, we are trying to get to the root cause of the delays in order to allow us, as part of this inquiry, to make the best recommendations possible. We are looking for the short, sharp, corrective action to reduce delays.

Is the NICS board sighted on the specifics of time and cost overruns in projects?

Dr Brady: The review that is taking place in that sector will cover a number of specific projects. It will look at whether short, sharp or, indeed, underpinning action is required, which will address the matter of overall governance. It will also be led by the committee, so it will have the expertise to delve into all the enabling actions. The SROs for those specific projects and further sectors will also be involved, so short-term actions and thematic areas will be identified. From what I have heard from the Committee, that is the direction of travel that you would like the NICS board to take. The board concurs with that.

Ms Forsythe: Absolutely. Is the board sighted on the specifics of time and cost overruns when it meets?

Mr Gibson: Currently, it is not. We hope that our data-mapping exercise can be put into the information that the board has sight of. We are always conscious of not creating another level of bureaucracy or scrutiny. Obviously, in Committees and individual Departments, accounting officers have to speak to all their deadlines, delays and cost overruns, so there is already significant scrutiny there. We are, however, looking at the data mapping to see whether there are common data fields and things that we could bring into reporting that would make that type of exercise easier. It is a work in progress. We are doing that data mapping at the moment, working through it with COPEs, where we get that information. A big theme in the new procurement strategy is transparency and having better and more intelligible data. We hope that we will have that data, but, as things stand, the NICS board does not go through the same level of detail as individual departmental boards do when they are scrutinising individual projects.

Ms Forsythe: That is very simple and very important. We could be talking about significant amounts of time, and we are, obviously, talking about billions of pounds. It is important for a board to have not just the traffic lights but very clear sight of the numbers. If the numbers for time and cost overruns are not presented to the board, how do you, Jayne, as head of the Civil Service, and the board hold Departments accountable for them?

Dr Brady: Neil referred to the SRO's responsibility for those projects. There is departmental oversight through a project office that looks at those portfolios. Projects are then scrutinised by the ISNI committee. There is escalation, through the gateway reviews, which identify red flags in relation to a project's readiness. Further analysis takes place through investigations. Ultimately, it is an accounting officer's responsibility to deliver those projects under the Minister's direction.

Ms Forsythe: I am concerned, as is the Committee, about who has oversight on those huge projects if responsibility stops with the permanent secretary. In your introductory remarks at the previous evidence session, you spoke of the need for collective leadership and the need to break down perceived silos, but if, in dealing with those projects, the NICS board is not dealing with the cost and time overruns as a collective, how do we expect to reduce the delays and the spiralling costs that we continue to see under the current way of doing things?

Dr Brady: The data and evidence that Neil referred to will inform those decisions and provide qualification to support them. That will provide information that will hold Departments and projects to account and reveal whether they are being flagged with that status. That will also inform how we manage and mitigate those issues. There is also my role as a line manager, without going over a Minister's responsibility for delivery in his Department. We will have information that allows us to make more qualified judgements, which will allow me to do the same.

Ms Forsythe: I appreciate that there is crossover between ISNI, the board, you and the Departments. I am just trying to get to the root of the problem so that we can make good recommendations to the board. When you appeared before us in October, you talked about how the board was reconstituted in response to the recommendations. Over the past two years, how have you evaluated the effectiveness of the NICS board?

Dr Brady: We are undertaking an external effectiveness review. That is ongoing.

Ms Forsythe: Who is doing that?

Dr Brady: Baker Tilly. We shared the terms of reference. We have now engaged that company, and it has observed board sessions. It will opine on the governance arrangements, the board's composition, the skills mix, the relationship to the board and the subcommittees. We expect the findings to be delivered by the end of March.

Ms Forsythe: You said that Baker Tilly will review the board and the skills mix. Will it also review the information that comes to the board and whether things such as cost overruns and time delays should be in that?

Dr Brady: I am just looking at the terms of reference, which include evaluating the board's role and governance arrangements and the effectiveness of its decision-making. That includes the information that comes to the board and the decisions that it takes as a result.

Ms Forsythe: What are the plans for ongoing assessment following the review?

Dr Brady: Once the findings are provided, we will factor them in to how we address the recommendations. I do not want to pre-empt the recommendations from the process. It is important to have that scrutiny function, recognising that it was a big step for the composition of NICS board to transition from only the head of the Civil Service and the permanent secretaries to include non-executives and then, as part of further restructuring, have a number of subcommittees delivering as part of that. We need to acknowledge the transition and the ways in which we need to feed that into our structures.

Mr Gibson: Culture is often used as a throwaway word, but it matters. The board is engaging in more collective thinking by having reports on areas that are relevant. I should be going home worrying, even though I am not in a big capital-spending Department, because I am a member of the NICS board. The setting up of committees and the regular reporting of items changes behaviours because, ultimately, is not only about scrutiny; it is about support. It is about thinking about how, if there are challenges or difficulties, we can help colleagues.

The biggest change that I have seen in the capital area is the SRO network. Being an SRO was quite a lonely and high-pressure existence, but a community has now been created. We are trying to do the same with the NICS board, so that people feel that other permanent secretaries are thinking, worrying and concerned and are asking, "What can we do? What other expertise might we have in another area to provide support?". The boundaries between Departments then become a little bit less clear, which is something that I am seeing. Historically, would the Department of Finance have been focusing on a capital project? It does not deliver any capital projects.

Another area that I am interested in is workforce, which I am sure that we will come on to in future inquiries. You have some Departments with 10,000 staff and others with a few hundred, but we need all of them to be collectively worried about workforce questions. Some of the changes are as much about culture and leadership as they are about material and content. I concur with your view. One of the enabling actions is, "What can we get quicker and easier that we can use to provide better insight and better support?". It is hard to do that without the right evidence.

Ms Forsythe: Thank you. It is very helpful to get clarity on those points about the board.

Mr T Buchanan: The ISNI committee is a subgroup of the NICS board. How can you be confident that there is sufficient independence, accountability and governance over the work of the committee?

Dr Brady: The appointment of an independent, non-executive member was critical. The PAC recommended to the NICS board that the committee be chaired by one of those individuals, who comes with relevant infrastructure and financing experience, to provide that level of scrutiny. The "Dear Accounting Officer" letter requested external expertise as part of those project boards as well, so there is a further level of external scrutiny and support in those areas. Obviously, the Audit Office performs a very important role in those frameworks. External representation is provided in our structures.

Some of the enabling actions that we are considering involve looking towards an industry reference panel to support some of the further investment decisions that we need to make. The Department of Finance has, through the Procurement Board, significant engagement with the sector and the procurement facilities, but having that committee led by an independent non-executive assures me that there is independence in the governance structure.

Mr T Buchanan: What role does the ISNI committee play in ensuring that there is departmental accountability for delays and overruns? How does that feed into the process of the wider NICS board?

Dr Brady: An SRO in a Department is responsible for individual project overruns. Obviously, the Department is under the direction of the Minister, and the accounting officer has responsibility. That SRO has a further responsibility to the accounting officer in their Department. There will be a project office across that portfolio in the Department. Through that, they are also responsible as part of the ISNI committee, which oversees the major projects. That information is provided to the Department of Finance for correlation. Once the ISNI is agreed, it is proposed that the ISNI committee will become the programme board, through the NICS board, for monitoring projects. When compared with a project-by-project perspective, there will be an overall responsibility that reflects the Executive's responsibility for the delivery of the ISNI. That will be delivered at the NICS board level, with the ISNI committee providing assurances. The role of the ISNI committee will be to track and monitor the projects in the ISNI. If any of those projects goes off track, it will also be responsible for identifying the root causes for that. It will also be responsible for providing suggestions for remedial action to bring those projects back within scope. It will report and provide assurance to the NICS board that it is on track and, as I outlined to Ms Forsythe, advise on what remedial action could take place — with specific focuses — should projects be going off direction.

Neil, I do not know whether you want to respond any further.

Mr Gibson: Just to echo the fact that there is a significant scrutiny mechanism within Committees and within Departments, which is under the control of Ministers. The hope is that the NICS board will have that more strategic information so that we can see whether there are common themes that we can look at.

That governance structure is relevant in that it helps us to set out a training programme. We have set up SRO training days, all of which are related to things that came out of conversations at the NICS board, such as, "The issue is business cases," or, "The issue is communications," and, "Let's have a look at that and bring in external people to speak and help train us". We identify themes, which are then taken away to develop in different forums. Those themes may be about training needs or the different types of data that need to be collected.

Mr T Buchanan: Has that training proved to be effective?

Mr Gibson: Yes. Obviously, in one sense, it will have to bear fruit over time, but I detect effectiveness is in things such as training on business cases. We now have people and Departments volunteering for pilots. We talk a lot about proportionate effort and making the business cases proportionate to how much detail that they need. We see a lot more willingness from people to work in tandem with us on that, pilot it and showcase it to other colleagues so that they can look at it. It is early days. We have had only five training sessions, and the board has only been constituted in this way for a while, but we are beginning to see early dividends through people's willingness to pilot new ways of doing things.

Mr T Buchanan: Given the delays and overruns, are you satisfied that the ISNI committee is on top of its game?

Dr Brady: The committee has been formally constituted for almost a year. It has had five meetings and established an SRO network to provide references for some of those key areas. It has had four engagements with that network. There has been a substantive body of work. Although I do not have a role on the committee per se, I have sat in on its meetings as an observer. It is positive that the Departments are working together, in common cause, to address these issues. There are policies, procedures and structures, but it is about people and how we work together to learn about the common areas before we address them.

It is really important that we are having a review of the NICS board and its effectiveness. It is also really important to hear the outworkings of the Committee, because we are doing something new. We are trying not just to analyse what happened in the past but to look forward. Given the level of requirements in environmental legislation, even if we address all the issues from the past, we will need to look at what we need to put in place to address new challenges.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): How are you measuring progress, if there has been any?

Dr Brady: We measure progress through the status of the enabling actions. All the enabling actions have a status that shows what is to be delivered in the next three months and what has been delivered. That status changes. The committee meets the month before the NICS board meets. If I am correct in my figures, four or five areas that had amber status have moved to green status. That was reported to the NICS board on Tuesday. Those are being progressed. I have listened in and heard about the outputs in those areas: specific work streams have been undertaken.

As we are delivering enabling actions, some of this is, by its nature, about discovery and pre-empting areas that we need to look at. That is particularly the case if you look at the social licence aspect. In it, the "Dear Accounting Officer" letter talks about the need to engage with the community in advance of going into a project proposal. The Executive agreed the procurement policy update just before Christmas. That policy needs to consider social value prior, during and after a proposal. We understand that that alone is not sufficient: it is about the guidelines that go alongside it, because even ticking those boxes will not be sufficient. You get that by getting a network of people who have done it before — our SRO network — and focusing a particular work stream on that. You get them all together and ask, "What has worked well and what has not worked well?". We know that many of our issues came from not having that social licence and going in with a de facto, "This is it", a plan, an outline business case (OBC) and a final business case (FBC). We did not understand the reality of the environment that we were feeding into. The consequence of that is the legal challenge that comes with it, which may not align at all with the material effect of the social value. In such cases, you have not brought the community with you. That is not something that you can do in a policy note. It is about understanding what has worked before and how you need to bring those areas forward. Each of them has a phased perspective. We will learn and we will get things wrong, but it is about identifying the areas on which we know that we need to focus, and we need to have a collective position on those.

Neil, do you have any other comments to make?

Mr Gibson: We had a board meeting this week, and to give you a flavour of that I am happy to share an action plan highlights report that we received. That might help the Committee in its thinking on whether that type of reporting will help us have the level of precision that you are seeking. We received the latest one this week, so it might be useful for the Committee to see what type of reporting is coming through on how we are moving forward in each of the different thematic areas. It is certainly more manageable. I can sit here confidently and say that I believe that we, as a board, will make progress on 12 actions, whereas I would definitely tell you that we could not do so on 105. At least there is a structure for driving progress, which was not there before.

Mr T Buchanan: Do the committee oversight and reporting arrangements apply to all major capital projects or only to those included in the final approved list of ISNI projects?

Dr Brady: All the major projects are included. We got the report on the major projects at the recent NICS board meeting. That information will, hopefully, be integrated into the final document so that we have one common set of projects in a common format with common reporting.

Mr Crawford: Thank you both for your answers thus far. I have a few questions about the ISNI dashboard. You have provided members with the dashboard that was presented to the board in September 2024 and a further update that was provided on 9 January. I am concerned, as is the Committee, that three of the four actions due for milestone delivery in the dashboard that you provided in October have not yet been met. Why is that? What are the reasons for the failure to deliver against those milestones?

Dr Brady: I think that the report that you have been provided with is the one that was provided in November. That has been updated, and we can provide you with revised updates as of the report to the NICS board. The status of all those actions is now green. Mitigating action has been taken to bring them all within scope. In fact, I attended the Committee meeting last October to go through the feedback from the Departments on those actions, so all of those actions have a green RAG status.

Mr Crawford: Will you forward the update to us?

Mr Gibson: Yes, we will. There are also a few that will move because they are contingent on something else. For example, some of the work in my area on procurement will depend on the publication of ISNI, and, once that is official, we will write the procurement plan. In the same way, the Programme for Government has some relevance in a number of areas as well, so a few are slightly co-dependent on some other things that are not within the committee's control, but we can give you the latest update. In fact, we had an update this week, so we can provide that for you.

Mr Crawford: That is great. Will you tell us more about project 11 in the enabling actions? Have the terms of reference been presented to the ISNI committee, and what is the next milestone for project 11?

Dr Brady: Project 11 is the energy legislation regulatory priorities, and, again, we have a status update that we are very happy to provide to you. The main focus and the key activities provided during the period from November to December were Utility Regulator engagement in preparation for the decarbonisation Bill; a public consultation design plan for the roll-out of smart electric meters; the renewable energy support scheme; engaging on the legislative pathway, with meetings between senior DFE and DFI officials to discuss actions to increase the flow of renewable energy; and developing terms of reference for the project group, which is a point that you raised. The further aspects identified for January to February are the milestones, which will then inform the latest RAG status. The task is to agree those terms of reference for the 2030 project group — again, the draft ones are available for policy development in terms of the green hydrogen energy and connection storage — and progress in those areas. They are in draft at this stage, but their terms of reference are due to be agreed in January/February. Those will then be advised in terms of the next RAG status. In general, the committee meets about four weeks before the board meets, so it provides the updates in a timely fashion to be included at the NICS board for any action.

Mr Crawford: Lastly, there is a real need for urgency in driving change to how NICS delivers major capital projects. The dashboard provides a high-level snapshot and does not give any sense of the total number of milestones and, importantly, delivery dates for the overall ISNI action plan. Can you update the Committee on the timescale for implementation of each of the 12 enabling actions? When can we expect to see impact?

Dr Brady: Two aspects are being reported. There are the 12 enabling actions, which have specific delivery milestones, and we are very happy to provide those. The latest report details those for the next number of months. Those are the enabling aspects, such as the development of guidelines for social licence, for example. We believe that those will be key areas to support successful delivery of the actual projects. The projects will be provided in the investment plan for ISNI once it is agreed. They will also be monitored through the ISNI committee, and through to the NICS board. At the moment, the projects that are being brought to the board for discussion are the most major projects for which, as we talked about earlier, there is a further scrutiny exercise in the areas that have a red-flag

status. To summarise, we can give you updates on where the enabling actions are, and the status and timelines for those deliverables, but there are then the timelines for the actual projects themselves.

Mr Gibson: Just to say again that one of the key areas where the outworkings of the PAC report will be very relevant for us will be around monitoring and the level of detail. We are working through that at the moment. We are not trying to duplicate, but that will provide the monitoring and assurance around the ISNI when agreed. We are looking into what level of detail of data we are going to report on and how we are going to monitor that. The recommendations that I am sure you will have will be relevant for us in that regard.

Conscious again of not duplicating or repeating work, we are trying to make sure that we have one data system that SROs can enter data into directly. The SIB is helping to design that for us, so there should not be duplication of effort against what Departments are collecting as well so that it does not become another bureaucratic process. Enabling action 6, "Monitoring and Assurance", is clearly something that I am sure the Committee will have thoughts on as to what data you would expect to see in that future monitoring report, if that was being made available.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): The next area, social licence, is going to be picked up by Colm Gildernew. Before we come on to that, you have said a lot about improving and project milestones turning into green lights. When can people on the street, ordinary people in our society, expect to see the benefit of those improvements? Further, can you pick one project as an example for the Committee and outline what improvements have been made?

Dr Brady: When I think of the changes that we have put in place, some of these do not come with an immediate response, because some are deep and structural in identifying the areas that we need to focus on. For me, one of the key areas of the structures that have been put in place is the understanding of the social licence aspect and understanding that that needs to be a fundamental aspect that is underpinned as part of those projects. We will discuss that later. We are looking at the projects that have come in and that we have identified as red flags to the NICS board, and we will be doing a deep dive as to where that progress needs to be better and lessons need to be learned.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): It just worries me — sorry for interrupting — that, although you have both talked about how improvements have been made and a number of projects have green lights, when I ask you to simply outline one project and explain the improvements that have been made by all these adjustments, you are not able to do that. Improvements on paper are not improvements if they are not tangible. It is a bit worrying if you cannot explain how all those changes have led to an improvement in any project.

Mr Gibson: Respectfully, my answer to that is that we have had the committee for only a year, and we do not have the monitoring data yet. Projects are quite a long run —.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Respectfully, this is not a new problem. There has been a long tail of issues: delays, overspends and everything else. Surely, you were not waiting for the return of the Executive a year ago to have all these things in place. I would like to think that there was some forward planning.

Dr Brady: Absolutely. One of the recommendations of this Committee was the provision of experienced non-execs. That went ahead and was delivered in the absence of an Executive. It was my view and that of my colleagues that just delivering that requirement was not sufficient, because that would not provide scrutiny of the things underpinning this. There are multiple specific projects, of course, but we need to understand the root causes of things going wrong, and —.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I have no doubt about that, and you have been very good at giving us all the examples of how it has improved, but you cannot explain how we can see any tangible improvement that is going to be picked up on the ground by the taxpayers and the ratepayers of our community who are paying for these delays. That is why I am asking the question. It is OK to talk about improvements, but no one outside the door is able to see the benefit of them. If you cannot provide an example now, at what point will our constituents, who are paying significantly for these overruns, see a tangible benefit?

Dr Brady: We are here to listen to those aspects. The nature of the capital projects is such that establishing a committee and a structure is not going to yield a tangible response in the immediate

term. There are multiple projects in delivery. We are underpinning the key aspects that we need to drive forward, but it will take time for that to show outworkings. Also, it is difficult to identify retrospectively where things that might have happened have not happened. We always need to provide further improvement and enhancement, but the reverse argument that action taken has stopped things from happening is very difficult to prove.

Looking towards costs, in some of the areas of the differences in budgets, it is about how we monitor that from the outset. The £3 billion that we talked about is based on an outline business case, not the final business case that represents its having gone through planning and procurement. There is a 10% overrun. Sometimes, the money is what was on paper, but the establishment of the actual out-turn is not based on the real perspective from when the project was costed. It only gets costed at final business case stage. The out-turn difference is about 10%. There are key areas of delivery, such as planning and social licensing, that need to be driven and focused on. We are endeavouring, with everything that we are doing, beyond having created structures while we had no Executive to drive them forward, so we are not waiting for direction, but we will take learnings from this Committee's review of what we need to factor in to do better and do more of.

Mr Gibson: I will add a small remark. A lot of brilliant work is being done by a lot of brilliant people delivering capital projects. Understandably, our focus is on the ones that overrun. We scrutinise those, and we look at high-risk projects. Unless you were in one of the capital-delivering Departments, you would not necessarily see a lot of the brilliant work, but, hopefully, our citizens are seeing the benefits of a lot of that capital investment at the minute. We do not want to create a system that will not develop projects for fear of the world changing when they happen. I have spent a lot of time talking to procurement-side colleagues, and, although I do not have a comparable report to hand, we could all pick out projects of our nearest neighbours in Ireland or the UK, such as hospitals and transport networks, that have had similar capital overruns. In other jurisdictions, there are lots of reasons for overruns — war in Ukraine, inflation — but there are many projects being delivered, and delivered well. We had the privilege of being in the new Grand Central station. I cannot speak to cost overruns there, because that is not my Department, but it was a privilege to sit in it and say, "Look at what a facility this place now has", and we would want to think that that speaks to what we can do on the capital side.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Yes, that is one example and it is a positive one, but there are many that are not so positive and are not to be proud of in any way, shape or form. Our role is to ensure good value for public money, and there are major problems, as you are well aware, that need to be resolved. If we cannot see a tangible benefit of the changes that you have outlined to this Committee, what is the point? Secondly, it is OK talking about traffic lights and all the internal lingo that goes with these processes, but this is about what the public sees and what the benefits are of the well-invested taxes that they pay. We really need to be clear about what we expect when it comes to outcomes. It is OK having traffic lights, but if there are no cars on the road, the traffic lights are not much good, are they? There are issues here. When we, undoubtedly, review this again, I would like to hear of a tangible example of how these changes have led to a benefit and not just wasted time. Otherwise, this is a waste of time.

Dr Brady: I am acutely aware that this is about the people whom we serve and producing a tangible benefit. I have been in Grand Central and Ulster University, and in areas where there had been deprivation, there has been a massive regeneration effect. The centre for the Fire and Rescue Service and the Ambulance Service has been developed and will make a tangible difference. That is why we are so focused on trying to understand the areas where we can make a difference.

You talk about the traffic lights. Those assessments need not to be based on anecdotal information but grounded on what actually went wrong. When we report them, they need to be based on real-time data and consistent across all the projects. I am sure that you, like me, can get swathes of information that, when you interrogate it, tells you very little. There will always be a reason *[Inaudible.]* We need to understand the core things that keep happening again and again — that goes to the enabling actions — and what the reasonable set of data is that we need with which to hold those things to account. Some of them may be to do with things that are outside our control, but some of them will not be. If we have the data and the evidence base, then we need a structure and a mechanism to hold it all to account. We are at the foothills of that, and I have to be honest and say that there is probably more that we could, and I probably should, have done, but that is what we are endeavouring to do. That matters to people and the economy and all the lost opportunities that were there as well.

Mr Gibson: I can feel many of my permanent secretary colleagues shouting in my ear and telling me what project I should cite. Obviously, DOF does not deliver a lot of capital projects. It would be disingenuous for me to say that even the ones that we have referenced —. The committee has not been there that long — our new structures — and that will take time. Most of the reasons for those successes are down to many excellent and brilliant people, and I would not want our committee structures or me to take any credit. What we can do, however, is make sure that they feel encouraged and supported and that we learn the lessons from the good as well as the bad. That is why we went as a board, for example, to see those projects, so that the people there could tell the story to us about how they had made progress. That gave them all a little bit of a lift, and then we had to think, "OK, are there any lessons from that that we can take forward?" There are colleagues of mine who deliver a lot more capital and would be itching to give a number of examples, but it would be wrong of me to trace any claim back to a fledgling committee and a process. Hopefully, when you look back again in years to come, it will also be clearer and easier to evidence where that progress has been made.

Mr Gildernew: Thank you. I appreciate the answers and the engagement. I welcome the fact that social licence has been peppered throughout. However, I still retain a wee element of concern, which I am going to try to dig into now. In that sense, I am going to switch the order of my questions. I will ask the second question first and the first question second. I am sure that you will be delighted to know that the third question will still be the third. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Gibson: I have written that down.

Mr Gildernew: I am concerned that social value is being conflated with social licence. They are very different things. What is your understanding of the difference between social licence and social value?

Mr Gibson: It is a really important difference. Social value is something that you can contract for, measure, codify and quantify. We have social value in contracting, and we have ways of measuring that. Social licence is very different, as you know. It is about permissions and collaboration in the fullest sense. It is more like a philosophy than a policy in the way that social value is. Social value is within it, but social licence is something very different. It has been peppered in a little bit because it is one of the things that certainly I have learnt more about as I have gone along. When you are involved in public service, you can think about what you do in consultation, and that is not what social licence is. It is a much more engaged programme, and it must start very early in talking to the communities and the people on whom any investment will impact to see what they hope for and wish for from it.

It does not solve all. There is evidence from elsewhere, and I point members again to the SIB report, which is very helpful in this regard. So impacted by it was I that I brought Brett Hannam and his team along to my departmental board to take us through the whole concept and help teach many of my colleagues and me more about it. It really is a very different thing to how I conceived it about running consultations and engaging with communities. It is a very different thing, thinking about being involved right at the outset. From looking at the evidence from elsewhere, where it is done well, such as France or Canada, you see that they still run into challenges, as you would expect. It is the right and democratic process, but you do have a smoother journey.

It will take a long time for us to see the real benefit, but one of the big changes that we have made is to put into the new procurement policy note (PPN) 01/21, which will come into effect with the new Procurement Act 2023 at the end of February, to make a requirement for a social licence stream in any major capital project. That will be required. We have quite a lot of learning to do on it, to be frank. We have to learn from the areas that have done it well and better than us, and we also have to develop training for whoever will run that type of social engagement. For example, in France, there are institutes that do that. We are at the foothills of getting it right, but I am glad that you gave me the opportunity to speak on it because it is a very different thing to a social value contract.

Mr Gildernew: I suppose that the importance of it is that, on the A5, for example, social licence has been established by default, almost, rather than design. The difference between design and default is delay and all of what has unfolded. Within the SIB's own guide to how we do social value, there are four bullet points, and social value is one point out of five in the first bullet point. Therefore, it is really one fifth of 25%. Social value is hugely important but is a very small part of it. It is a much, much bigger thing, and I am keen to ensure that accounting officers and anyone responsible through that chain understands that. I am concerned that people will think that, if we can demonstrate social value, that will do us for social licence. It is only a tiny part of it. I take the point that it is a journey. We cannot just create it overnight, but how are you going to ensure that the understanding of the breadth of it and the importance of it is right there throughout the entire process?

Mr Gibson: There are a couple of ways that we will do that. First, I am sure that this Committee will make recommendations in that regard, which is always helpful, with things that we can tie back to and say that it is also a requirement of the Committee. We have put it into the new PPN, which is coming shortly, and we are also already looking at how we will train our SROs and our teams to be able to develop better on it and what external expertise we will need to help us. We will be looking at bringing people over for coaching and training. There will also be training for the community groups and others, which will have to engage with us in a different way, so I am not underestimating the significance. Although I am speculating a little, the likelihood is that the best way will be to anchor that into some of our projects that are really in the conceptual stages at this time. We look at some areas where it has been done well, but maybe not under that badge. There is good practice, even locally, but we have to see it as a journey of change, not just in learning for us as a service administering social licence but for those who will be impacted on by it so that the citizens and community groups feel that they are being treated and engaged with in a different way. I think that that is quite a body of learning. We have an enabling action around that, and we are developing our plan around that, which, obviously, we are happy to share.

Mr Gildernew: Let me say this by way of a comment. Even the way that it is presented in this PPN is slightly problematic in that it sets out social value and then mentions the new name for that social value. Right at the end, it mentions social licence, and it is in brackets. Presentationally, that to me almost immediately downgrades it as something that is within social value rather than vice versa. I think that there is a need to bring it up, even just presentationally, so that it is higher on the radar, in a sense.

Mr Gibson: That is very helpful. Thank you.

Mr Gildernew: That is something that we need to ensure, because I think that it could continue to get conflated to a point where we find out in five years' time that it has not been fully ingrained. Therefore, it is important in that sense. Finally, you said there were some examples of good practice. I am delighted that you said that. Will you give us some examples of where an effective social licence approach, though it might not have been called that, has led to a good outcome when delivering a project?

Mr Gibson: There are a few examples. I am not as close to the projects as those in the Departments that are in charge of them. For example, I think of the journey at Ulster University — I worked there for part of it — where it engaged with local communities to think about what regeneration efforts it could bring. I picked that example because that story shows that a social licence journey continues after the project is developed. Even today, if we look at road networks and safety, we see that a lot of issues still continue with engagement. It is not something that you do just to get your project done. It is about building the relationship between the capital project and the area, and Ulster University is a good example of where those networks and that engagement with local business owners and residents continue. Again, it is not without its challenges, but it is a hugely important regeneration project that almost built up the social licence as it went on. However, I like it as an example because the process is still going on even though the project is finished.

Mr Gildernew: Good engagement will always be a process and not an event, and that is significant.

Dr Brady: The social licence is a good example of something that is more fundamental. We are in the Senate Chamber, and I was here before when the young people were leaving. When we were developing the ending violence against women and girls framework —. The consultation period is not what we should be moving to. It should be at the beginning in the co-design. From a social licence perspective, it could almost be transactional, because you want to get it done and you have to engage with the community, but that is fundamentally not the case. You will get a richer, broader proposition.

We have talked about breaking down silos and accountability in the Civil Service, and that is also about how we work, ingrained in the people who are closer to the ground. We engaged in the storm response and all the groups. The people from the community and voluntary sector know the sectors and everything else. A much more fundamental aspect, as we go towards policies, the Programme for Government and ISNI, is about being there and hearing those voices at the earliest time, because it gives better policy development, and there are outworkings if that is not done.

Mr Gibson: One of the biggest cultural changes is the willingness to engage so early that maybe the idea is not fully formed or baked, and that is culturally very different from what we are used to doing, which is designing what we are going to do and then taking it out for consultation. If you were to say,

"We need to resolve a transport solution here, but we are not exactly sure what it might look like yet", that would take a different level of bravery and openness about your ideas, because the final product might not look anything like them. We need to have that type of behavioural change as well as putting it into legislation.

Mr Gildernew: The reference to bravery is important. The system sees that as a huge challenge, because we exposure ourselves to all this churn and change, and it is not as controlled as we might be used to, but actually there is real value in it. You could pay thousands or millions to consultancy firms, when people in communities or particular areas understand the difficulties and, often, the solutions. They will be prepared to give them to you virtually for free, and that should be an inherent part of all the processes.

I would have liked to ask a question about the ISNI projects, but I expect that, the next time that you come back, we will definitely see something in black and white about how social licence is hardwired into the ISNI projects and across other Departments.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Thank you. I appreciate that we are running over time, but we have a number of questions, Neil, about the implementation of the outstanding RHI inquiry recommendations. We will touch on a few of those, if that is OK.

Mr Gibson: OK.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): In a letter dated 24 October, you were asked whether there was:

"a plan in place, with defined timescales, to ensure the remaining recommendations are fully addressed".

In the response, which was received by the Committee on 6 November, you stated:

"Officials will shortly be putting advice to the Minister on how best to make progress with"

that particular matter. Given that we are now two months on, can you advise whether that has happened and whether there is now a plan in place with defined timescales for that implementation?

Mr Gibson: Yes. The advice has been provided by me and my officials to the Minister to consider and for her feedback and thoughts. It will then, hopefully, go to the Executive. That advice is now in, and, if it is accepted in its current guise, I am confident or, rather, hopeful — I should not say "confident" — that it will give us a plan in order to complete all the actions that are agreeable to the NIAO.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK. On the basis of the overall plan, on what date do you expect all outstanding recommendations to be fully implemented?

Mr Gibson: I cannot say that yet, because some of our recommendations require the Minister to decide whether she will take a particular approach. The timeline will follow from whatever decision she takes on the recommendations. Some of those decisions on policy areas and things will take quite a significant time. Others can be done a little more quickly.

One of the key things in some of the RHI follow-up findings was that there were some challenges for us in getting things that would be auditable; in other words, that the NIAO would be content with. It was not unhappy that we had not made the actions but that we could not measure them in the way that it hoped. We are very hopeful that the plan, which, as I say, is with the Minister, will lead to a road map for completing the last of the recommendations.

To be fair, we would now probably want to have gone further than some of the recommendations. They will find their home in other things, such as our people plan and people strategy. We hope to be able not only to close off those recommendations but take forward their spirit and ethos. Obviously, the world has moved on a bit. That is a bad phrase to use, but, were the report to be written today, we suspect that it might be written differently. So, we not having a narrow focus and simply saying, "Close that for the sake of closing it". We hope that bringing some of the recommendations into constant review in a new strategy forum, such as the people strategy that is under development, will add a little more to them than what was originally set out in the RHI report.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Will you update us when you receive those timescales?

Mr Gibson: Yes, absolutely.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Thank you.

Mr Delargy: Thank you for your presentation and your answers so far. I want to touch on the root cause analysis. I appreciate that mention of it has been peppered through a lot of your answers, so you may need to recover some ground. SIB has completed its review. Will you talk us through the main findings, and, importantly, what needs to change?

Dr Brady: Yes. Thank you, Mr Delargy. The findings from the root cause analysis identified a number of key areas: people, processes and policy. Those form the 12 enabling actions, and we have now identified owners for each of those. They are now being monitored: action plans are brought to the committee and then to the NICS board for governance.

The first two actions relate to the infrastructure profession itself and the plan for the public and private sectors to support many of those areas. That theme has been raised by this Committee. The actions also identified the relevant sectors. We engaged with the sectors through some workshops. We worked with some of the top six ALBs, covering 60% of the capital spend, to identify the key areas in which they recruited external expertise and HR policies.

The business case process comes under the process aspect. A workshop was led as part of the ISNI committee. Some 105 attendees looked at the common areas and issues that were identified with the business case process. Among the themes that came up through looking at those areas was the view that there was more of a focus on the process than the outcomes and that there was a lack of monitoring of the timelines for the approval of those processes. We need to make sure that that is more focused. Other areas to do with process included the planning system: short-term planning improvements and the long-term planning improvement plan, which is under the direction of the Department for Infrastructure. Monitoring insurance was also included, as were the proportionate project management aspects of that. That also looked towards the data map, which was to replace the other monitoring and reporting arrangements. A trial was done on that aspect of the city deal projects. It is a live database system that has been developed in NAC for agreement. The NICS board agreed to use it as a vehicle for historical projects and for ISNI projects going forward.

On procurement, there was a meeting of SROs about the integrated procurement plan. Policy — I am sure that Neil will want to come in here, because he knows about this in much more detail — looks at risk, guidance and proportionate risk assessment and, in particular, the social licence aspects. On funding and finance, the funding needs identified in ISNI far outweigh the funding that will be available, so we are looking to how different funding structures can be addressed and how they might be financed. The estimates for maintenance alone come to £7 billion as part of the procurement plan. Areas in that could include access to different funds or different borrowing powers: for example, for the Housing Executive. We are also looking towards the Scottish model. A number of weeks ago, we had a meeting with the investor panel in Scotland to understand what it is doing. Therefore, we have that collective learning and, indeed, some industry reference as part of that.

Infrastructure planning was the tenth area identified. The long-term infrastructure needs assessment is that we need £7 billion for maintenance, and there is also the overall need. That is acknowledging that if you are building a house or a new school, it needs water, power and road infrastructure behind it.

Core areas in decarbonisation look towards the changing legislative and regulatory environment to reach our 80% renewable energy target by 2030 and what may need legislative change within the confines of what we are delivering.

The last area was working with the sectors to coordinate the adoption of those standards and qualifications.

I have provided a very brief summary. Neil can go into more detail. We agreed to provide the highlight reports for each of those that has been reported to the NICS board. A highlight report goes into who is the project lead is, what the project objectives are, where the deliverables are for the different phases, the key activities that have been undertaken and the key activities for the next two months. It also updates the milestones, the resourcing risks and the status.

Mr Gibson: I can see that —.

Mr Delargy: May I just come in between you, if that is OK? This is a better point for my next question, if you can answer it. Have all the recommendations that you mentioned been agreed by the NICS board?

Mr Gibson: Yes. As Jayne said, we found it — certainly, I found it — quite a profound and excellent report. All the recommendations have been brought together with the recommendations from the NIAO reports and others into those enabling actions. Therefore, I encourage the Committee to take a look at those recommendations, read those across to our enabling actions and highlight reports and check whether you feel — certainly, I am confident — that the enabling actions cover all those recommendations.

As I mentioned, this has involved not only my Department. We brought in Brett and his team to present to my board because of the profound nature of some of its findings. Some of the authors of that report remain involved through SIB on the work that we are doing now.

Mr Delargy: Just in —.

Dr Brady: We have a mapping — sorry.

Mr Delargy: No, go on ahead.

Dr Brady: Also, we can provide the mapping that was provided for each of those enabling actions. For example, for the one on the procurement process, there were 24 legacy recommendations that came out of the PAC and CBI reports. Therefore, there is a corollary between how all those are being delivered. That will give you assurance, and it is also for your scrutiny to see whether you feel that they will address the areas that were identified.

Mr Delargy: That is very useful. I am keen to get your assessment of whether you consider them to be robust and whether all those outcomes and actions are achievable.

Mr Gibson: On the first point, yes, very much so. I think that they were well evidenced and that there was good research in there. It would be hard to disagree with them.

As to whether they will be achieved, that is certainly the intention, but some of them are incredibly difficult. If we look around the world, we see that people are wrestling with the same challenges. The recommendations talk about skills, but there is a finite supply of that skill set around the world and a high level of competition for it. We are a very small place. We have to train our own and develop them. I will not underplay just how challenging it is anywhere in the world, never mind locally, to deliver capital projects effectively and efficiently. I am confident that we have put a framework in place to give us the best chance of doing that, but I do not underestimate the challenge. As we have discussed at this Committee, it is very difficult to deliver modern, flexible infrastructure to budget.

Dr Brady: Some of them are in the policy domain. Obviously, it is not for officials to provide advice on policy, but some of them might require new legislation to be adopted. Delivering on our net zero commitments and energy targets will be very challenging if we continue with the same structures, because of the complexity of the propositions and challenges. I am assured that we have identified the key areas, but the areas in which we can bring effect to that are still within the confines of the global situation and the positions that Ministers take.

Mr Delargy: I appreciate that. Obviously, some of them are more complex than others. It would be really useful to get your assessment of which ones are achievable and which ones will be more difficult. A strategy with short-, medium- and long-term goals needs to be put in place to assist you in achieving them and to identify blockages. I appreciate that there are some similarities and some that run across the board, but there are some that will be novel to each project and situation. It would be really useful for our knowledge to get that information. Philip and I from our party worked on the *[Inaudible]* green energy and climate change. It is so cross-cutting that it will be very difficult to balance and measure all that. You touched on that one in particular, but, if we were able to get in at an early stage and identify where the potential pitfalls are, we might be more likely to achieve that by putting short-term strategies in place. I certainly agree with you on that point.

This is the last point from me on this issue. I am conscious that time is moving on. Numerous reports have highlighted the fundamental reforms that are needed. What short-term measures can you put in place to address the root causes that you have identified and that we have talked about here today?

Dr Brady: One qualification is that some of the enabling actions do not come with an overall programme plan or endgame. Some are in the discovery phase, so we need to consult all the ALBs to unpick the issues. The thematic area is that we know that we have issues with our skilled workforce. We need to engage with our ALBs to understand the skill sets that they have provided.

The fact that we had such a large representation in the business planning perspective means that there are clear areas that we need to address in why that was not progressing. I know that there have been short-term responses, which will be reflected in the accounting officer provision.

Mr Gibson: As I said, we will send on the highlight report from the board from this past week. That will set out some of the update on milestones, which will reflect some of the things that we can think can be done relatively quickly or that are scheduled to come in the short term. Some, as you identified, are very long term, such as some of the skills requirements and things. I point to things such as the new social procurement policy note. I also point to things such as the Procurement Act that is coming in. Some things will come in that will allow us to accelerate some of the actions.

Probably the most interesting one for me will be the work stream on new reporting, which will probably be the most valuable in providing early insights.

Mr Delargy: We have done a lot of work around the skills piece. I have a motion on skills that will come to the Floor next week. Sometimes, our collective failure is that we look at a big-ticket issue such as that and say, "We're not sure how to solve it". There is a failure to break that into smaller steps. I appreciate that you are doing that and that you are looking at short-, medium- and longer-term actions.

Careers advice has to come before skills, but, before careers advice, there has to be a review of the sixth-form funding model. There is a financial imperative on schools to retain students. You will not be able to challenge the Careers Service until you change that funding model, and you will not be able to challenge the skills deficit until you change the Careers Service model. There are a number of steps in all these things, and the more information that you can provide on that, the better. I appreciate that you have brought it forward this week, and that is useful in helping us to be supportive of your role and to look at what we can do to have those smaller strategies that feed into the broader strategy, which is the key. I appreciate that you are already working on that.

That is all from me. Thanks very much.

Dr Brady: I can give you an example of one of those smaller aspects that can be shown, because it can sometimes look overwhelming or too complicated. The Department for Infrastructure needed technical infrastructure staff, and it implemented an academy, which is the third of that type of thing that we have done in the Civil Service. With foreign direct investment coming into Northern Ireland, DFE delivered skills academies. We knew that we had really talented individuals but that they did not have the skills match for what was needed, so DFE reskilled those individuals into areas such as data science and software. DFI is now running an academy based on infrastructure skill sets, which is an acknowledgement that we have the talent but not the skills. That is being done with Belfast Met.

Those are the models. We developed those in the Civil Service and delivered them really well externally. That has been part of our success in the economy. It is about how we think differently about doing that: about the collective ways of getting those SROs together and how we can scale that into different areas and regions.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK, Pádraig. You have been muted. You were silenced before you went silent.

Mr Honeyford: I will go back to look at the RHI documentation. The Department of Finance was nominated as the board to support the Executive subcommittee and to oversee that. Given the fact that the inquiry report highlights a significant failing in information management, would it not be reasonable to expect a readily available file of evidence to be held by the Department of Finance to support its assessment?

Mr Gibson: I take responsibility for that, in that it has been a very difficult job for me to try to keep my Department within its budget. That means that we have had lots of unfilled vacancies and pressures across the system that will be familiar to you. We have a very thin corporate services function, and we have to collect a lot of the material, because it sits in other Departments. An example is the policy profession work. The head of policy profession is not in the Department of Finance, so we had to go out and collect that evidence from others. I absolutely take responsibility for the fact that we do not have the resource or the machinery to pick that up as quickly as the NIAO hoped that we would. We have been providing regular updates on our progress on RHI, but the follow-up correspondence revealed that some of the material that we had did not contain the level of detail that the NIAO expected. We did not have it all to hand and had to collect it from other Departments, which, regrettably, was a slower process than others had expected.

In answer to your question, no, we did not have auditable material sitting there. Although we are the coordinating body, that material sat in different areas. We checked in annually and collected information from those other areas, but we did not have it all to hand. I accept that criticism.

Dr Brady: Three areas of records management were identified in the RHI inquiry. Two of those were achieved. The third was on the audit and whether the information had been provided. Issues were also found in relation to the COVID inquiry. We identified areas there and took action on them afterwards, introducing mandatory online record management training for all civil servants. We also reconstituted the information governance board as the senior information risk owner (SIRO) forum and rolled out a new framework in Departments. I met the Information Commissioner about that approach and that strategy.

I will talk to my understanding of the aspects of non-delivery. Record-keeping is required under the accounting officer provisions and is audited by Departments through their record management. Any internal audit will also identify those areas. The issue that we had related to the thematic review across the service, and, as Neil said, the prioritisation of the areas that you do thematic reviews on. After the RHI inquiry, our view on the prioritisation of reviews was that it raised a concern, because we had issues there as well. That thematic review has taken place, and I can give the Committee assurances that we are fully committed to delivering it and having the auditable material available to the Audit Office to make sure that we are assured. Those are some of the gaps in the other five that were said not to be available, and it was about the audit of the information to be able to vouch for that.

Mr Honeyford: May I clarify one thing? Has the Executive subgroup been re-established?

Mr Gibson: No.

Mr Honeyford: What advice have you given the Executive on the subgroup?

Mr Gibson: I have that advice with the Minister at the minute, and it is for her to consider. It is on policy and development, and I cannot tell you yet what is in the advice. Once the Minister is content with the advice or has made the changes that she wants, she will take it to the Executive, and we will make it available to the Committee.

Mr Honeyford: Was it the Minister who stopped the re-forming of the subcommittee?

Mr Gibson: No. I have provided advice on how to meet the recommendations that are set out as not being completed. I have provided advice on those matters, and it will be for the Minister to consider that advice.

Dr Brady: It was before I took up the post, but the Executive subcommittee had fulfilled its terms of reference for the Committee when the recommendations were agreed. It was then for this Committee to monitor the delivery of those recommendations. In the absence of Committees, I actioned updates to the NICS board on where we were with the RHI recommendations. Hoping for the restoration of the Executive, we provided the last of those updates last January. They were presented in March. It was our view that we had fulfilled the actual requirements, but we did not have the vouching information, and that is why it is helpful to deliver that. It is not that the subgroup was stood down; it had fulfilled those terms.

Mr Honeyford: Are there no plans for it to be re-established?

Mr Gibson: It will be for the Minister to consider the advice.

Mr Honeyford: OK. Pre-Christmas, there was a newspaper allegation along the lines that the Civil Service does not believe that it has to do as the auditors direct. How do you respond to that allegation?

Mr Gibson: Sorry. Can you repeat that?

Mr Honeyford: An newspaper allegation around RHI was that the Civil Service does not believe that it needs to do as the auditors direct. How do you respond to that?

Dr Brady: I would say that that is untrue.

Mr Gibson: Untrue.

Mr Honeyford: OK, no problem.

Finally, can you confirm your commitment to fulfilling the full implementation of recommendation 4 of the second NIAO report on RHI, which proposes:

> *"measures are put in place by DoF to ensure that appropriate documentation and records in support of future published assessments are held centrally by DoF, and are made available on a timely basis for audit inspection." ?*

Mr Gibson: Again, advice is with the Minister, but the overarching comment about record-keeping remains important. As Jayne said, we have reconstituted the SIRO forum, and it produces an annual report. We are looking at changing our content management systems for record-keeping. Record-keeping is now a challenging question globally: which records should be kept? Obviously, technology allows a lot more to be recorded, but there is a question about whether all of that should be kept. We add about a million records a month to the content management system, which is becoming almost impossible to navigate when you try to find records. It is not obvious that recording all and every conversation will be the right outcome and provide better clarity of record-keeping. A review is ongoing of all our record-keeping policies to make sure that they are up to date and follow best practice, and that will come to the NICS board in May, I think, or maybe June.

Mr Honeyford: Is there is a commitment to have the information available when the auditor wants it?

Mr Gibson: Obviously, a resource commitment is needed to do that, and we have limited resources. Therefore, we do our best to have everything as quickly as possible. My contention is that we will be helpful in getting it as quickly as required, but whether it takes is a little bit longer to collect some of the information is, to me, not as pressing as making sure that we actually have it and can get it.

Dr Brady: Technology has progressed since RHI, and we have rolled out Microsoft Office 365 to 28,000 users across the service. There is a mechanism to check compliance, and technology should take that task away. It should remove the ability not to do the right thing, and that information should be there. We talked about the data map, and it should be built into the system, which should be "queryable" as opposed to people sending assurances to me that they have done things. The technology should put in place the guard rails to ensure that nothing else can be provided. The mobile devices are in a locked-down environment where everything is captured and retained. At the moment, we have timeline rules for when things have to be put into systems, and that should remove the risk. We need to drive better transformations to increase productivity across the service, and we need to embrace technology in a way that helps to deliver productivity but also optimises the function of government. I guess that part of the SIRO reform is how we look back to do that. As Neil said, however, a big opportunity going forward is that we can not only provide better assurances but query the system by using technology as opposed to sending people out to find it.

Mr Honeyford: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Comptroller and Auditor General, have you any comments?

Ms Dorinnia Carville (Northern Ireland Audit Office): No.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK.

Thank you, both, for being with us and taking questions for quite a long time. Even from the RHI questions, we got information today that really could have been provided to us in written form. Had that happened, we would not have had to ask some of those questions. The lesson here is that, if we ask questions and need answers, we should receive that information as requested and in a timely fashion. We should not have to wait for, in some instances, three months for information, leaving unanswered questions that we are then left to follow up, which takes up your time as well as ours.

That said, I appreciate your being with us, taking questions and answering to the best of your ability. If we require further information, I would be appreciative if you would commit to providing us with those answers as quickly as possible and in as much detail as is possible. Thank you for being with us.

Mr Gibson: Thank you, all.

Dr Brady: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Thanks also to Stuart, the Treasury Officer of Accounts, and to Julie from the Department of Finance; Ms Dorinnia Carville, Comptroller and Auditor General; and the staff in the Northern Ireland Audit Office for their assistance. Our guests in the Public Gallery have also been very welcome.