



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Report by the Assembly Commissioner for Standards  
on complaints made by  
Timothy Gaston MLA and Doug Beattie MLA  
against First Minister Michelle O'Neill

Assembly-Confidential

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## Summary

This report presents the findings of my investigation into two complaints: the first submitted by Mr Timothy Gaston MLA, which was received on 3 October 2024, and the second submitted by Mr Doug Beattie MLA, received on 6th October 2024. Both complaints are against the First Minister, Michelle O'Neill MLA, and allege that she misled the Committee for the Executive Office on 2 October 2024.

Mr Gaston's complaint pertains to First Minister O'Neill's assertion that she had no knowledge of Mr Michael McMonagle's whereabouts since his suspension from Sinn Féin in August 2021. However, a photograph published in the media on 3 October 2024 showed her standing 'less than ten feet away' from Mr McMonagle in the Great Hall, Parliament Buildings, on 14 February 2023.

Mr Beattie's complaint addresses what First Minister O'Neill knew regarding the references provided to the British Heart Foundation on behalf of Mr McMonagle by two senior Sinn Féin press officers in August 2022. Mr Beattie is sceptical regarding the First Minister's claim that she became aware of the references on 25 September 2024, only the day before they were reported in the media. He argues that this assertion lacks credibility and raises concerns about the First Minister regarding openness and transparency.

My investigation included interviews with Mr McMonagle and First Minister O'Neill. Additionally, I obtained written affidavit testimonies from the two Sinn Féin press officers who provided references to the British Heart Foundation, written testimony from the former Sinn Féin HR Director, and documentary evidence requested from and provided by the British Heart Foundation.

At interview, Mr McMonagle confirmed that he had not interacted with the First Minister since prior to his suspension from Sinn Féin in August 2021. He further stated that he had requested employment references from his former colleagues, Mr Séan Mag Uidhir and Mr Caolán McGinley, after receiving a job offer from the British Heart Foundation. First Minister O'Neill confirmed that she did not see Mr McMonagle on 14 February 2023 in Parliament Buildings and that she had no interaction with him since he had been suspended from the party.

Both Mr McGinley and Mr Mag Uidhir provided references to the BHF on behalf of Mr McMonagle and confirmed that they did not inform anyone within Sinn Féin about their actions. In August 2023, the former Sinn Féin HR Director engaged in an email discussion with the British Heart Foundation concerning the references provided, particularly involving Mr Mag Uidhir's from a personal email address. However, she did not notify First Minister O'Neill or anyone else within the party about the British Heart Foundation's queries. First Minister O'Neill confirmed that she was not aware of the references until 25 September 2024, the day before it was brought out in the media.

Based on the evidence, I do not believe that First Minister O'Neill misled the Committee when she said she had not seen Mr McMonagle in the Great Hall on 14th February 2023, or when she stated that she was unaware, until 25 September 2024, of the references provided to the British Heart

Foundation by the two Sinn Féin press officers on behalf of Mr McMonagle. Therefore, I do not believe that First Minister O'Neill has breached the Ministerial Code of Conduct.

## **Complaint**

1. I received two complaints, one from Mr Timothy Gaston MLA<sup>1</sup> and one from Mr Doug Beattie MLA<sup>2</sup> about conduct concerns in relation to First Minister, Michelle O'Neill MLA, with allegations that she misled the Committee for the Executive Office ("the Committee") on Wednesday 2nd October 2024.<sup>3</sup> The two complaints have been linked for the purposes of my investigation and report.
2. Mr Gaston's complaint relates to First Minister O'Neill stating that she knew nothing about the whereabouts of Mr Michael McMonagle, yet on the 3 October 2024 a photograph of the First Minister was published in the media of her standing just metres away from Mr McMonagle in the Great Hall, Parliament Buildings on 14 February 2023.
3. Mr Beattie's complaint relates to First Minister O'Neill's statement that she was not aware of the references for Mr McMonagle provided by two senior Sinn Féin press officers to the British Heart Foundation ("BHF") until 25 September 2024. Mr Beattie expresses scepticism regarding this assertion, particularly in light of evidence indicating communication between the BHF and the Sinn Féin Director of HR in August 2023.

## **Investigation**

4. This investigation was conducted with a specific focus on determining whether the First Minister acted dishonestly or misled the Committee. It did not extend to examining the motivations of the press officers, the Sinn Féin HR Director, or investigating the procedures of the Sinn Féin party. The investigation is limited to the specific allegations of misconduct by the First Minister.
5. Apart from the First Minister, all participants in this investigation served as witnesses and provided information specifically pertaining to the allegations outlined in the complaints by Mr Gaston MLA and Mr Beattie MLA regarding the First Minister. Their involvement was limited to the matters directly related to these allegations.
6. This investigation was focussed on establishing the following:
  1. Whether First Minister O'Neill misled members of the Committee when she said she didn't know the whereabouts of Michael McMonagle since he was suspended from Sinn Féin after his arrest in August 2021 for alleged sex offences against children, for which he was convicted in September 2024.

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<sup>1</sup> Document 1

<sup>2</sup> Document 2

<sup>3</sup> Document 3

2. Whether and when First Minister O'Neill knew about the references provided to the BHF on behalf of Mr McMonagle by two Sinn Féin press officers in August 2022.
7. I commenced my investigation on 22 October 2024 (Mr Beattie's complaint) and 30 October 2024 (Mr Gaston's complaint).
8. In the course of my investigation, I carried out the following:
  - Interviewed Mr Michael McMonagle<sup>4</sup>
  - Requested and received information from FM Michelle O'Neill<sup>5</sup>
  - Requested<sup>6</sup> and received documentary evidence from the BHF<sup>7</sup>
  - Requested and received written affidavit testimony from Mr Séan Mag Uidhir<sup>8</sup>, Sinn Féin press officer
  - Requested and received written affidavit testimony from Mr Caolán McGinley<sup>9</sup>, Sinn Féin press officer
  - Requested and received written evidence from former Sinn Féin HR Director<sup>10</sup>
  - Interviewed First Minister Michelle O'Neill<sup>11</sup>

All documents I have relied on in reaching my conclusion are at Annex A

9. All interviews were carried out under oath, recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were sent to the interviewees for their approval.
10. Both press officers, through their solicitor, wished to provide affidavit testimony as opposed to an interview. As they were witnesses to this investigation, I accepted their request and provided a questionnaire to each press officer which was completed and returned signed by them and their solicitor.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Document 4

<sup>5</sup> Document 5

<sup>6</sup> Document 6

<sup>7</sup> Document 7

<sup>8</sup> Document 8

<sup>9</sup> Document 9

<sup>10</sup> Document 10

<sup>11</sup> Document 11

<sup>12</sup> Documents 8 and 9

## Evidence

### Timeline of events

11. On 20th August 2021, Mr Michael McMonagle informed Sinn Féin of his arrest the preceding day. Upon learning that the arrest pertained to alleged serious criminal offenses occurring between May 2020 and August 2021, including sexual offenses against children, Sinn Féin suspended Mr McMonagle's employment and party membership.
12. In June 2022, Mr McMonagle's employment with Sinn Féin concluded when his contract expired.
13. In August 2022, Mr McMonagle received an offer of employment with the BHF for the role of Communications and Engagement Manager, contingent upon satisfactory references being provided. He accepted the offer and privately requested employment references from Sinn Féin press officers Mr Séan Mag Uidhir and Mr Caolán McGinley. After securing their consent, he uploaded their contact details onto the BHF employment portal.
14. On 22nd August 2022, the BHF sought employment references from Mr Mag Uidhir and Mr McGinley. Mr Mag Uidhir was contacted by the BHF via his Gmail address, while Mr McGinley was reached at his official Sinn Féin party email address, both of which were provided by Mr McMonagle when submitting their details on the BHF portal.
15. On 24th August 2022, Mr McGinley completed an online reference on behalf of Mr McMonagle. The reference did not mention the ongoing police investigation or Mr McMonagle's previous suspension from Sinn Féin.
16. On 31st Aug 2022, Mr Mag Uidhir provided an online reference on behalf of Mr McMonagle. The reference did not mention the ongoing police investigation or Mr McMonagle's previous suspension from Sinn Féin.
17. Following the receipt of both references, the BHF had no concerns and Mr McMonagle's appointment was confirmed.
18. On 14th February 2023, Mr McMonagle attended an event at Parliament Buildings in his professional capacity as the Communications and Engagement Manager for the BHF.
19. On the same day, First Minister O'Neill greeted the family of Dáithí Mac Gabhann in the Great Hall, Parliament Buildings, as she passed through on her way to the Chamber for the Organ Donation legislation debate.

20. In July 2023, Mr McMonagle appeared in court, where he was charged with child sex offenses.
21. On 31st July 2023, in response to a media inquiry, the BHF became aware of the criminal charges against Mr McMonagle and subsequently suspended him.
22. On 3rd August 2023, as part of its internal review regarding Mr McMonagle's appointment, the BHF reached out to Sinn Féin HR for contact details of the HR Director. The Sinn Féin HR Director replied, indicating her understanding of the reason for their inquiry and provided her contact details.<sup>13</sup>
23. On 7th August 2023, the BHF emailed the HR Director to explain that they had received two references from the party nearly a year earlier. They were seeking clarification on the legitimacy of Mr Mag Uidhir's email address and reference provided on behalf of Mr McMonagle.
24. On 15th August 2023, after returning from leave, the HR Director confirmed to the BHF that the email address provided was indeed correct and belonged to Mr Mag Uidhir, Sinn Féin's Head of Press.<sup>14</sup>
25. Following the BHF's internal review in August 2023, Mr McMonagle's employment was terminated.
26. On 23rd September 2024, Mr McMonagle pleaded guilty to fourteen charges, including two charges of attempting to incite a child to engage in sexual activity. His sentencing date was set for 8th November 2024, and he was placed on the sex offenders' register.
27. On 26th September 2024, First Minister O'Neill stated that she first became aware of the references provided to the BHF on behalf of Mr McMonagle by Mr Mag Uidhir and Mr McGinley following a media inquiry the day before. In response, Sinn Féin promptly initiated an internal disciplinary process.
28. On 28th September 2024, Mr Mag Uidhir and Mr McGinley resigned from their positions and party membership before the completion of the internal disciplinary process.
29. On 2nd October 2024, First Minister O'Neill addressed questions while appearing before the Committee for the Executive Office ("the Committee")<sup>15</sup>:

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<sup>13</sup> Document 12

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*

<sup>15</sup> [Committee for the Executive Office 02.10.24 Hansard](#)

*I will say two things. First, I am absolutely aghast and horrified that two former employees decided to give a reference to that individual. It would not have happened had they come and asked for permission. They would not have been given permission. So I do not agree. It was wrong, absolutely wrong, and it should not have happened. Secondly, I will make a more general point. No, I did not know anything about Michael McMonagle's whereabouts or employment. I attended an event in this Building, as many members would have, because of the support for the campaign. I engaged with the family on that day, not with anybody who may have been with the British Heart Foundation. It is important to clarify that point.*

On your question about the British Heart Foundation, I am very confident that whenever we were aware that there was a criminal investigation under way, that then became an issue for the police and justice system to deal with, and I was confident that that was the case. There are lessons to be learned for a lot of people here around the due diligence of an employer who takes on an employee. Everybody needs to learn those lessons, but, with regard to my actions in the employment of the individuals and the references that were given, they would not have been OK'd by me. I never would have OK'd those references and, had I been asked, I would have said so. That is why the two people are no longer employed.

30. On 3rd October 2024, a photograph surfaced showing First Minister O'Neill standing just meters away from Mr McMonagle in the Great Hall, Parliament Buildings, on 14th February 2023.<sup>16</sup>
31. On 5th October 2024, the BHF issued a statement confirming that it had communicated with a senior Sinn Féin HR official about Mr McMonagle's references in August 2023.
32. On the same day, First Minister O'Neill stated that the contact between the BHF and the party's HR department had not been brought to the attention of the party's leadership at that time.
33. On 6th October 2024, the First Minister spoke with Fearghal McKinney, head of the BHF in Northern Ireland, during which she expressed regret over comments she made during the Committee meeting on 2nd October.
34. Also on 6th October 2024, the First Minister characterised the failure of Sinn Féin's former HR Director to inform her and the party's leadership about the BHF's contact in August 2023 as a "serious omission."
35. On 7th October 2024, the First Minister was summoned before the Assembly to respond to an urgent question concerning whether confidence in her office as First Minister had been diminished.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Document 13

<sup>17</sup> [Plenary Hansard 07.10.24](#)



## Testimony and Documentary Evidence

### Parliament Buildings, 14th February 2023

36. In his interview, conducted under oath, Mr McMonagle affirmed that he had not had any contact with First Minister O'Neill since before his suspension by Sinn Féin in August 2021.<sup>18</sup> He further confirmed that there was no interaction between himself and First Minister O'Neill on 14th February 2023 at Parliament Buildings.<sup>19</sup>

*No, I didn't. From memory, Michelle walked through the Great Hall, I think on her way into the Chamber. She stopped with the Mac Gabhann family, it made for good imagery, so I took a few photos and video clips. I think I may have been holding my phone on a stick thing. That would have been the extent of it really. [Mr McMonagle]*

*I can't really speak to what she did or didn't see. She has said she didn't see me, I know there was no interaction between us, so I take that at face-value, yes. [Mr McMonagle]*

37. During her interview, conducted under oath, First Minister O'Neill stated that she did not see Mr McMonagle on 14th February 2023 at Parliament Buildings.<sup>20</sup>

*My sole focus on the day of the British Heart Foundation event was the wee man Daithi, who I've a long-standing history with, very supportive of the family. I've been to every part of their campaign the whole way through the years and I've watched their progress through that campaign. If you remember the context that days that we're in the... Well, if you do know, the Assembly sitting was called, so we called the Assembly. I was just stopping by at the invitation of the family to say a quick greeting to them because the purpose of the recall was the legislation for organ donation, so my sole focus was on the child, as I always do. He's in the centre of this big, a lot of attention, and that was why I was there, so I just called to say hello to him on the way into the chamber.., and also to say to the family that I'm going to be very respectful about the debate. We don't want this to descend into politicking against each other. I want the recall of the Assembly so we can do legislation like this. [M O'Neill]*

*So that's my sole focus in that Assembly or that Great Hall that day whenever I went in. Never for a second did I see Michael McMonagle. Had I have seen him, it would've been an alert in my head but never did I see him, despite the fact what that picture looks like. [M O'Neill]*

38. Both First Minister O'Neill and Mr McMonagle confirmed that, although the angle of the photograph does not capture it, the Great Hall was quite busy on that day.

*Hugely busy, because all of the media would've encountered and all in that general area, a lot of observers and then all the MLAs going to the Chambers, so it was a very busy Hall, as it generally is. Of my experience this is, and I go in through that Hall on a daily basis, on a Monday and Tuesday certainly every week, the Hall could be full at any time. [M O'Neill]*

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<sup>18</sup> Document 3

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*

<sup>20</sup> Document 11

*It certainly was because there was a lot of media there. Like I said, I don't know who took that photo, but I'd imagine it was from part of the media contingent. There would have been a lot of media there that day because of the, just because of the attempt to recall the Assembly because of the issue that they was discussing. [M McMonagle]*

39. While answering the urgent question in the Chamber on 7th October, the First Minister further commented regarding the photograph:

*On the issue of the photo, I understand that people may perceive it differently, but I can stand over only my own actions. My statement of absolute fact is that I did not see Michael McMonagle on that day. I was focused solely on the child and the campaign, of whom and of which I have been a big advocate the whole way through. I very much regret that the family is being brought into the middle of this day and daily. I just want to say that. [M O'Neill]*

*I accept that, when you look at that photograph from that angle, it could perhaps look as though I perhaps should have seen him, but I did not see Michael McMonagle that day. I would not stand here and make that statement if it were not true. I did not see that individual on that day. I was solely focused on talking to the family and solely focused on the actual reason why they were in the Great Hall in the first place, which was around trying to get the organ donation legislation over the line. [M O'Neill]*

## **Employment References**

40. Mr McMonagle confirmed that he requested references from his former colleagues, Mr Séan Mag Uidhir and Mr Caolán McGinley, for the BHF role he had been offered. He uploaded their details onto the BHF's portal after accepting the offer of employment.
41. The BHF received the employment reference from Mr Mag Uidhir on 31st August 2022 and the reference from Mr McGinley on 24th August 2022.
42. Both Mr Mag Uidhir and Mr McGinley confirmed that they provided references for Mr McMonagle to the BHF and stated that they had not informed anyone in Sinn Féin about the references they provided.<sup>21</sup>
43. Documentation from the BHF indicates that the former Sinn Féin HR Director was contacted by the BHF and she confirmed that the email address associated with Mr Mag Uidhir was legitimate. It appears that the reference from Mr McGinley was not discussed due to Data Protection considerations.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Documents 8 and 9

<sup>22</sup> Document 12

44. The former Sinn Féin HR Director confirmed that she had not informed anyone within Sinn Féin that she had received an email from the BHF seeking clarification on the references provided for Mr McMonagle.<sup>23</sup>
45. First Minister O'Neill confirmed during her interview that she was not made aware of the BHF's contact with the HR Director concerning the references at that time and was unaware that the Sinn Féin press officers had provided references until 25th September 2024.<sup>24</sup>
46. Furthermore, First Minister O'Neill stated during the urgent question session on 7th October:
- This other issue has arisen because people gave references without asking for permission and because the HR manager was asked for clarification after McMonagle was charged, but did not bring that information forward.<sup>25</sup> [M O'Neill]*
45. In relation to the British Heart Foundation, First Minister O'Neill stated during the urgent question session on 7th October:
- I have been very clear both today and when I spoke with Fearghal [Head of BHF NI] on Saturday that we would not want to damage the reputation of an excellent charity that does sterling work to promote heart health. I look forward to a constructive relationship with the charity, but I have been unequivocal about any reputational damage caused to it. I apologise for that.<sup>26</sup> [M O'Neill]*

## Findings of Fact

47. I found the following facts established to the required standard of proof:
1. First Minister Michelle O'Neill has had no contact with Mr Michael McMonagle since before his suspension from Sinn Féin in August 2021.
  2. First Minister O'Neill did not see Mr McMonagle in Parliament Buildings on 14th February 2023 and had no interaction with him on that day.
  3. Mr McMonagle asked Mr Caolán McGinley and Mr Séan Mag Uidhir, two former colleagues and Sinn Féin press officers, to provide employment references for him to the British Heart Foundation in August 2022.

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<sup>23</sup> Document 10

<sup>24</sup> Document 11

<sup>25</sup> [Plenary Hansard 07.10.24](#)

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*

4. Mr McGinley and Mr Mag Uidhir provided employment references on behalf of Mr McMonagle to the British Heart Foundation on 24th August 2022 and 31st August 2022, respectively.
  5. Neither of the references provided mentioned Mr McMonagle's suspension from Sinn Féin or ongoing police investigation.
  6. Mr McGinley and Mr Mag Uidhir did not notify anyone in Sinn Féin that they had provided references for Mr McMonagle.
  7. The former Sinn Féin HR Director engaged in email discussion in August 2023 with the British Heart Foundation regarding the references provided to them, and in particular by Mr Mag Uidhir from a personal email address.
  8. The Sinn Féin HR Director did not notify First Minister O'Neill, or anyone in the party, about the email correspondence from the BHF in relation to its queries about the reference providers.
  9. First Minister O'Neill became aware of the references provided by Mr McGinley and Mr Mag Uidhir on 25th September 2024.
48. In accordance with paragraph 7.14 of the General Procedures Direction, First Minister O'Neill was afforded an opportunity to challenge any of the above findings before I finalised my report. She provided relevant clarity on item 47.5, which was updated.<sup>27</sup>

### **Further Analysis and Reasoning**

49. This investigation was conducted to determine whether the First Minister misled the Committee when she stated that she did not see Mr McMonagle on 14th February 2023, was unaware of his whereabouts since leaving Sinn Féin, and did not know prior to 25th September 2024 that two Sinn Féin press officers had provided references to the BHF on behalf of Mr McMonagle.
50. The evidence established that First Minister O'Neill and Mr McMonagle have not interacted since before he was suspended from Sinn Féin in August 2021. While the photograph may lead some to believe that the First Minister must have seen Mr McMonagle due to their proximity, both she and Mr McMonagle have affirmed that there was no interaction between them on 14th February 2023.

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<sup>27</sup> Document 14

51. What the photograph does not convey is that the Great Hall was quite busy on that day, as the Assembly had been recalled to discuss the organ donation legislation. First Minister O'Neill had stopped to greet the McGabhann family on her way to the Chamber and stated that she was focused on that meeting and did not see Mr McMonagle that day. I have found no evidence to suggest that she is not being truthful.
52. There is no evidence indicating that First Minister O'Neill was aware of the employment references provided by the two Sinn Féin press officers. The evidence demonstrates that both individuals did not inform anyone in Sinn Féin about the fact that they provided references on behalf of Mr McMonagle to the BHF.
53. The former Sinn Féin HR Director confirmed that she did not alert anyone in Sinn Féin to the contact made by the BHF in August 2023 seeking clarity on whether Mr Mag Uidhir's email address was correct in relation to the references provided by him to the BHF on behalf of Mr McMonagle. Furthermore, the HR Director did not notify First Minister O'Neill about the BHF's inquiries and had not engaged in discussions about Mr McMonagle with the First Minister at any stage.

## **Conclusion**

54. Based on the evidence I have gathered and analysed, I do not believe that First Minister O'Neill misled the Committee when she stated she hadn't seen Mr McMonagle on 14th February 2023 in the Great Hall, Parliament Buildings.
55. Based on the evidence I have gathered and analysed, I do not believe that First Minister O'Neill misled the Committee when she claimed she only became aware of the references provided by the two Sinn Féin press officers on behalf of Mr McMonagle to the BHF on 25th September 2024.
56. First Minister Michelle O'Neill did not mislead the Committee for the Executive Office on 2nd October 2024 and has not breached the Ministerial Code of Conduct.

Dr Melissa McCullough  
NI Assembly Commissioner for Standards  
5th February 2025

## Annex A

Document	Description
1	Timothy Gaston MLA complaint against Michelle O'Neill MLA
2	Doug Beattie MLA complaint against Michelle O'Neill MLA
3	Committee for the Executive Office 02 October 2024 Hansard
4	Michael McMonagle Interview transcript
5	Information received from Michelle O'Neill MLA
6	Information request to the BHF from Commissioner
7	Response received from BHF
8	Séan Mag Uidhir written affidavit testimony
9	Caolán McGinley written affidavit testimony
10	Sinn Féin HR Director written testimony
11	Michelle O'Neill interview transcript
12	Email correspondence between former Sinn Féin HR Director and BHF
13	Photograph, Parliament Buildings, 14 February 2023
14	Email from M O'Neill re Findings of Fact 47.5



Emailed to: [standardscommissioner@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:standardscommissioner@niassembly.gov.uk)

Ref: TG/SM/Gen/12458

3 October 2024

Standards Commissioner  
Room 222  
Parliament Buildings  
Stormont  
Belfast  
BT4 3XX

Dear Ms McCullough,

**Re Complaint against First Minister**

I write to invite you to investigate a potential breach of the Ministerial Code by the First Minister.

The First Minister told the Executive Office Committee on Wednesday that she knew nothing about the whereabouts of Michael McMonagle. On Thursday the Irish News published a photo of her standing less than 10 feet away from the convicted sex offender. The Ministerial Code requires Ministers to uphold the seven principles of public life, including openness and honesty. The photograph published in the Irish News demands that the First Minister answer for how she has upheld these principles.

Accordingly, I invite you to investigate how the First Minister's remarks to the committee are compatible with the Ministerial Code.

Given the seriousness of the issues involved here, I trust that the matter will be investigated expeditiously.

Yours sincerely,



Timothy Gaston MLA

Timothy Gaston MLA, 38 Henry Street, Harryville, Ballymena, Co Antrim BT42 3AH

Tel: 028 25 640250



**Doug Beattie MC MLA**  
Upper Bann Constituency Office  
103 Bridge Street,  
Portadown,  
BT63 5AA

Dr Melissa McCullough  
Standards Commissioner  
Rooms 222  
Parliament Buildings  
Stormont  
Belfast  
BT4 3XX

Date: 6<sup>th</sup> October 2024

Dear Commissioner,

I write to ask that you investigate the actions of the First Minister. My concerns are in regard to what could be seen as the First Minister misleading a statutory committee in respect to what she and her party knew about the references given to Michael McMonagle by 2 senior party members.

It is now clear that the party knew about the references a year previously, yet the First Minister said she was only made aware the day before the news broke in the media. This is not credible and strikes at the heart of the 'Nolan Principle' particularly openness and transparency.

I believe the First Minister must produce the documentary evidence that supports her claim that she did not know. This could be in the form of the email chain between the British Heart Foundation and Sinn Féin.

This is a serious issue and strikes at the heart of integrity we expect of all elected representatives particularly Executive Ministers.

Yours sincerely,

  
Doug Beattie MC MLA





Committee for The Executive Office

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Briefing by Mrs Michelle O'Neill MLA, First Minister; Mrs Emma Little-Pengelly MLA, deputy First Minister; Mrs Pam Cameron MLA, junior Minister; Ms Aisling Reilly MLA, junior Minister

2 October 2024

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for The Executive Office

Briefing by Mrs Michelle O'Neill MLA, First Minister; Mrs Emma Little-Pengelly MLA, deputy First Minister; Mrs Pam Cameron MLA, junior Minister; Ms Aisling Reilly MLA, junior Minister

2 October 2024

**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Ms Paula Bradshaw (Chairperson)  
Ms Connie Egan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Timothy Gaston  
Mr Harry Harvey  
Mr Brian Kingston  
Ms Carál Ní Chuilín  
Ms Emma Sheerin  
Ms Claire Sugden

**Witnesses:**

Mrs Little-Pengelly	deputy First Minister
Mrs O'Neill	First Minister
Mrs Cameron	junior Minister
Ms Reilly	junior Minister

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** I thank the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the two junior Ministers for coming to the Committee today. I remind members that we only have them for one hour, so if we keep our questions nice and succinct, we will cover a lot of ground. Do you want to make any opening remarks?

**Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister):** Yes, thank you, Chair. We are grateful for the opportunity to be back in front of the Committee this afternoon. I know that you would like us to keep our comments brief, so we will endeavour to do that and open the meeting up for discussion. We are delighted to have both junior Ministers, Pam and Aisling, with us today, who work very hard alongside us in the Executive Office.

I know that, throughout the course of the conversation, members will want to touch on some of the departmental issues that we are currently working on and considering. It would be remiss of us, however, not to highlight some of the issues that we have put a lot of emphasis on and some of the significant announcements that we have made in recent weeks. The Committee is heavily involved in the first of those, which is around the Executive's draft Programme for Government, which was announced to the Assembly and launched for public consultation. It is fair to say that it has been

welcomed by everyone, and it is the culmination of extensive dialogue across the Executive. Inevitably, of course — you will know this — there are different views on what should or should not be included in the Programme for Government. We look forward to considering all the consultation responses that we receive. As I said, this Committee has a pivotal role in coordinating the collective response of all the Assembly Committees to the draft Programme for Government and, no doubt, will perform that task diligently. We look forward to the Assembly's contribution to the final Programme for Government in a short period of time.

Of course, that followed our earlier statement to the Assembly about our legislative programme for 2024. Departments are now taking forward the work on those Bills. As indicated, we are going to make a further statement later this term on the legislative proposals for the remainder of the 2024-25 Assembly session. We will keep coming back to that and refreshing it as we add to it.

**Mrs Little-Pengelly (The deputy First Minister):** Thank you. It is great to be here. I echo the First Minister's thanks for the opportunity to appear before the Committee. I will be brief, but I wanted to mention in particular our strategy for ending violence against women and girls (EVAWG), which has been published since we were last here. It is a key priority in the draft Programme for Government, but we felt that it was important to move ahead when we were able to. The First Minister and I are personally committed to that issue, so we are very pleased to have reached that milestone. We were delighted, therefore, to be able to formally publish a strategic framework and a first delivery plan associated with the strategy. We are confident that it will deliver real change for those who suffer harm and abuse in our society every day. We are realistic about it, but we believe that this is a really strong start and will progress to make a real and tangible benefit and difference.

A few weeks ago, the First Minister and I were in the north-west for the signing of the £290 million Derry/Londonderry and Strabane region city deal. This is a hugely significant opportunity for growth in the area and tangible proof of how collaborative working across government can deliver much-needed investment on the ground. Of course, all of that is set amidst the financial constraints that we all face. We are all fully aware of the two city deals that are currently paused. We are doing everything that we can to push those issues and try to ensure that the Government unpause those. We do not see that there is any justification for that, and all parts of Northern Ireland must benefit from those. Nevertheless, it is an example of the financial constraints and challenges that we face. I know that everyone on the Committee is well aware of those as well.

I assure the Committee that our focus is very much on delivery. Yes, that is challenging at the moment because of the current Budget, but we are very aware that we can do something. That is why we have moved forward with a whole range of issues, and you have seen those set out in the draft Programme for Government priorities. We are also very conscious that one of the big things that we can do is to prepare for the opportunities that will, hopefully, come in relation to some of those priorities, and that we are finding the right solutions to be implemented in the right way, at the right time and in the right place. At our very first appearance at the Committee, I mentioned the importance of getting those things right and delivering well-developed proposals and interventions in an effective way. There is a window of opportunity now for us to do that. That is the best way of making a meaningful difference across the priorities that we have identified.

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** Thank you. Do either of the junior Ministers want to add anything?

**Mrs O'Neill:** We thought that, for the sake of brevity, we would allow you to come in.

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** Even better, thank you. We have two more panels to talk to today, and we are focusing on the racially motivated incidents that happened in the summer. I want to pick up on the Communities in Transition (CIT) programme. It is my understanding that you are in a transition year. You have had phases 1 and 2, and you are looking at planning for the delivery of a future phase. I am concerned that, of the eight programmes, none is in South Belfast, which is where the coercive control structures of paramilitarism are very prevalent. Where are you with phase 3, and will you bring forward the research so that you can look at a new set of programmes?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Do you want us to start with that one, or do you want to ask a few?

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** That is the first one. The second one is pretty much linked to that, because it is about where we are with the review of Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC). Instead of the binary aspect, it is more about multiculturalism. I also have a question about our inquiry.

**Mrs Little-Pengelly:** I will start on CIT. The Committee will have been updated on the progress that has been made with the programme. There were really good evaluations of the implementation and the feedback on the particular projects. The projects were put together with a collaborative design approach and, overall, the evaluations have been very positive. You will be aware that the areas were decided on in accordance with a matrix, which was based on a range of advice and evidence as to activity. South Belfast scored very low on that.

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** That was eight years ago. I am asking whether there will be an update.

**Mrs Little-Pengelly:** Of course. The relevance of this type of programme is to continually assess that. Moving forward, of course you have to make sure that these interventions are going in the right area, and that will be based on a combination of factors, including levels of criminality but also intelligence and assessments around the levels of other activity. You will be aware that there is a crossover in some of the activities in the summer and that there have been interventions, including by the Executive Office. South Belfast is an Urban Villages area, for example, and that was all about building —

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** Minister, can —?

**Mrs Little-Pengelly:** — social capital within the community. It is important that these programmes are collaborative. There is a complementary and supplementary aspect to the Urban Villages, neighbourhood renewal and community relations work, and the race and CIT work in all the areas. Therefore, it is really important that we continue to learn from our experience of the roll-out of those programmes in those areas to see where the added value of, for example, CIT is, but that will be based absolutely on evidence on where the areas of need are for this type of project.

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** Are you giving an assurance there? Your officials have said that, looking forward to phase 3, this will involve commissioning of research to look at the prevalence of paramilitarism across CIT areas and beyond to inform. I am asking whether that research has been commissioned for phase 3.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I am not 100% sure, but we will clarify that for you. A more general point is that we live in a very changing society, and we have a number of different programmes, whether it be Urban Villages, good relations work, race relations work or the T:BUC work in general. We are moving to a space where we need to find a way to align all those things, and I think that our focus should no longer be on what has traditionally been described as orange versus green. It needs to be about how we make a better, fairer society, a more equal society and a more inclusive society. A lot of the work that we are doing in that regard is around that overarching review and how it all, even the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT), fits under that one umbrella. We want to bring forward ideas that actually allow us to harness that work together. Do you want to add to that, Aisling?

**Ms Reilly (Junior Minister, The Executive Office):** Yes. In the past eight months, since we have been in position, junior Minister Cameron and I have been very involved in T:BUC. We have met and listened to a whole range of people, and we have been able to see for ourselves the impact that T:BUC has had on people's lives. It has brought people together and is very much about enhancing and investing in communities. We have been to Derry, Newry and all around Belfast, and we have listened to and spoken to people of all ages and backgrounds. They have been engaging in the programmes, and that has been really positive for us to see, because, by and large, they are telling us that they have had to step out of their comfort zones. It has been really powerful for us to see that for ourselves and listen to those people.

As recently as last week, I was at the official launch of the Black Mountain shared space project, and that is a perfect example of bringing communities together in a space that is not only shared and welcoming but modern and fitting for the people who will use it. It is also about the community having a sense of ownership of that space. Luckily enough for me, it is five minutes away from my constituency office. For me, that shows the Executive's commitment to improving community relations, because, fundamentally, we all want everybody who lives here and calls here home, regardless of their background, to be really proud of where they live and for that to be somewhere that represents them.

As Michelle said, we understand that the make-up of society is changing, but it is important for us, as political leaders and representatives, to be out and about, to be accessible and to be listening.

Fundamentally, we need to bring that back, because that will inform any review of T:BUC and how we go forward with that strategy.

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** OK. I think that you have covered my second question. Can we get an update on the identity and languages Act and the three bodies?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes. I think Pam is just going to confirm that the research that you asked about earlier has been commissioned.

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** OK. Good. Thank you, Pam.

**Mrs O'Neill:** There you go; junior Minister to the rescue.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Well done, Pam. *[Laughter.]*

**Mrs O'Neill:** We are making progress on the language and identity commissioners. We have got panels agreed and in place, so we can move forward to the next stage of the recruitment process. That demonstrates good progress.

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** I have one last question; I do not want to hog this.

You will be aware that our Committee is conducting an inquiry into gaps in equality legislation. The direction of travel is nearly set out, and we are only about halfway through taking oral evidence. If a key recommendation is for this Committee to bring forward a single equality Bill, will we have the support of the Executive Office and your officials in that work?

**Mrs O'Neill:** There will probably be a difference in emphasis from the two parties on a single equality Bill. We have not considered it. I am certainly supportive of a single equality Bill, but we need to see the proposals coming forward so that we can jointly consider them.

**Mrs Little-Pengelly:** It will be a case of taking a look at the detail. Undoubtedly, a range of gaps have emerged, and those need to be addressed. There has always been an issue about trying to bring those together, having a regurgitation of the existing law and asking people to vote again on that legislation. As Michelle said, there will be different views on single equality legislation. We have not traditionally felt that that was the way forward. However, we absolutely want to look at where the gaps are in equality legislation and move forward on it.

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** If there is a vehicle or a series of vehicles, we will —.

**Mrs Little-Pengelly:** We are absolutely committed to looking at and addressing that.

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** OK. Thank you.

**Ms Egan:** Thank you all for coming in today. Your time is really appreciated. I will ask a few questions around the recently launched strategic framework to end violence against women and girls, which is really positive. The co-design partners, along with your officials, put in a lot of hard work to get that over the line. I want to ask a few questions around the funding specifically. I know that budgets are very tight. However, it has been pointed out to me that the Republic of Ireland is spending £59 million — nearly £60 million — just in 2024 on gender-based violence initiatives, whereas here we have announced £3 million over two years, which, although positive, is a much smaller amount. Can you give me some detail about how that is being spent? Are you looking at other funding streams? Are you talking to the Finance Minister about it? When will the change fund be launched?

**Mrs O'Neill:** There are three questions in that. I will kick off. Obviously, we are dealing with two different jurisdictions. We all have our political view of that; I know what mine is. You are looking at a sovereign Government in Dublin. If you directly compare our budget with what they are dealing with, you see that, for example, the entirety of the Apple tax is the entirety of our block grant for every public service. Therein lies the challenge. You cannot really compare the two. However, £3 million is what we have identified for the first two years of the initial action plan. We want to get that money out on the ground as quickly as possible. Hopefully, we will get the money moving before the end of the year.

There are a number of different strands to that work. That is certainly not the totality of it. I know that Emma and I are very determined that we use every avenue open to us to achieve additional funding.

What we wanted to do was take what we have for now, launch the two-year action plan, align the funding to it, get that work moving and then build on it. There are lots of opportunities for us to build on it going forward and looking at what other funding stream there may be. For example, can we use the Irish Government's budget — can we do something around ending violence against women and girls in border counties through the Shared Island Fund? Can we use the other sources of funding that we have? We will not be shy in trying to knock doors and get what we need, because this is a game changer piece of work. If we can have that whole-society focus on ending violence against women and girls, it will be a game changer. We know that it will not be turned around overnight, but it will start to transform. If we are committed to it and continue to invest in it, the seven-year road map can be successful and very transformative.

I commend to the Committee the co-design approach that we took. It was second to none, and it is a very good example of how policies should be developed going forward. The partners were in from the very start and had their hands on the design of the strategy.

**Mrs Little-Pengelly:** I will add to that. We have expressed our thanks to all the people who gave up their time to be part of that collaborative design process. There are lots of lessons to be learnt across government on that process. Looking at it from so many different angles definitely improved the strategy, the actions coming out of it and the delivery plan.

Michelle is absolutely correct: £3 million will not fulfil the ambition that we have for the strategy. However, we were very keen to start not just with the publication of the strategy but with some funding to support initiatives on the ground. We were also very conscious that we did not want to just replace funding that is funded from elsewhere. There has been funding insecurity for really great organisations like Women's Aid, which needs to be addressed. We are conscious that funding is not just pulled into the centre and then replaced by this. The funding through the strategy has to be complementary and supplementary to existing funding in Departments. It is really important to make sure that Departments buy into it as well. It is an Executive strategy, so the spend on these initiatives, for example, in Justice with the PSNI, through the courts, through Communities etc, is likely to be significantly larger, of course, than the £3 million that we have. However, this £3 million will very much focus on working with grassroots organisations on the ground and then funding to support that training and the improvements in our structures and processes all around that prevention.

From our point of view, this is a good start. It is not the ambition that we want for this, but we are also very realistic about the budget that we are operating with at the moment. It will be a case of ramping this up, scaling this up over the course of the next number of years and, hopefully, improving and increasing the pot of money available.

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** Just before you move on, I remind members that we have an Executive Office briefing on the strategy next week. Go ahead.

**Ms Egan:** Thank you, Paula. I will take an opportunity while the First Minister and deputy First Minister are here. This is something that I really care about, and it is really positive to see this. How have you have been working with other Departments already with regard to that? I know that there are actions for the Department of Education in regard to curriculum and educational programmes. Also, have you had any conversations with the Departments of Justice and Health about work that they can do together on the recently announced domestic and sexual abuse strategy? There will be a lot that aligns in the two.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Do you want to start?

**Mrs Little-Pengelly:** I was just going to say that I was really pleased that the two strategies came to the Executive together, so we had the opportunity to emphasise that, as I am sure that the briefing that you received did. It is right and proper that there is a strategy that goes beyond women and girls, because the domestic and sexual abuse strategy of course impacts much wider than simply that. It is right that it is there, and it is right that that work was developed as part of a cross-departmental project, and that has been published. We wanted to absolutely make sure that this was not duplication and that these strategies complemented each other. We wanted this one to focus on the particular problem — it is a particular problem — of violence against women and girls and what motivates that

and the issues with it. We believe that the two strategies are highly complementary, but we want to make sure that, in the operation and implementation of it, that follows through.

We have already been able to leverage some additional money, for example, through the Department for the Economy for working through this strategy and some of the projects. There will also be a number of actions that are low-cost or no cost, and that can be about messages that are integrated, for example, within the curriculum in the Department of Education and elsewhere. They are positive messages around the strategy, but also key messages about what positive relationships look like. There are many actions that we can continue to progress, even though the budget is comparatively small at the moment. However, those actions will still make a big impact, if done correctly.

**Mrs O'Neill:** That work has already started. The reason that we are able to arrive at the action plan and that everybody knows what is to be done in those first two years is because of that strong cross-departmental working. As Emma said, both strategies are really going to dovetail. They are separate, but in some ways aligned. This is the best chance that we have had to have a holistic approach to ending violence against women and girls and come at it from every angle. There is a part for everybody to play. This is all about prevention, but probably what will be useful for the Committee is that we have asked for twice-yearly updates on the action plan itself and the delivery points. I am sure that the Committee will also want to have that information, and we assure you that we can do that.

**Ms Egan:** Thank you.

**Mr Kingston:** I thank the Ministers for their answers so far. The Executive Office oversees many significant issues, including the difficult issue of historical institutional abuse and clerical abuse. I am sure that you will agree that it is important for victims to have confidence in all the processes and in everyone overseeing them. Too often, in the past, people have not spoken up when they have had concerns. I am sure that you will agree that concerns about an alleged abuser should not just disappear when they have been moved to another parish, either literally or metaphorically. Therefore, I feel it is relevant to ask the First Minister about this. You were present at the event in this Building on 14 February 2023, which was also attended by the British Heart Foundation (BHF) and was focused on the medical needs of a child. Were you aware at that time that Michael McGonagle was also present? Did you not feel that it would have been appropriate for you, or someone else in Sinn Féin, to have informed the British Heart Foundation that Mr McGonagle had been suspended from his employment with your party due to serious allegations prior to taking up his post with BHF?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I will say two things. First, I am absolutely aghast and horrified that two former employees decided to give a reference to that individual. It would not have happened had they come and asked for permission. They would not have been given permission. So I do not agree. It was wrong, absolutely wrong, and it should not have happened. Secondly, I will make a more general point. No, I did not know anything about Michael McGonagle's whereabouts or employment. I attended an event in this Building, as many members would have, because of the support for the campaign. I engaged with the family on that day, not with anybody who may have been with the British Heart Foundation. It is important to clarify that point.

Outside of that, we are here today as TEO, but I wanted to give a factual account of my view. Absolutely, this is not behaviour that is acceptable to me. That is why, as soon as I became aware of it, we took immediate action, and the two people are no longer employed by Sinn Féin.

**Mr Kingston:** Again, the point is that, given that members of Sinn Féin were aware of the allegations about Michael McGonagle, which he has since confessed to —.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** It is McGonagle. You are saying someone else's name.

**Mr Kingston:** McGonagle. Does the First Minister stand over the comments by the Economy Minister yesterday on this issue that there was no moral or public responsibility on Sinn Féin to have acted differently, when they were aware of his presence and being employed by a charity?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I will say this. Remember, at the end of all this, what Michael McGonagle has done is wrong. He has now admitted that and should be dealt with by the full force of the law. Let us make that point very clear. Aligned with that, I am confident that I took all the correct actions on what I needed to do around disciplinary actions within my party. He left our employment, and rightly so.

On your question about the British Heart Foundation, I am very confident that whenever we were aware that there was a criminal investigation under way, that then became an issue for the police and justice system to deal with, and I was confident that that was the case. There are lessons to be learned for a lot of people here around the due diligence of an employer who takes on an employee. Everybody needs to learn those lessons, but, with regard to my actions in the employment of the individuals and the references that were given, they would not have been OK'd by me. I never would have OK'd those references and, had I been asked, I would have said so. That is why the two people are no longer employed.

**Mr Kingston:** I think the questions around what could have been passed on —.

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** Sorry, can we move on?

**Mr Kingston:** Can I raise two other matters?

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** I am happy for you to move on to another question, but I think the First Minister has —.

**Mrs Little-Pengelly:** May I just come in on that? Issues around the safeguarding of children are very relevant right across government.

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** I am not disputing that.

**Mrs Little-Pengelly:** In terms of the work of the Department, I want to assure you that the safeguarding of children is at the heart of many of those inquiries.

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** I totally agree.

**Mrs Little-Pengelly:** It is also important to say that many of the key messages coming across are around that duty of candour, communication and making sure that people are aware. Those are the key things that have come out of inquiries, and that we need to move forward to make sure that children and vulnerable people are protected. In a sense, if we have overseen a lot of those inquiries, that overseeing will only matter if the lessons are learned and we are moving it forward in a situation and atmosphere that is open, has candour and where people know what they need to know when they need to know it.

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** OK. Thank you.

Go ahead with your next question, thank you.

**Mr Kingston:** Thank you, Chair. I want to refer to one of the priorities in the Programme of Government, which is the reform and transformation of public services. Will the Ministers say more about the work of the transformation board and delivery unit? Many people will point to the need for greater efficiency and savings within government in Northern Ireland and to the number of public bodies and multiple boards that we have over some sectors. How can we ensure that, where there is a bringing together of bodies, that will result in real savings to the public purse?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Well, that is what it is designed to do. It is important that we do not just look at the transformation unit in a singular way, because it is part of a wider policy approach and part of creating that culture where we are innovative and have agility, which is not traditionally how things have always been. The opportunity that we have for a wider reform package, including what the division might look like, is quite significant. We also know that they need to run alongside other areas. For us to have an efficient board, we need sufficient funding, which is the number-one priority of the Executive, and we continue to make that case.

We also need to have the interim transformation board and the work that it is doing. We have now employed a new chief science and technology adviser. We have an economy policy unit, Fiscal Council [*Inaudible*]. A whole range of things need to align for us to do things more efficiently but, certainly, we think that there are opportunities to transform the way that we have always done things to get better outcomes because, ultimately, that is what we are trying to achieve.



**Mrs Little-Pengelly:** This is a big piece of work. It is one of the nine priorities, but it will be really important to all the priorities because we have to improve the way that we do business. We are very aware that, at times, there are inefficiencies. There are things that we could absolutely do better around policy development and also the implementation and delivery. We have only to look at the capital programme, for example, and the frustrations at times around big capital project roll-out. The longer it takes, the more money it costs. Delays cost more money. That money could be spent elsewhere on more ambitious capital programmes. There are really good reasons why, of course, we want to do things on time and on budget. We fail to do that time and time again.

From the beginning, we have very much been about learning from other jurisdictions around a delivery unit and transformation approach. It is about getting in and looking at your processes and how to do those better. It is also about identifying new ways of doing things, new ideas and new interventions that are designed and focused on making measurable progress against the targets that are set.

It could be a real game changer for government. We propose a delivery unit, which will sit in the centre and, as Michelle outlined. Alongside a whole range of other bodies, including the transformation board, and the work on the investment strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI), it will look at past challenges and issues. That all comes together in a really ambitious programme of transformation and delivery. At the heart of it, it has to be about delivery, delivery, delivery for the Executive, despite the difficult Budget. We want to deliver, and people out there demand that we deliver, not just from the centre but across government, on the issues that really matter to them.

**Mr Kingston:** One of the nine priorities in the draft Programme for Government is to:

*"Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing".*

As all members and the Ministers will be aware, getting approval for NI Water connections is an issue that keeps coming up in planning applications. It is not just a matter for the Department for Infrastructure; it is very much a cross-departmental issue. What priority are the whole Executive giving to ensuring that there is the necessary investment to enable new developments to proceed?

**Mrs O'Neill:** We need proper financial resource in order to invest in building homes and in our waste water infrastructure. The announcement, earlier this year, from the Communities Minister that he will build only 400 homes next year was just not going to cut it. That was not acceptable, and it will not meet need. We also have a wider target, which we brought in previously, of building 2,500 houses every year. We need to reach for that target and beyond. We are committed to trying to find additional funding to build more social and affordable housing.

You are right: alongside that, investment in our waste water infrastructure is a must or we will not build anything in the next five to 10 years, because it is in such a dire state because of decades of austerity and underinvestment in our infrastructure. That picture must be turned around. We are determined to try to work with all Ministers. More widely than that, we need the Treasury to assist. If we are to be successful in transformation and in doing things like building homes and investing in our infrastructure, we need a financial model that allows us to do so.

**Mrs Little-Pengelly:** That is all being considered as part of the ISNI, which will go up to 2050. That is at the final stage. It is being considered by Ministers. It will deal with all the big capital issues, but we are also very aware, as Michelle outlined, of the budget constraints. The key things that feature in the strategy include affordable and social housing. For example, the Communities Minister could announce only 400 homes because that is the capital settlement that he had. We need to increase that, so we need to give him the funding to do that. Water and sewage fall under John O'Dowd's Department, but he can only do what he can on that if he gets the capital budget to do that. We know there will be a shortfall, but we have identified as big priorities: water and sewage infrastructure, social and affordable housing, investment in our public transport system and, of course, our education estate. We have seen the impact of not having the capital for the facilities that people need on, for example, special educational needs provision.

We have therefore identified those four big areas on the capital side. They will feature heavily in the investment strategy, but we also identified where the shortfall is. We have committed to looking at how to meet that shortfall both by making the case for Northern Ireland to the Treasury and by looking at ourselves and alternative forms of funding to make sure that we do what we can to fulfil the potential of the capital programme, which will be outlined in that strategy.

**Mr Harvey:** First Minister, deputy First Minister and junior Ministers, you are very welcome to Committee, as are your staff. Now that we have the draft Programme for Government and given the limited time of two and a half years left to run in this mandate, what are your priorities, and what will success look like?

**Mrs O'Neill:** You are right that it is a shortened mandate. It makes the Programme for Government unique, because we can deliver it over two and a half years, but we will also keep refreshing and adding to it. For me, success looks like hitting and making advances in the areas that we have set out. I am glad, because we are already delivering some of the things that we identified in the Programme for Government, such as the ending violence against women and girls strategy, the work on Lough Neagh and the first ever environmental improvement plan, which we signed off last week.

When I reflect on the first eight months of the Executive, I think that we have made a decent start to the delivery of what we brought forward. However, we have an awful lot more to do. We know that. We have just talked about some of those things, including the major infrastructure investment that is required. The Executive's collective work on the Programme for Government demonstrates that there is a willingness that I, maybe, have not witnessed before for people to work together to deliver on key areas such as special educational needs, which, we know, is so challenging alongside all the other public services, the health service and everything else that we have set out.

**Mrs Little-Pengelly:** Absolutely. From the outset, our discussions with Executive colleagues have shown that we can agree on so much that needs to be moved forward. The big challenges that we face throughout Northern Ireland are common across all communities. Our duty is to have a strong focus on delivery, whether on health, education, affordable and social housing or growing our economy. There is a lot of commonality in those areas. We will work best when we focus on those things, because — you are right — there are only two year and a half years left. Frankly, if we spend the entirety of those two and a half years focusing on the nine priorities, we will still not get done what we want to get done. There is plenty of work to get on with.

Obviously, the Budget constraint will be the biggest risk to delivery, but we are absolutely committed to making progress against all nine priorities. How much progress we make will be partly dependent on how we work with the system to drive the programme forward and the Budget that we receive. Unfortunately, we are unlikely to get a multi-year Budget in the autumn or for next year. That will hinder our ability to plan, but it will not stop us making the preparations to grow and scale up. The critical thing is to start what we can start and roll out what we can roll out.

As I said, the absolute focus for us is on delivery. If we are not delivering against the priorities, why are we here? We are here only to make a positive difference, and that is how we have tried to prioritise, difficult as it is. There are so many really worthy issues that we want to focus our time on, but we are conscious that there is only so much bandwidth. Let us focus on a small number of priorities, start the progress and make a tangible difference. That is what we will be working on in the next two and a half years.

**Mr Harvey:** I welcome the progress made, but there is still more to do. I think of working families and childcare. What else can the Executive do in that way?

**Mrs Little-Pengelly:** On childcare, I am really pleased that we were able to make the initial announcement about the interim package. We are conscious that that will not solve the issue of affordable childcare. It will help, and families appreciate that. There are now over 11,000 recipients of the subsidy support. It is really good that that is making a tangible difference right now, while the policy development is ongoing against the childcare strategy.

On the big things, the key is to get the substantive strategy right. As the Budget improves, hopefully, we will be in a position to scale up even the interim interventions over the next number of years in order to be in the best possible position to roll out an ambitious set of actions in the finalised strategies. Many of those are the same. You are right about housing, for example. The Communities Minister can do more right now if he has the additional money. Our job is to secure the additional capital money for him, but he could also do more, above and beyond that, through preparation, development and working with NI Water on sewerage. Those will remain barriers to an even more ambitious agenda. We need to get those things right in parallel, not sequentially, to drive forward against all the priorities.

We are conscious that there is work to do now that is not just about delivering on the ground. It is about the preparation, the work and the development, but that needs to happen in parallel with the actions that people want to see.

**Mr Harvey:** Have I time for one on a different topic?

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** I will maybe bring you back in, but I am conscious that four more members wish to ask questions.

**Mr Harvey:** That is fine. No problem. Thank you.

**Ms Sugden:** Thank you, Ministers. You will not be surprised to hear that I remain disappointed that there is no priority in relation to older people in the Programme for Government. I, maybe more than others, think that that issue is pertinent, although I know that others will fight their corner. We are an ageing population, however, and our public services will look very different on account of the demographic rapidly changing over the next 10 years. It is a failure to prepare if we do not include that in some form, even if it is just to set out the actions that we need to take on that in the next mandate. I appreciate you both attending the recent event in the Long Gallery in relation to that and listening to people's views.

I am mindful that it is currently a draft Programme for Government. Is there any hope of older people being included in it, notwithstanding the fact that the UK Government has made disastrous decisions in relation to older people? We need to give value back to what is probably the most significant part of our population, and, if we leave that out of the Programme for Government, we are not doing that. I would like to hear your thoughts on that.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Thanks for that. We know that you are particularly interested in that area, and we were grateful to take the opportunity to attend the event in the Long Gallery. You can be assured that those present made sure that their views were known to the deputy First Minister and me, and it is right that they did that.

That is what the consultation is about. We have to reflect the fact that we have an ageing demographic in some way. Our society and our Programmes for Government need to reflect that. We will definitely take that on board in shaping the final document. I do not yet know what that final document will look like. We will consider everything in the round, but you have raised a fair and legitimate point and one that we will certainly look on favourably, albeit we will have to talk about that collectively in the Executive. I know that you are also keen to introduce some legislation on that, which will also be significant. You asked to engage with us on that legislation, and we are certainly up for having that conversation.

**Mrs Little-Pengelly:** As you know, it is always difficult to make choices for what to include in a draft Programme for Government. The calculation is very much around whether to include separate priorities not just for older people but for young people and people with disabilities. There are many key groups, and we are conscious that we need to deliver for everyone. Each of those groups has particular issues. We are conscious of that fact, but we made a decision to go with nine all-encompassing priorities. It is important that those priorities mainstream all the considerations for those groups. If we talk about social and affordable housing, for example, we need to take into account the needs of older people. At times, those needs will be different from the needs of younger people or those of young families, as we know from the structures for accessibility and need. That is common across most of the priorities in the draft Programme for Government. It is relevant even in the case of the priority on childcare. We know that a lot of grandparents end up providing free childcare for their grandchildren because childcare is simply unaffordable. They help out by taking on a huge number of caring roles that they might not have anticipated doing.

Maybe we need to communicate that message better to make sure that people — young people, people with disabilities, older people, rural people and urban people — know that all those things will need to be mainstreamed within the key priorities. If we need to more clearly reference that, we absolutely will. It is only a draft Programme for Government, and I have no doubt that we will hear about that very strongly. However, we want to send a clear message that all the priorities will be nuanced by reflecting on and making sure that we fully consider the needs of all those groups: the needs of the section 75 groups that are often referred to, but also those of everyone across society.

**Ms Sugden:** I take that point. We cannot satisfy everyone, particularly in a reduced mandate. However, I think it was the Chief Medical Officer of England and Wales, Chris Whitty, who said that you need to design your services around the demographic. The draft Programme for Government does not do that. The business of government is to provide good public services, and, if we are not mindful of his advice, particularly when considering health and social care, we will have a big problem in 10 years' time. We are already seeing the consequences of that, because we failed to forward plan.

I will ask you to reflect on another thing about the Programme for Government. I hear a lot of Ministers say that we do not need a Programme for Government in order to get on with the job of delivering. That is fine, but the Programme for Government is not only for Ministers and the Government; it is for the sectors and statutory agencies, which align their priorities to the Programme for Government. I therefore ask you to reflect on some Members saying that the Programme for Government is just for us and that we will get on with delivering in other ways. I know that statutory agencies are disappointed about that type of language, because that leaves them with the question of what they should do, and we cannot exist without them.

Do I have time for another question?

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** Do you want them to reflect on that?

**Ms Sugden:** Yes, if they want to do that now. Otherwise they can come back to me on that.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I would not use the language that you talked about, so I agree with you. There are aspects of normal departmental business that would carry on regardless of whether there is a Programme for Government, but that is a different statement than saying, "The Programme for Government is just something that we do, but we are already doing this". I agree with you that a Programme for Government has to mean something. It cannot sit on the shelf: it has to be a live document that sets out the things that we will work on collectively. I take your point.

**Ms Sugden:** OK. Thank you.

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** Do you want to ask another quick question? I am conscious that I did not give Brian a third one.

**Ms Sugden:** If you could come back —.

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** I will come back to you at the end.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Welcome to the Committee. It is good to see you. There will not be a multi-year Budget this year or possibly next year, but there may be one in the year that this mandate dissolves. Has any thought been given to running the Programme for Government across mandates? There is a lot of good stuff in it. People are concerned about things not being in it that they would like to see included, but that is what the consultation is about. It certainly needs to be the basis of not just this mandate but others. I congratulate you. It took well over a decade for a Programme for Government to be agreed. That is my first question. I am curious about it.

My second question is about challenging what has been, frankly, a summer of hate in Belfast: a build-up of murals and posters; then, regrettably, the destruction of people's homes, businesses and property; intimidation of health and social care staff out of their homes; and children with disabilities and their families were not able to access their homes because of sectarianism. We have the awful, ongoing issues in east Belfast of Gaelic games not being able to be played because of threats and children being intimidated and unable to go to school and be taught through the medium of Irish. I am sure that the officials who are to give evidence after you will talk about all the work that they are doing — that is fine — and we have the police coming in after that, but what can we do collectively, as an Assembly and an Executive, to challenge this ongoing hate?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I will start with your first point. The Programme for Government is in draft. We will get to the final version. Everybody recognises that this is a short mandate. We have to keep refreshing and updating, because we should get to the point where we have delivered some of the actions and have to refresh. There should be continuity in a new mandate. There are things that we know that we will not complete in this mandate, so there is a natural follow-through. The point about Budgets is important because, as we know, for far too long, we have been limping from year to year with year-on-

year Budgets. That is no way for anybody or any public service to plan. It is difficult for anybody to do that, even on a personal level. We are unclear about where the Treasury will go, but early indications are that it will be two years before we are in a multi-year cycle. By the end of this mandate, we should at least be in a situation where we have a multi-year Budget, and we should be able to align, for example, public-sector pay with that instead of public-sector workers waiting year-on-year for confirmation of where things stand. There are huge opportunities for us if we can get to that juncture.

In the summer, we saw horrific scenes of intimidation on our streets. That is not in any of our names: none of us wants to see that. We are an increasingly diverse society, and that is a very healthy thing that we should celebrate. Political leaders, in particular, should be waxing lyrical about it: that is the kind of society that we want to build. Where we see things that are wrong, we need to call them out. That goes for the scourge of racism, and it is the same for sectarianism when it comes to young people learning Irish and playing Gaelic. That is not acceptable: so many children are being educated through the medium of Irish, and they need to see that in their community. You referenced that in east Belfast in particular: it is totally unacceptable. The Irish language sector is thriving. Parents want to make choices about where their children are educated. We should encourage and support that and call out those who are involved in basic criminality and intimidation of people who are trying to advance good provision for people who want to take it up through the medium of Irish.

**Mrs Little-Pengelly:** I will add to what Michelle said on the Budget. A lot of people do not realise that, to some extent, we are dictated to by what Treasury does in relation to a single-year or multi-year Budget. If there is no multi-year Budget in Treasury, we cannot do a multi-year Budget.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Absolutely.

**Mrs Little-Pengelly:** That can be a frustration at times. There are planning assumptions that we can make, and we will do that, but, of course, we will not make very optimistic assumptions and then end up not being able to do what we want to do or what we planned for. There are assumptions. The cycle that we have is unfortunate. At the same time, there are, as I said at the beginning, things that we can do and plan for as we look forward. We cannot tie the hands of a new mandate. It would be wrong to do that. However, based on the feedback that we have so far, the nine priorities are very much in the space of where people's priorities are. They were put together by listening to people's concerns and what matters to them. We feel very confident that those nine priorities represent a lot of the concerns out there. It is not the totality — absolutely not. It is about prioritisation, and those are the key priorities that emerged. I would be surprised if a new Executive, in the next mandate in two and a half years' time, did not want to take forward that work and integrate it in a Programme for Government, but we cannot presume that at this point.

On the wider issue, hate is absolutely wrong, whether it is based on race or sectarianism. We should always remember that it is a very small minority of people who participate in that. I know that the vast majority of people across all communities throughout Northern Ireland stand united against hate, racism and sectarianism and, indeed, the violence or disorder that might flow from that. We have put this into perspective, but it is a big challenge that we need to tackle. We took the decision in the summer to show strong and united leadership across the Executive in order to send a very strong message. I have said this before, and I will say it again: we will always be there to listen to people's genuine concerns and issues — that is the role of politicians and government — but those are never an excuse or a justification for any hate, sectarianism, violence or disorder. As political leaders, we need to be clear about the clear difference in all this and to show leadership on the way forward. That is not the type of society that Northern Ireland wants to be. I know that, across all communities, it is neither condoned nor desired.

We are not complacent. We are very aware that there are things that we need to do: working with and showing support for the PSNI and, going back to the very first question, working with the programmes that we have. This is what Together: Building a United Community is all about and what those interventions are all about: bringing people together, tackling myths, tackling prejudice and creating friendships and robust relationships across, between and in communities, no matter where they are. That is what we will do in our review of T:BUC. We will integrate the race actions and race relations issues more closely into that, as well as, as I mentioned, rolling forward some of the FICT review points. There is an opportunity to get this right and to build on the good work. I have no doubt that you are about to hear from the officials behind me that that has been happening. However, there is more to do to be done, and it is up to us to push that forward.

**Ms Sheerin:** Thanks to you all. It is lovely to have you here. I want to ask about the ending violence against women and girls strategy as well. I appreciate the detail that you have already given. I was delighted to see the strategy's publication last week and the progress that has been made. Even the visual of the four of you, as Ministers, goes some way towards challenging the norms and attitudes that, we know, ultimately, end up in femicide and violence against women. I would like to hear some detail from you on the real-life implications for people who have already suffered gender-based violence and for the next generation of women and girls who, I hope, will not experience what we have all experienced.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Sadly, we cannot change anybody's experience, particularly women and girls who have experienced violence. What we can do, however, is do what we are doing, which is to try to build a whole-society approach that says no to misogyny, no to everyday sexism and no to all the challenging attitudes and cultures that lead to violence against women and girls.

I am really proud of the piece of work that we have done. As I said, I am so proud of the way in which it was brought about. People who are on the front line delivering services were part and parcel of the delivery. I wish that we could flick a switch to make it stop, but that is not the reality. The reality is that it will take time. The interventions that have been set out, particularly for the first two years, and the action plan are deliberately targeted at areas that, we think, we can reach quickly. It is about consistency of messaging. What is violence against women and girls? What does it look like? It is about ensuring that every child growing up today understands what that looks like. I do not want to say that it will take a generation to change things, but there is more education now than ever before, and the work that we are doing now with the strategy will enhance that and make sure that our young people are equipped with the tools to be able to see this, see it around them and support one another. There is also the wider society piece: this is not down to women to fix, nor is it down to policing. This is a whole-society approach, and it is about prevention, which goes to the heart of what we are trying to achieve: creating a society that is free from violence against women and girls. That is why the whole focus of the strategy is around the prevention piece.

**Mrs Little-Pengelly:** At the heart of this is attitudinal change. We know from a public policy perspective that attitudinal change is one of the toughest things to try to bring about. I am sure that that is as true for any Department as it is from an Executive Office perspective. However, one of the remarkable things since we launched the strategy is the number of women who have come forward and shared their very personal stories with me. I am sure that is the same for Michelle and the junior Ministers. Women felt empowered to tell their experiences, and they wanted us to understand the difficulties that they have faced in a real, practical way. Very often, those difficulties can cover everything: trying to leave, getting the funding support to get new accommodation and navigating through a court system — everything from the property that is in a house to domestic violence issues or criminal charges that have been brought. There are so many different elements. I have been really surprised when listening to those women's stories. They face not just one or two things but a whole range of practical challenges.

The message that those women send to us is that they really think that this strategy is a good piece of work. It is so necessary, and they want it to happen. A lot of this is at the attitudinal and the big policy level, but there are also real, practical things that need to be done to support women in that situation that they are not finding it easy to do.

I will bring Pam in, just very briefly. Pam has been engaging a lot with Women's Aid and other organisations on that practical side of it. We need to do more on that, as well as working with Health and Communities to support women in the community who face this today.

**Mrs Cameron (Junior Minister, The Executive Office):** Thanks, Minister, and thank you Chair. It is good to see you all and good to be here in these lovely refurbished Committee rooms. It is not like the bad old days on the Health Committee, Paula.

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** That is right.

**Mrs Cameron:** We worked very well together in the past, collaboratively, and with Carál in particular on the Autism Bill. It is good to see. I have to get a wee plug in: it is good to see the reviewer role finally rolled out. The reviewer has hit the ground running and done some superb work so far. It is good to see that and good to be here today.

We are talking about the EVAWG strategy. Everywhere we go, I tell everybody that I liken Aisling and me to the Spice Girls, and I say that she is Sporty Spice and I, because I have been here for so long, am Old Spice. In 2011, I made my maiden speech, which was around domestic violence. Back then, you were not even talking about domestic and sexual: you were talking only about domestic violence. I remember that it was a superb opportunity to raise awareness of the issue, because we were so far behind. Despite the funding difficulties, looking at where we are now, awareness is through the roof. There have been horrific murders and incidents, and they continue, which is wrong and needs to be addressed, but the awareness, I think, is at an all-time high, which is wonderful in itself. What the First Minister and deputy First Minister were saying is right: this is attitudinal and requires societal change, and, going forward, we all own responsibility for it.

This issue also touches on Claire's point on age. It covers all age ranges. I remember that one of the first stories that I was told — it was not a story; it was the first experience that I was ever told about — was about a lady in a nursing home. She was in her 80s and living in a joint room with her husband. This lady had dementia, but her husband did not. She was turning up with bruises and injuries, and nobody could understand how that could be the case in the nursing home. When the GP was brought in, they were able to say that, yes, there is a 60-year history of domestic violence in this family. The family and the home — everybody — knew about it. The really sad thing is that the lady was moved out of the room to give her husband peace so that he could sleep at night, but he was raping and beating her at night in that home.

We have come from afar, but these issues spread across all age ranges, and it is incumbent on us all, as a society, to take charge of it and, as families, to recognise, see and speak out and say what is wrong. That is why it is so important to have men also speaking out and saying, "No, that is not right, and you should not say things like that". It is important. Sometimes we can think that it is a little trivial to refer to how people speak to each other and how we refer to each other, but it means something. That is all educational, and there is so much work to go forward with.

I am very excited about where we are with the whole EVAWG process. The organisations that we have been able to visit and work with and that we will continue to visit and work with are incredible. The co-design process has been fantastic, and we have seen a wonderful outcome from that. I wish that we had all the money in the world to do much more, much more quickly. However, we are making good headway and will continue to do so.

**Ms Sheerin:** Thanks for that, Pam. My next question is around the junior Ministers, the role that you have played since coming into office and what sort of work you have been doing. I do not know whether you, Pam, or junior Minister Reilly wants to answer that.

**Ms Reilly:** I can start and try to fit as much from eight months as I can into about a minute. I echo what Pam said: this is my first time in front of the Committee so thank you all very much.

Since taking office in February, junior Minister Cameron and I have been out and about as much as we can. For us, it is important that not only the First Minister and deputy First Minister are represented through us as much as possible but that the Executive Office is represented in everything that it does. That is important. I said earlier that we are out, we are listening and we are accessible. Often, people think that things happen on the hill but that nobody can get speaking to Ministers and elected representatives. That is not the case: we are accessible, and we want to be out and about and engaging and listening as much as we possibly can.

I could touch on a lot of things that we have done, but I will mention a couple of people. We visited the Schools of Sanctuary, Women's Aid, as Pam spoke about, and were fortunate to go out to the office in Brussels. We were able to engage with the officials out there and the work that they are doing. We were also at the Somme commemorations — it is important that we reflect our shared history — and all four of us went to a women's football game at Windsor, which was reciprocated when they came to my home club of St Paul's.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I noticed that, Aisling. You are very parochial. *[Laughter.]*

**Ms Reilly:** I do not need to rehash my love — my grá — for sport and how it brings people together and enhances lives. I have been to Trade NI business events in Dublin and London. I delivered the Executive's message that we are open for business, trade and investment and that we want people to come here, live here, work here and be proud of the North. We have been to North/South Ministerial Council meetings and the British-Irish Council — you name it, we have been there; we have done it

all. It has been a hectic eight months, but I am enjoying it, and I hope that you can see that we are enjoying it. I also hope that the public can see that, because it is about us representing the people who elected us to here. That is important for us.

**Mrs Cameron:** It has been a fantastic privilege for me to have this role. You feel it on the ground when you go to see people. The appreciation and love that you receive for your time and attention to them are incredible: it is a wonderful feeling. You get that as an MLA when you are helping people and listening to them. Sometimes, that can be the most valuable thing — listening and letting people tell you what they need and want to tell you. It is good. I will not repeat what Aisling said, but the role is incredibly busy. There are lots of events, speaking engagements, engaging with stakeholders and lobbyists and feeding that back into the system.

I will give you an example of one meeting that we had. Apologies, but I was out for a few weeks looking after my husband, who has not been well. Before I went off, we met people from Auditory Verbal UK, which is an incredible group. I was able to meet them again, along with the Children's Commissioner, the other day, after I came back. It was wonderful to hear the experiences of children who have had specific and different training that is not commonplace — it is only through word of mouth that people have found out about it. It is training for children from birth to five years old. That training, along with their cochlear implants, is enabling those children to speak as you and I speak. You would not know that they are profoundly deaf, but they are. It is incredible enablement, which is promoting independence and giving them the fullest of lives. When I hear about such experiences, I am able to take them back and write to the Health Minister to ask, "What are you doing about this? That is a really important thing that you should be looking at. It is truly transformative and the ideal type of thing that we should be looking to invest in". The savings that that could bring about in the system are incredible. There was one young girl there called Katie. She had —.

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** I am sorry, Pam. I do not mean to move you on. It sounds brilliant, but we have one more member to get to.

**Mrs Cameron:** Yes. Apologies. I was just going to say that that little girl, a 15-year-old, was completely independent and would not take extra time in an exam even though she was profoundly deaf. That is how empowering that is. There is much good work going on.

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** Wonderful.

**Mrs Cameron:** Much too much to tell you about today *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Gaston:** We have already talked about the article in today's 'The Irish News' — or touched upon it, I should say — that highlights the fact that, in February 2023, First Minister, you were at an event in Stormont where Michael McMonagle was present.

**Ms Reilly:** McMonagle.

**Mr Gaston:** McMonagle was present. It also points out that, later the same month, Michael McMonagle met Paul Maskey MP in Westminster, so we know that what Mr Murphy said last night was not true. First Minister, you have said that you did not see him at the event. Going by the photographs published today, I have to ask whether junior Minister Reilly can say the same. Can you detail what your interaction was with Michael McMonagle on that day?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I will take the question. I think that I have already dealt with that matter, Chair, to be fair.

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** I think that you have, too, yes.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I was horrified that anybody would give a reference in that scenario. Had they asked for my permission, it would not have happened. Earlier, I set out the rest of it clearly. If there are any questions that relate to the Executive Office, I am very happy to take them.

**Mr Gaston:** Just before we go off that topic, have you checked whether the references provided were on Sinn Féin headed paper?



**Mrs O'Neill:** I have confirmed clearly that I did not give any OK to any references being given. I would not have seen them, given that I did not even know that they existed until the matter came to my attention last week.

**Mr Gaston:** Did you ask for a copy of them?

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** OK, sorry. You said that you had only one question. Move on, please. Thank you.

**Mr Gaston:** Máiría Cahill has cited your handling of the Michael McMonagle case as a reason why women have no faith in your ability to lead the ending violence against women and girls strategy. Last week, during Question Time, I reminded you of what you said on Radio Ulster about the Máiría Cahill case. You said:

*"It's not for me to say that I believe her." — [Official Report (Hansard), 23 September 2024, p23, col 1].*

I will give you the opportunity once again, First Minister: do you believe Máiría now?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Of course, I do. I would be really interested in this conversation if you actually cared about the feelings of any woman out there. I am absolutely committed to leading on our strategy to end violence against women and girls. It is absolutely what is required in our society. We need to move to that preventative approach. We have launched an excellent strategy that has the support of so many groups out there that are actually on the ground doing that work. I am determined to lead that work, as I have done to this point. I will continue to do so.

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** OK. I will draw a line there.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Thank you.

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** Many members had the opportunity to ask only two questions. You got three, Timothy, so —.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** None of them related to TEO.

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** Yes.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** They need to be related to the Department. That is how it works.

**The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw):** Thank you.

Thank you, Ministers, for coming. We hope that you will be back in front of us in the next few months to give us more updates on your work. We appreciate what you have given us for now. Thank you.

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[Other comments:]

NOVEMBER 2024

JM - DEPTH - 23 MINS

**Okay, so I'm Melissa McCullough, the Northern Ireland commissioner for standards, the date is 4<sup>th</sup> November 2024 and the time is 10 am. I'm interviewing Mr Michael McMonagle. Are you happy to be referred to as Mr McMonagle or do you prefer Michael for this interview?**

R2: Michael's fine.

**Okay Michael, thanks. Also present is [REDACTED], he's the legal representative on behalf of Mr McMonagle. I just want to remind you that [REDACTED] is not permitted to answer any questions on your behalf, he's here only as an observer. If you need to consult with him on anything, I can pause the interview and allow for that. Also, to remind you that this is a confidential interview and nothing spoken about or any evidence obtained during this interview should be discussed with anyone or used for any purpose outside these proceedings. Additionally, this transcript may be appended to the investigation report which I'm duty-bound to place before the relevant Assembly committee if I rely on it to reach any recommendations or conclusions. I was going to now ask you to formally take an oath, which in this case is due to the virtual platform for today's interview will be an affirmation. Is that okay?**

Yes.

**Right, I'm going to share this screen for you so you can see it and if you could just speak it out loud. There you go, can you see that okay?**

I do. I do solemnly, sincerely and truly declare and affirm that the evidence I shall give shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

**Right, thanks so much. Okay, so... Hold on one second. If for any reason...**

**I2: Just to confirm, my name is John Devitt, and I am also part of the process, just for the record.**

**Oh yes, thank you, John. I want to say if this technology should fail us, we'll just wait for each other to click back on the link and get back on again if that should occur. I want to formally acknowledge and thank you for your prompt response and agreement to attend this interview which has been arranged via your legal representative. I also wish to clarify that your status during this interview is that of a witness only. It is specific and only in relation to the events which I'm investigating which are relating to conduct. The main topics I want to discuss for the purposes of my investigation today include details regarding your suspension from Sinn Fein. The recruitment process when you were appointed to the British Heart Foundation as well as an attendance at a BHF event at Stormont in February 2023. Before I begin with my questions, do you have any questions, Michael?**

No, not at this stage.

**Okay, can I just ask you Michael in your own words, can you just explain to me the sequence of events following your arrest on 19<sup>th</sup> August 2021 and the interaction you had then with your employer Sinn Fein which resulted in your suspension?**

I would have received an email the following day from the office of the national chairperson informing me of my suspension.

**On what date did your formal employment contract end with Sinn Fein?**

Oh, I don't recall the exact date the informal contract ended. It would have been after the subsequent Assembly election when there was a review of staffing. Was that June or July?

**I think I read June, but that's why I don't know for sure. Was that, did your contract come to a natural end at that stage, is that what happened, or...?**

After, following the Assembly election there was a review of staffing structures and at that stage, it came to an end then, yes.

**In that interim period, which I think I count around nine months from your suspension to the end of your contract, is that correct?**

I think so, that would be right, yes.

**What was your interaction with Sinn Fein at that stage, during that nine months?**

Very limited. I think there may have been... I received communication that after the election that there would be a restructuring, that they were examining the staff structures and there could be restructuring and that could lead to my appointment coming to an end. Then notice of that, following that, that would have been the extent of the contact.

**Okay, so just moving on again, in your own words, can you explain to me how you came to be employed with the British Heart Foundation? This, just to be clear, I need to fully understand the relevant timeframes, so the application process, the interview process, the request for references, the giving over of references and just how that was managed if you don't mind?**

Well, the vacancy was advertised, I saw the advertisement and applied for it. I was called to the interview, I did the interview in a virtual manner, much the same as this. I was offered the position, much in the standard way of recruitment.

**I suppose then just moving on to these to press... The references themselves, Michael. First, of all, the title of your role that you were hired to at BHF, was that communications manager?**

Communications and engagement manager.

**Now, the press officers I believe are Sean Mag Uidhir and Caolan McGinley who provided references on your behalf, is that correct?**

Yes.

**Okay, can you just tell me about the specifics of when and how you asked Mr Mag Uidhir and Mr McGinley to provide you with references for that role? Was it that they listed on the application for example?**

I cannot recall just if they were listed on the application. I think I emailed Sean Mag Uidhir and asked if he could provide a reference, and I think I sent a text to Caolan McGinley. That was the extent of the contact with them.

**Was that after they hired you or was that during the process of them hiring you did they require those references?**

I think it was at the stage where I had been offered the position and accepted it, I think they call it onboarding.

**Okay, yes. Then, at that stage, they've offered you the job, you ask your two colleagues, the two Sinn Fein press officers, and you say Mag Uidhir, is that how you say that?**

Yes.

**Those two provide this to the BHF, is that your understanding?**

Yes.

**When they provided that, did they actually do it from a Sinn Fein address do you know, or was it personal, from their own personal addresses?**

I wouldn't have any way of knowing that.

**Okay, do you have a copy of those references by chance or no?**

I don't, no.

**You don't know if they were on Sinn Fein letterheads, I'm just looking at my list of questions. Are you aware of who knew about these references provided by both press officers, are you aware who might have known that they were providing them within Sinn Fein?**

No, my involvement was asking for them.

**Do you have any idea what role or knowledge or involvement the senior HR manager at Sinn Fein had in connection with the references?**

No, only what's been since put in the public domain. No, I don't have any information on that.

**Do you know the name of that HR manager?**

I don't, I think it was someone, from what I see in the media, someone new in the post. It could have been new in post since I wouldn't have had any contact with them, so I don't.

**Just to bring you into some of the media stuff, but on 25<sup>th</sup> September, Sinn Fein publicly stated that they only became aware of your references following a media enquiry to them. What is your recollection of that statement of fact?**

My recollection is seeing the statement in the public domain.

**On 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2024, First Minister Michelle O'Neill said she was aghast and horrified after being informed about the references and she had stated that you had not been on her radar at all following your suspension. What would be your response to that statement made by her?**

That was her statement, and she made that publicly, I saw that publicly, yes.

**Do you have any information that would stand in difference to that? Had you any...?**

No, I wouldn't have been on Michelle's radar, well, I don't know what was on her radar, but I certainly didn't have any contact with her.

**I suppose moving on to the events at Stormont at the BHF event in February 2023. That was, you attended in your capacity as Communications and Engagement Manager for the BHF. How did that visit evolve and did you have any role in making the necessary arrangements for that visit?**

Well, it was not a BHF event, it was a scheduled sitting of the Assembly to effect a recall and to discuss the soft opt-out organ donation bill. The BHF attended as anyone would be entitled to, it wasn't a BHF event. In terms of the organisation of it, no, it would have been another, I think it was the policy coordinator would have been the person who would have liaised with the elected officials on behalf of the BHF, she would have organised the details of that. I, my role would have been just to alert the media that it was taking place.

**As far as you can recall, can you tell me the individuals you engaged with at that visit?**

Well, my primary focus on that was to publicise the BHF's involvement and particularly the campaign around soft opt-out organ donation. I would have, the colleagues that were there, my personal motivation was to get a piece with Fearghal McKinney, in the public domain, the head of the BHF in the North, and that's what I was there to do really. To get pictures of both him and BHF branding in association with the campaign, so it would have involved Fearghal, the Mac Gabhann family and I expect there was other BHF staff there.

**Did you have any engagement with those same Sinn Fein officers or any media officers?**

No, I don't recall seeing them there. It wasn't a Sinn Fein event, so I'm not sure if they were there to be honest, I don't recall seeing them there.

**Did you interact at all with Michelle O'Neill at any time during that event?**

No, I didn't. From memory, Michelle walked through the Great Hall, I think on her way into the Chamber. She stopped with the Mac Gabhann family, it made for good imagery, so I took a few photos and video clips, I think I may have been holding my phone on a stick thing. That would have been the extent of it really.

**Now, so I'm just going to share a screen again real quick, just to show you that photo that has been in the domain, the public domain. Can you see that there?**

I can.

**Yes, and that's that photo, I think it's leading people to wonder... These are where these complaints are coming in. You're in very close proximity, but you're saying that at no time did you interact with the First Minister O'Neill, then First Minister In Waiting. When you see this photograph, do you know who took that photograph?**

I don't, no.

**I know that you seem in close proximity in this photo, but First Minister O'Neill said that she did not see you at this event. What would be your response to that?**

I can't really speak to what she did or didn't see. She has said she didn't see me, I know there was no interaction between us, so I take that at face-value, yes.

**Do you have any photographs in your possession that would be any different to what is in the public domain at present?**

No, any photos that I had taken would have been on the BHF's social media platforms, but I don't have access to those now.

**I mean, it doesn't... I can't tell for certain, but it doesn't look like there was a whole lot of people in the Great Hall at that time, from that picture, I can't tell. Was it a busy Great Hall that day?**

It certainly was because there was a lot of media there. Like I said, I don't know who took that photo, but I'd imagine it was from part of the media contingent. There would have been a lot of media there that day because of the, just because of the attempt to recall the Assembly because of the issue that they was discussing.

**Yes, of course, the media was very involved in that all along. Okay, so it was a busy day. Now, just one final question relating to your Assembly pass. Can you tell me the sequence of events as to when you ceased to have that in your possession?**

I think the last time I ever would have used the pass would have been the last day I was ever up in Stormont, which I can't really recall when that was, it was prior to my suspension anyway. I [bleeping



sound] presumed, I just assumed that it wasn't, it was no longer active. I think perhaps... I had a car accident in the start of January of 2023, was it? Yes, and I think that the pass may have been in that car when it was taken away, so I don't even think I have it in my possession anymore.

**Okay, thanks. Now, is there anything else that you'd wish to say that you consider relevant to my overall investigation or that I should be made aware of?**

Not that I can think of.

**I'm just going to ask John. John, is there any questions that you'd like to ask?**

**I2: Yes, Michael, what you've shared with us so far has been very important. I just want to clarify some things in my own head. You said that your suspension was notified to you by an email from the national chairperson, is that correct?**

Yes.

**I2: Am I to understand that the HR person, whoever that may have been, within Sinn Fein had no role in your suspension?**

No, I don't recall any involvement with HR, no, it would have been from the national chairperson's office.

**I2: In that regard, do they have a responsibility or duty to notify any hierarchy within the party?**

I'm not aware of what responsibilities they would have.

**I2: Okay. You have said that your contract finished as far as you can recall in June or July and then you applied for the post within the British Heart Foundation, which was obviously publicly advertised I presume.**

Yes.

**I2: In respect of the references that were then called for, was that done via anybody within Sinn Féin, or was that done purely between you and those individuals?**

Purely between me and the two individuals.

**I2: Can you clarify, or do you recall what their status was at that time?**

Status?

**I2: Well, were they at that time when you engaged with them still employed by the party?**

As far as I'm aware. I contacted them on the basis that they were colleagues that I worked with.

**I2: You obviously would have shared the fact that you'd applied for the British Heart Foundation post. You were hopeful that you were going to be successful and they have now called for references, so how did, I suppose what I'm trying to establish was the commissioners asked you, were they personal references or as part of the party reference?**

They were personal references.

**I2: You can't clarify whether that was on party paper or whether it was on plain paper from those individuals, is that correct?**

I cannot speak because I didn't see them. When I contacted them, I would have contacted them on personal emails, but primarily because that was the principal email they used.

**I2: Can I then move on to the events at Stormont? You've shared with us that this wasn't a British Heart Foundation event, is that correct?**

That's my understanding that it was a sitting of the Assembly, an attempt to recall the Assembly and form the executive, yes.

**I2: How were you notified of that on behalf of the British Heart Foundation?**

Well, I'm not 100 per cent sure. I think it was publicly announced that there would be a recall of the Assembly to try and get this piece of legislation passed. I can't recall which MLA or MLAs called for the... Well, it would have taken 30-plus anyway because of the Assembly mechanisms, so that would have been publicly announced that this would have been taking place.

**I2: The reason that I'm asking the question, just for my own clarity, is that your title was the communications and engagement manager?**

Yes.

**I2: On that basis, would I be correct in assuming that because of that role, communications and engagement manager, you just didn't turn up at Stormont, you had to pre-notify them of your attendance?**

Pre-notify Stormont?

**I2: Yes.**

No, we just turned up. Stormont is a publicly accessible building.

**I2: You didn't give anybody prior notification that you would be attending the building on that day?**

No, I would have notified, I think, media perhaps, that Fearghal McKinney and the Mac Gabhann family would have been attending, that would have been the extent of it.

**I2: When you say that you were notified media, what media?**

I probably would have put out... I can't recall exactly, but I probably would have put out a press call just to say that they would have been there and available for interview.

**I2: Oh right, so there was no direct interaction with the First Minister's office?**

No, no.

**I2: She would have had no indication that you were in attendance or that was your plan?**

I wouldn't think so.

**I2: I'm trying to establish, for such a public event, that the First Minister would have notification of what was happening that day and who might be attending. Is that analysis wrong?**

What analysis would that be now? It wasn't quite clear from the question.

**I2: Well, I'm trying to establish... You say you didn't have any engagement with the First Minister's office to notify them of your attendance other than a general press call. Is that correct?**

Yes, well, the press call would have went to the press, it wouldn't have went to the First Minister's office.

**I2: Oh right, okay. You've clarified for the commissioner in your previous answers that you had no engagement with the First Minister on this occasion, is that correct?**

I did not have any engagement with her, no.

**I2: Can I clarify, just for the record, that since these events, have you had any communication or contact with the First Minister?**

No, I haven't.

**I2: I've no further questions at this point in time, so I'm handing it back to you Commissioner.**

**Okay, well, I have no further questions. Have you anything else, since John's asked some questions, is there anything else you want to add Michael?**

No, not at this stage, no.

**Well, I want to thank you once again for agreeing to meet with us, it's been extremely helpful and I know you're under time and stress at the moment, so I thank you for taking the time to do this. I'm going to be sending a transcript, I'll send it through [REDACTED]. I'm hoping to get it done very quickly, so you can see it and approve it. It will just be exactly what we've just went through here, but if there's anything that is inconsistent, you can let me know, okay? Thank you so much again, I appreciate it.**

**No problem, all right, thank you.**

**I2: Thanks Michael, all the best now.**

**Take care.**

**I2: The time is 10:23.**

**End of interview, okay.**

**[END OF TRANSCRIPT]**



**Michelle O'Neill** MLA  
**Leas-Uachtarán Shinn Féin**



Dr Melissa McCullough  
Commissioner for Standards  
222 Parliament Buildings  
Ballymiscaw  
Stormont  
Belfast  
BT4 3XX

8<sup>th</sup> November 2024

**Case ID: 202400025 and 202400026**

Dear Dr McCullough

**Re: Correspondence dated 30<sup>th</sup> October and 4<sup>th</sup> November**

I am writing to confirm my attendance at the initial interview. I have asked my office to engage with [REDACTED] to agree the details.

Please also see attached information which was requested to assist you with your investigation.

Please let me know if I can be of further assistance in advance of our upcoming interview.

Yours sincerely

[REDACTED]

## Requested Information

Contact details for Sean Mag Uidhir	[REDACTED]
Contact details for Caolan McGinley	[REDACTED]
Name and Contact details of Sinn Fein National Chairperson on 19 <sup>th</sup> August 2021	<b>Declan Kearney</b> <a href="mailto:national.chair@sinnfein.ie">national.chair@sinnfein.ie</a>
List of Sinn Fein HR personnel from 19 <sup>th</sup> August 2021 to date	<p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>HR Director for the period mentioned up until March 2024</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>To note - [REDACTED] had two periods of maternity leave:</p> <p>29th May 2020 - 18th March 2021</p> <p>1st December 2021 - 4th October 2022</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>Provided temporary maternity leave cover for the first period.</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>Sinn Fein did not recruit maternity leave cover for the second period.</p> <p>[REDACTED] was not contracted by the Party for the second period but contracted on a needs basis.</p>



**Commissioner for Standards**

222 Parliament Buildings  
Ballymiscaw  
Stormont  
Belfast  
BT4 3XX

Tel: 028 9052 1220  
Email: [standardscommissioner@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:standardscommissioner@niassembly.gov.uk)

Mr Fearghal McKinney  
Head of BHF Northern Ireland  
[mckinneyf@bhf.org.uk](mailto:mckinneyf@bhf.org.uk)

22 November 2024

**Request for Documents: Investigation Case ID 202400025 and 202400026**

Dear Mr McKinney

Thank you for your recent correspondence of 19 November 2024. I am writing to clarify my 4 November 2024 request for documents as you have requested.

1. Firstly, you asked for confirmation of the complaint and you have assured it would remain confidential. I quote directly from the complaint as follows:

“The First Minister misleading a statutory committee in respect to what she and her party knew about the references given to Michael McMonagle by 2 senior party members. It is now clear that the party knew about the references a year previously, yet the First Minister said she was only made aware the day before the news broke in the media. This is not credible and strikes at the heart of the 'Nolan Principle' particularly openness and transparency.”

“I believe the First Minister must produce the documentary evidence that supports her claim that she did not know. This could be in the form of the email chain between the British Heart Foundation and Sinn Féin.”

2. Having considered your letter, I have revised d, e and f.
  - a. Correspondence sent to Mr McMonagle by the BHF requesting references
  - b. Correspondence received in relation to the references requested by the BHF
  - c. A copy of the references received in relation to the BHF's appointment of Mr McMonagle
  - d. Replaced with questions below at 3

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- e. Any and all correspondence/communication between BHF and Michelle O'Neill from 19th August 2021 to date in respect of public reporting and media statements made by BHF and Michelle O'Neill with regards to references provided.
- f. Any other documents within your custody or control, including emails, letters, notes, minutes, memoranda, file notes, diary entries or otherwise, whether in electronic or hard copy, which would be relevant to the complaint as disclosed at 1 above.

3. Questions (in replace of d)

- a. On what date did BHF seek references in respect of the potential suitability of Mr McMonagle?
- b. Were they sent directly to the individuals named or to their official party email account or personal email account or by any other means, ie via HR at SF offices?
- c. Were the references documented on Mr McMonagle's application form or requested after successful interview process.

I would ask that, if at all possible, this information be received before 3pm on Tuesday 26 November 2024.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation. Please be in touch should you have any questions.

Yours sincerely



Dr Melissa McCullough  
Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards

**PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL**



**British Heart  
Foundation**  
Greater London House  
180 Hampstead Road  
London  
NW1 7AW

bhf.org.uk  
Tel: 0300 330 3322  
email:  
heretohelp@bhf.org.uk

**Dr Melissa McCullough**

Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner  
for Standards

27 November 2024

StandardsCommissioner@niassembly.gov.uk

**PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL**

By email:

Dear Dr McCullough

**Re: Request for Documents: Investigation Case ID 202400025 and  
202400026**

Thank you for your further letter of 22 November 2024 clarifying the scope of your request for documents in relation to the above complaints.

As previously advised, BHF is committed to co-operating with your request. I would, however, also take this opportunity to provide you with some important context which I would ask you to bear in mind more broadly in this matter. BHF has found itself, through no fault of its own, caught up as 'collateral damage' in a scandal involving the wrongdoing of persons other than BHF. BHF has already spent significant time dealing with queries arising out of the scandal as well as having to spend substantial time and effort seeking to protect its good name from being unfairly and unjustifiably attacked. Both BHF's good name and, more importantly, the wellbeing of some of its staff, have been adversely impacted. You will appreciate that our staff must focus our time and efforts on the purpose of BHF and its charitable cause. We are therefore hopeful that this letter and its enclosures will resolve your queries in so far as BHF is concerned, particularly given the fact that the complaint before you is clearly a narrow one, directed to the state of knowledge at a particular point or points in time of certain elected persons in an organisation other than BHF.

Returning to your 22 November 2024 letter, please now find attached those documents as requested.

Royal Patron: His Majesty, King Charles III | CEO: Dr Charmaine Griffiths

British Heart Foundation is a registered charity in England and Wales (225971), Scotland (SC039426) and the Isle of Man (1295). A company limited by guarantee, Registered in England and Wales (699547) and the Isle of Man (6201F). Registered office: Greater London House, 4th Floor, 180 Hampstead Road, London NW1 7AW.

I have included an explanatory appendix to help you identify and understand the nature of each document, and which part of your letter it relates to.

For context, please note that the BHF uses a 'recruitment portal'. Details of referees are uploaded to that portal, and emails are sent out to the referees and responses received back via the portal. I have explained this in further detail in the appendix.

In respect of your questions at paragraph 3 of your letter, please find my responses below:

- a) BHF sought references in respect of the potential suitability of Mr McMonagle on 22 August 2022;
- b) The request to Caolan McGinley was sent directly to his official party email account. The request to Sean Mag Uidhir was sent directly to his Gmail email account; and
- c) After Mr McMonagle accepted the BHF's offer of employment, he was prompted to upload the contact details of his referees on the BHF Recruitment portal, with the employment offer subject to satisfactory references being provided.

Please also note that I have redacted the names of members of our Recruitment Team who were involved in the matter in order to protect their Article 8 rights.

I trust that this satisfies your request, but please do let me know should you have any further queries.

Yours sincerely



Fearghal McKinney  
Head of BHF Northern Ireland

**BRITISH HEART FOUNDATION**

**Statement of Sean Mag Uidhir**

Q1. When and how were you asked to provide this reference for Mr McMonagle?

**The reference request was received from a British Heart Foundation e-mail account, [bhfrecruitment@bhf.org.uk](mailto:bhfrecruitment@bhf.org.uk), on the 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2022. A further request from the same e-mail account was received on the 30<sup>th</sup> August 2022.**

Q2. By what method did you provide this reference and how was it sent to the British Heart Foundation?

**I provided a reference on the 31<sup>st</sup> August 2022 from my personal e-mail account:**

[REDACTED]

Q3. At the time you provided this reference were you still employed by Sinn Fein?

**Yes**

Q4. On what documentation did you complete this reference? Was it on Sinn Fein party headed paper or on personal paper?

**I did not complete the reference on Sinn Féin headed paper. It was provided on a personal document.**

Q5. Who within the Sinn Fein party knew you had provided this reference?

**No one else within Sinn Fein was aware that I provided a reference.**

Q6. Did you consult with your colleague Mr Caolan McGinley in connection with this reference?

**No**

Q7. Prior to providing this employment reference for Mr McMonagle did you consult with anyone within the Sinn Fein HR department? And/or who did you consult with before providing this reference?

**No**

Q8. Sinn Fein stated on 25<sup>th</sup> September 2024 that they only became aware of the references following a media enquiry to them. Do you have any evidence to suggest that this statement is incorrect?

**No**

Q9. In February 2023, Mr McMonagle attended an event at Stormont in his capacity as

Communications and Engagement Manager on behalf of the British Heart Foundation. Were you still employed by Sinn Fein at this time? What was your role and did you attend this event?

- (a) I was still employed by Sinn Féin in February 2023;
- (b) I was Sinn Fein press manager at this time; and
- (c) I did not attend the event in question, but I did meet some of those who attended the event on that date in the Long Gallery at Stormont including Fearghal McKinney and Michael McMonagle from the British Heart Foundation. I may have spoken to others, but I can't recall specifically who.



Q10. On 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2024, First Minister O'Neill said she was “aghast and horrified” after being informed about the reference you had provided. What is your response to that statement?


**First Minister O'Neill's comments are understandable given the circumstances.**

Q11. Please document any further information, evidence or detail that you consider relevant to the matters that I am investigating or which you consider necessary and that I should be made aware.

**I have nothing to add at this stage but I am willing to co-operate with any future requests relevant to the investigation.**

Date: .....9/12/2024.....

Signed: ..........

Counter Signed (Legal Representative).....



**Statement of Caolan McGinley**

Q1. When and how were you asked to provide this reference for Mr McMonagle?

**The reference request was received from a British Heart Foundation e-mail account, bhfreruitment@bhf.org.uk , in August 2022.**

Q2. By what method did you provide this reference and how was it sent to the British Heart Foundation?

**I completed an Online Submission Form which was accessed through a link in the e-mail from the British Heart Foundation.**

Q3. At the time you provided this reference were you still employed by Sinn Fein?

**Yes**

Q4. On what documentation did you complete this reference? Was it on Sinn Fein party headed paper or on personal paper?

**I did not complete the reference on Sinn Féin headed paper. I completed an Online Submission Form which was accessed through a link in the British Heart Foundation e-mail.**

Q5. Who within the Sinn Fein party knew you had provided this reference?

**No one else in Sinn Féin was aware that I provided a reference.**

Q6. Did you consult with your colleague Mr Sean Mag Uidhir in connection with this reference?

**No**

Q7. Prior to providing this employment reference for Mr McMonagle did you consult with anyone within the Sinn Fein HR department? And/or who did you consult with before providing this reference?

**No**

Q8. Sinn Fein stated on 25<sup>th</sup> September 2024 that they only became aware of the references following a media enquiry to them. Do you have any evidence to suggest that this statement is incorrect?

**No**

Q9. In February 2023, Mr McMonagle attended an event at Stormont in his capacity as



Communications and Engagement Manager on behalf of the British Heart Foundation.  
Were you still employed by Sinn Fein at this time? What was your role and did you attend this event?

- (a) I was still employed by Sinn Féin in February 2023;
- (b) I was Sinn Fein press advisor at this time; and
- (c) I did attend the event in the Great Hall at Stormont on that date. I was there in my capacity as a Sinn Féin press advisor.

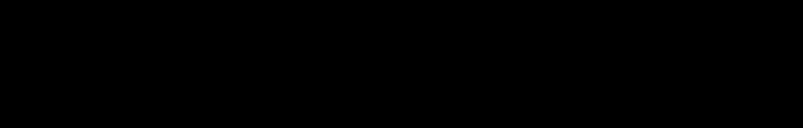
Q10. On 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2024, First Minister O'Neill said she was "aghast and horrified" after being informed about the reference you had provided. What is your response to that statement?

**First Minister O'Neill's comments are reasonable given the circumstances.**

Q11. Please document any further information, evidence or detail that you consider relevant to the matters that I am investigating or which you consider necessary and that I should be made aware.

**I have nothing further to add at this stage, but I am willing to co-operate with any future requests relevant to your investigation.**

Date: 9/12/24 .....

Signed:  .....

Counter Signed (Legal Representative).....



**From:** McCullough, Melissa Dr  
**Sent:** Thu, 23 Jan 2025 13:40:36 +0000  
**To:** StandardsCommissioner@workpro-online.com  
**Subject:** [REDACTED] FW: Confidential: Questions re 202400025 and 202400026

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**From:** [REDACTED] >  
**Sent:** 23 January 2025 13:31  
**To:** McCullough, Melissa Dr <Melissa.McCullough@niassembly.gov.uk>  
**Subject:** Fwd: Confidential: Questions re 202400025 and 202400026

You don't often get email from [REDACTED]

Dear Melissa,

Apologies in the delay in getting back to you. Please find answers to your questions below along with some further information.

1. In relation to the email exchange between you and the BHF in August 2023, did you notify anyone about that contact by the BHF?

No.

2. Did you notify anyone as to the BHF's questions in relation to verifying the references sent from two SF press officers in relation to Mr Michael McMonagle?

No, as you can see in the email exchange I tried to find out the identity of the second person who provided the reference, but they were unable to give me the detail due to data protection.

3. Did you notify FM Michelle O'Neill about the BHF's contact or their questions in relation to verifying the references sent from two SF press officers in relation to Mr Michael McMonagle?

No, I did not have any discussions with Michelle at any stage regarding Michael McMonagle.

If you need any further information please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kind regards,

[REDACTED]

---



**From:** "McCullough, Melissa Dr"  
<[Melissa.McCullough@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:Melissa.McCullough@niassembly.gov.uk)>  
**Date:** 22 January 2025 at 11:18:20 GMT  
**To:** [REDACTED] >  
**Subject:** RE: Confidential: Questions re 202400025 and 202400026

Dear [REDACTED]

I refer to my email below. Can you please confirm when you will be responding. Alternatively, I can arrange an interview with you.

Kind regards  
Melissa



**Dr Melissa McCullough**

*Commissioner for Standards*

work: 02890521220

email: [melissa.mccullough@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:melissa.mccullough@niassembly.gov.uk)

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Stormont  
Belfast  
BT4 3XX

---

**From:** McCullough, Melissa Dr  
**Sent:** 17 January 2025 11:14  
**To:** [REDACTED]  
**Subject:** Confidential: Questions re 202400025 and 202400026

Dear [REDACTED]

Many thanks for your reply and agreeing to assist.

I am in receipt of a copy of the email exchange in August 2023 between you (in your capacity as the Sinn Fein HR Director) and the British Heart Foundation. The exchange was relating to references the BHF had received for an applicant, Mr Michael McMonagle.

Can you please provide answers to the following:

1. In relation to the email exchange between you and the BHF in August 2023, did you notify anyone about that contact by the BHF?
2. Did you notify anyone as to the BHF's questions in relation to verifying the references sent from two SF press officers in relation to Mr Michael McMonagle?
3. Did you notify FM Michelle O'Neill about the BHF's contact or their questions in relation to verifying the references sent from two SF press officers in relation to Mr Michael McMonagle?

Kind regards



---

**Dr Melissa McCullough**

*Commissioner for Standards*

work: 02890521220

email: [melissa.mccullough@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:melissa.mccullough@niassembly.gov.uk)

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BT4 3XX

---

**From:** [REDACTED] >  
**Sent:** 16 January 2025 16:37  
**To:** McCullough, Melissa Dr <[Melissa.McCullough@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:Melissa.McCullough@niassembly.gov.uk)>  
**Subject:** Re: Making Contact

Dear Melissa,

I can confirm this is the correct email address and I will be happy to help with any investigations.

Kind regards,

[REDACTED]

On 15 Jan 2025, at 09:32, McCullough, Melissa Dr  
<[Melissa.McCullough@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:Melissa.McCullough@niassembly.gov.uk)> wrote:

[REDACTED]

First Minister Michelle O'Neill provided me with your email detail as I believe you may have information that will assist with an investigation I am currently working on. To be clear, this is not an investigation concerning you.

In the first instance,, can you please respond to confirm I have this contact email correct. If you wish to contact me directly my number is [REDACTED]

Kind regards  
Melissa



**Dr Melissa McCullough**

*Commissioner for Standards*

work: 02890521220

email: [melissa.mccullough@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:melissa.mccullough@niassembly.gov.uk)

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Belfast  
BT4 3XX

Commissioner interview with FM Michelle O'Neill

14 January 2025, 4:30pm

ZOOM0004

JANUARY 2025

LJ - DEPTH - 18 MINS

[Other comments:]

**This interview is being tape recorded. I'm Melissa McCullough, the Commissioner for Standards. The date is the 14th of January 2025 and the time is 4:32 pm. I'm interviewing First Minister Michelle O'Neill. Also present is █████...?**

M: █████.

**John Devitt is second interviewer. Are you happy to be referred to as First Minister or do you prefer Michelle?**

Michelle is fine.

**Okay. I just want to also remind you for the record that your representative, █████ is not permitted to answer questions on your behalf, they're here as an observer, but if you need to consult with him I can pause the interview and allow for that, okay?**

Okay.

**Also, I'm going to ask you to formally take the Oath which can be either the Affirmation which is below or the Bible which is above.**

Okay, I'll do the Affirmation.

**Okay, that one there.**

I do solemnly, sincerely and truly declare and affirm that the evidence that I shall give shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

**Brilliant, thank you so much.**

Sure.

**This is a confidential interview. Nothing spoken of in this interview should be discussed with anyone. Additionally, this transcript may be appended to the investigation report, in fact it will be if I rely on it to reach any recommendations. Now, just to recap, the matters I'm investigating relate to two complaints against you. One is by Mr Timothy Gaston MLA and the other by Mr Doug Beattie MLA.**

Mm-hm.

**I've highlighted that in your invitation to interview letter, but just to, for the record, say, my investigation is not concerned with the inner workings or politics of your party. My investigation is specific to the complaints that have been made against you. Before I begin my questions, have you anything?**

No, that's straightforward.

**What I want to do, because we're dealing with two separate complaints in one report, I want - or one investigation that is - I want to go over the first one dated the 3rd of October. That would be Mr Gaston's complaint, and just ask you if you'd like to respond to it. Basically, in this one, he's saying that when you said you knew nothing about the whereabouts of Mr McMonagle and then a photo appears. That photo, I'll just remind you, of course you've seen the photo...?**

Mm-hm.

**That's there, so I just wondered, he says, 'That this lacks openness and honesty. The photograph demands that the First Minister answer for how she has upheld these principles of openness and honesty.' I'm just going to open that up to you.**

Okay, sure, fair enough. Whenever McMonagle left the employment, I wouldn't know anything about his whereabouts, where he was or anything to do with that, so whenever... So just to say that clearly I'd no knowledge whatsoever of his whereabouts or his employment status for that matter. If he had had one job

or ten jobs, I wouldn't have known any of that information. My sole focus on the day of the British Heart Foundation event was the wee man [unclear name 0:02:53.7], who I've a long-standing history with, very supportive of the family. I've been to every part of their campaign the whole way through the years and I've watched their progress through that campaign. If you remember the context that days that we're in the... Well, if you do know, the Assembly sitting was called, so we called the Assembly. I was just stopping by at the invitation of the family to say a quick greeting to them because the purpose of the recall was the legislation for organ donation, so my sole focus was on the child, as I always do.

He's in the centre of this big, a lot of attention, and that was why I was there, so I just called to say hello to him on the way into the chamber to make the politics, and also to say to the family that I'm going to be very respectful about the debate. We don't want this to descend into politicking against each other. I want the recall of the Assembly so we can do legislation like this.

**Yes.**

So that's my sole focus in that Assembly or that Great Hall that day whenever I went in. Never for a second did I see Michael McMonagle. Had I have seen him, it would've been an alert in my head but never did I see him, despite the fact what that picture looks like.

**Yes, and interestingly, I don't know if you would agree, but I asked a question about whether it was busy. From that picture you would think there was nobody else there, it's just the angle. I've testimony that says it was busy on that day in the Hall. Do you recall what the...?**

Hugely busy, because all of the media would've encountered and all in that general area, a lot of observers and then all the MLAs going to the Chambers, so it was a very busy Hall, as it generally is. Of my experience this is, and I go in through that Hall on a daily basis, on a Monday and Tuesday certainly every week, the Hall could be full at any time. I could be grabbed by a school, a visiting group, and I wouldn't be aware of everybody or who's mingling around. I would be there maybe just to say a quick hello to somebody and on, and that was the same on that occasion. I did not see him at all and as I said, if I had have, that would've been a red flag.

**Let me move on to giving you a chance to just respond to the Doug Beattie complaint. Now, he was asking... He believes that you could be seen as the First Minister misleading a statutory committee**

**in respect to, 'What she and her party knew about the references given to Michael McMonagle by two senior party members.' He goes on to state, 'It's now clear that the party knew about the references a year previously, yet the First Minister said she'd only been aware of them the day before the news broke in the media.' So he thinks this is not credible and the Nolan Principles of openness and transparency.... Do you want just to respond to that complaint?**

Yes, I'm obviously very mindful of my responsibility which, well, the Ministerial Code for the Nolan Principles, and that's what I adhere to every day. In terms of misleading the committee, that absolutely was not the case. I mean, on the 25th of September we were made aware that the two press officers had given these references and I was absolutely horrified to learn that that was the case, and then we started our internal process. Then on the 28th, the two individuals resigned. I was absolutely aghast because had they have sought permission, they would not have been given permission to write such references, but they both resigned on the 28th, and then we're going into a bit of a media conversation. There was obviously a lot of interest around all of this, and the British Heart Foundation got in touch with me, my colleagues, to say - this was on the 3rd of October - to say, 'Hold on, we actually did get in touch with your HR person in August of 2023,' whenever McMonagle was charged then before the courts. They then did their own, I think, retrospective look at how he was employed.

Their contact got in touch with my office and then we went off and did our own work again, and they, the British Heart Foundation clarified to me that they had sent an email to our HR, senior HR person to do two things; verify the email address but also the identity of the senior press officer that gave the reference. They obviously, and rightly so on reflection, questioned what we had said publicly. So it was - because from the 3rd of that, of October until the 5th when I had an official, if you like, conversation with Fearghal McKinney, the head of the British Heart Foundation, where we clarified what they knew, what I knew. Then we both agreed that we needed to make a statement publicly, which I did that day on the 5th of October, as did Fearghal, basically to set the record straight, to say that we were now aware that they had contacted the senior HR person, who again let me down and who again did not bring forward that information.

**Can you share that name of that person with me? I note you had given me a list. There was a couple on there and I haven't gone into that and I may not need to, but I just wanted to know what the name of that person was?**

I thought that the chairperson of the party did that, so it's [REDACTED]

**Okay. No, that name is on there but there was two and I... Sometimes you don't want to talk about them to me.**

The second person is, and I'm now going to forget her second name, [REDACTED], but I think she maybe came after.

**She was, like, a maternity cover or something?**

Yes, yes.

**Okay. I don't know yet what, about that, but I do know... I understand. What you're saying you didn't know that the HR person was contacted back in August 2023.**

Yes.

**So the first you know about any references at all is when it breaks in the media, is that...?**

Yes, so the first time I were made aware is whenever the - the 25th of September, actually, so [Seán Mag Uidhur], the individual, the senior press officer, he lets us know that they have given the references. That's when we immediately moved to take action, and he would've been dismissed had he not have resigned, but we have to go through an internal process as per your rules.

**Yes.**

So we had started that, but within three days he had resigned, and then it was only... Then there was public commentary, as I said, back and forth around due diligence, things like that that I had said around the British Heart Foundation, around employing someone, which I then apologised to them for because I wouldn't want to damage their credibility in the public mind around what they do. Obviously, fundraising is a big, important part of it, but it was only whenever they said that they actually had contacted [REDACTED] back in August, whenever this became public, that he was charged with these vile offences.



**Can I ask you why you wouldn't have...? Sorry, did she give any reason why she didn't let the party know? Did she just not think it was important?**

I can't answer for her. She's not in our employment any more. I could make an assumption.

**Okay.**

That she assumed that Seán Mag Uidhur is a senior press officer, that she was only verifying his email and verifying that he was a senior press officer, that she perhaps... That's only me surmising. I can't answer for somebody who doesn't, yes.

**Yes, if she didn't have the detail of why they were asking?**

Yes, so I would've been in a very different position had she still been in our employment, because for me, that's a serious omission and she should've had the - as a senior HR person, should've known that if someone was asking to clarify a reference with somebody who's publicly in the media for the vile offences that they have committed, then I would've thought that it would be to anybody's reasonable mind that they would come and seek guidance from...

**Yes, and she'd left already? At the stage you found out she'd already left?**

She'd already left, yes, she'd already gone.

**Okay.**

So a lot of this is actually on reflection, yes.

**Yes, I know, okay. I do have some specific, for the record, under oath, questions. It may be that you're answering them again.**

Yes, sure.

**But I'm going to through them, and I'm thankful that you gave me your response to both of those complaints, for clarity. I have engaged with a number of people throughout my investigation, including Mr McMonagle, Mr Mag Uidhur, Mr McGinley and Fearghal McKinney, all of whom have cooperated with me and provided their testimony as evidence and I'm very grateful for that.**

**Now Mr McMonagle was arrested in 2021, August, for offences which took place between May 2020 and August 2021. He gets suspended from his job with Sinn Fein in August 2021. Were you notified of his suspension?**

Oh yes, of a suspension, yes.

**How were you informed, just...?**

He would've notified Seán Mag Uidhur at that stage. That would've then went to the general secretary of the party and the child protection officer, so, like, our internal party team, so in terms of a suspension from the party, yes, I would've been informed of that, yes.

**Now, in September 2022, Mr McMonagle took up his role with the BHF. Were you aware of this at the time?**

Absolutely not.

**Okay, and you became aware that he had taken up employment with the BHF on what date?**

Whenever this all happened, so when we went to court in July of 2024. So I'm assuming it was at that stage whenever... It became public knowledge that he was, and I'm assuming, whenever it became public knowledge that he was employed by the British Heart Foundation.

Yes.

Yes.

**Because after, it would've been after the conviction, I would've thought?**

After the conviction, so I'm assuming that that's...

**Yes, July 2024.**

Yes.

**Okay, and we talked about the 14th of February, the meeting at the Assembly and we talked about your recollection of the events on the day and you've explained that, so I'm happy with that, having that on record. On that day though, you say you did not see Mr McMonagle and you didn't have any interaction with Mr McMonagle, is that correct?**

That's correct.

**Were you aware that he would be an attendance?**

No, sure I didn't even know he worked for them.

**Okay, so your press officers at that time, they were Caolán McGinley, is it, am I saying...?**

Caolán.

**Caolán McGinley and Mr Mag Uidhur, they were both your press officers at that time and I believe one at least was present at the event. Are you aware if either of them had any interaction with Mr McMonagle on that day?**

No, I'm not.

**When did you last have any interaction that you're aware of with Mr McMonagle?**

Prior to him coming forward to say that he had been investigated, so prior to the 19th of August it would've been.

**Somewhere before he'd been suspended?**

Somewhere before any of this information came through and he was suspended. No interaction before that.

**Yes, okay, so prior to his suspension. In terms of the references now, I'm now aware that the references were provided by Mr Mag Uidhur and Mr McGinley, and you became aware... Again, could you just give me the date you became aware of, the date when these were provided, so when did you become aware of it?**

The 25th of September, yes.

**Okay, so this is again just confirming most of what you said already about the HR official, but you do not have really any knowledge of the events from the point at which they provide the references. To the point at which the BHF then phone on August 2023 to the HR official who never tells you, or you're not made aware of it anyway, and the only reason you become aware that these references were sought and looked at and all this by the BHF was when it all broke in September?**

Yes. Yes, so I had no knowledge up until that point, and clearly the actions of these individuals, particularly the two press officers, were deceitful on both turns, 1) giving the reference, 2) covering it up and not admitting to it until it clearly was going to become public knowledge, and then, 3) the HR person not actually coming forward and saying, 'Oh, by the way, we also had this at the time,' which didn't happen, so yes.

**Do you have any information as to why those two would've, those two press officers provided a reference from Mr McMonagle? At this stage, looking now, some time has passed since the complaint.**

Some time has passed, but there can be no explanation. I could not be satisfied by anything that either of them would have to say. There isn't any explanation that could be offered. I mean, how could anybody proffer anything to say there was a justification to give a reference to somebody who was up on, like, such reprehensible charges for something so diabolically bad, what this individual had done, how could they

give a reference? I just could not ever accept any explanation from either of them that would cut it. There isn't one.

**Yes, and I would be in 100 per cent agreement with that assessment, but... I mean, I assume it's because they worked with him and they had some sort of, felt some sort of loyalty to him.**

We all can assume that that's part of it, but I can't speak for the two individuals, no.

**Okay. Do you know of anybody else who knew about these references provided by the two press officers at the time?**

No, they didn't tell anybody else.

**Okay, so they kept it quiet?**

Yes.

**This is my last question here. Since these events, which again are some time ago, is there any other relevant information that you think I should be aware of in relation to the complaints against you?**

No, I think everything is on the public record. Obviously, there's been a number of occasions where I've said things publicly, so anything that I know is in the public domain now. There's nothing additionally.

**Okay, thank you so much. I'm going to pass over to John, just in case you have anything else you wanted to ask, John?**

**I2: No, I think you've covered all of that, First Minister. I'm just looking at my notes. On October the 2nd 2024, you said you were aghast and horrified after being informed about the references, and I think you've reflected that in the answers you've provided this afternoon. Is that fair comment?**

Absolutely fair comment, yes.

**Okay, well look, I'm going to conclude this, unless you have anything you want to ask us?**

No, I think that's everything, thank you.

**Okay, well, I really want to say thank you for your time in coming and in answering these questions.  
I'm going to call the time at, what is it, 4:50 pm, okay.**

**[END OF TRANSCRIPT]**



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RE: [EXTERNAL] RE: Email address

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From [REDACTED]  
Date Thu 8/17/2023 9:37 AM  
To [REDACTED]

Dear [REDACTED]  
Thank you for your response.  
I've taken advice from our Data Protection Officer and, whilst we do not wish to be un-cooperative, I do not believe that we have a legal basis to disclose the individual's identity under data protection laws.  
Kind regards

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
**British Heart Foundation**  
Greater London House, 180 Hampstead Road  
London  
NW1 7AW  
DE [REDACTED]

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**From:** [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, August 15, 2023 10:40 AM  
**To:** [REDACTED]  
**Subject:** RE: [EXTERNAL] RE: Email address  
Dear [REDACTED]

Apologies in the delay in getting back to you, I have just returned from leave.  
I can confirm that the email address provided is correct for Seán Mag Uidhir who is indeed our Head of Press.  
Can you please tell me who provided the other reference from the Sinn Féin email address?  
Many thanks,

[REDACTED]  
**HR Director**

Roinn Acmhainní Daonna  
Sinn Féin  
51-53 Bóthar na bFál  
Béal Feirste  
BT12 4PD  
Guthán: (028) 90347358 / [REDACTED]



**From:** [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** Monday, August 7, 2023 4:05 PM  
**To:** [REDACTED]  
**Subject:** RE: [EXTERNAL] RE: Email address

Dear [REDACTED]

Thanks for getting back to me. As I imagine you expect, I am writing in relation to your former employee, Michael McMonagle. Specifically I have a query regarding an employee reference provided to the BHF on 31 August 2022, purportedly from Seán Mag Uidhir in his role as Head of Sinn Fein Press and written in support of Mr McMonagle.

Whilst the reference was signed off by Seán Mag Uidhir, it was sent from a Gmail account [REDACTED]

We are therefore seeking to clarify that this was a legitimate email, and we should be grateful if you would be able to look into this matter and confirm by reply that this email was indeed sent by Seán Mag Uidhir of Sinn Fein. As an aside and for clarity, we did also receive one other employment reference from a Sinn Fein email address in relation to Mr McMonagle.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Happy to speak too.

Kind regards

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
**British Heart Foundation**

Greater London House, 180 Hampstead Road  
London  
NW1 7AW  
D [REDACTED]

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**From:** [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** Thursday, August 3, 2023 11:29 PM  
**To:** [REDACTED]  
**Subject:** [EXTERNAL] RE: Email address

Dear [REDACTED]

Here are my details.

I expect that I know the reason for your email so please give me a call if you would prefer.

Kind regards,

[REDACTED]  
**HR Director**

Roinn Acmhainní Daonna



Sinn Féin  
51-53 Bóthar na bFál  
Béal Feirste  
BT12 4PD  
Guthán: (028) 90347358 / [REDACTED]



From: [REDACTED]

Sent: Thursday, August 3, 2023 4:25 PM

To: [hr@sinnfein.ie](mailto:hr@sinnfein.ie)

Subject: Email address

Dear HR team

I've a query which I would like to address to the HR Director so could you please confirm their name and email address.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Many thanks

[REDACTED]

—

[REDACTED]

**British Heart Foundation**

Greater London House, 180 Hampstead Road

London

NW1 7AW

DD [REDACTED]

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Michael McMonagle (highlighted far left) attended the same event as Michelle O'Neill (in pink jacket with her back to the camera)

**From:** McCullough, Melissa Dr [REDACTED]  
**Subject:** FW: Confidential RE: Case ID - 202400026  
**Date:** 5 February 2025 at 06:30  
**To:** StandardsCommissioner@workpro-online.com  
[REDACTED]



---

**From:** +StandardsCommissioner  
**Sent:** 05 February 2025 05:30  
**To:** [REDACTED]@executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk>  
**Subject:** Confidential RE: Case ID - 202400026

Dear FM O'Neill

Many thanks for this clarification.

I have accepted your clarification and have amended 47.5. I can confirm the revised 47.5 now reads:

"Neither of the references provided mentioned Mr McMonagle's suspension from Sinn Fein or ongoing police investigation."

Kind regards  
Melissa



**DR MELISSA MCCULLOUGH**

*Commissioner for Standards*

work: 02890521220

email: [melissa.mccullough@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:melissa.mccullough@niassembly.gov.uk)

Parliament Buildings  
Ballymiscaw  
Stormont  
Belfast  
BT4 3XX

---

**From:** [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** 04 February 2025 16:08  
**To:** +StandardsCommissioner <[standardscommissioner@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:standardscommissioner@niassembly.gov.uk)>  
**Subject:** RE: Case ID - 202400026

You don't often get email from [REDACTED]@executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk. [Learn why this is important](#)

Hi

Please see below the response from the First Minister.

Carol

Good afternoon,

Thank you for your correspondence dated 29 January 2025, regarding the findings of fact.

I have noted the following, which whilst it is not a factual error, could be considered to be important contextually.

In point 4 you note the dates the references were provided, and in point 5 you note that neither reference mentioned the criminal charges, as pulled out below:

4. Mr McGinley and Mr Mag Uidhir provided employment references on behalf of Mr McMonagle to the British Heart Foundation on 24th August 2022 and 31st August 2022, respectively.

5. Neither of the references provided mentioned Mr McMonagle's suspension from Sinn Féin or criminal charges.

Charges were not brought against Mr McMonagle until August 2023, a year after the references were provided, therefore it would not have been possible to mention them in the references as they didn't yet exist. Though it is of course factual to say they weren't mentioned in the references, I thought it may be beneficial to add this context.

Sent obo the First Minister.

**Principal Private Secretary to the First Minister Michelle O'Neill MLA**  
GD.11 | Stormont Castle | Stormont Estate | BELFAST | BT4 3TT  
Tel: 02890 378234 | Ext: 88234 | Mobile: [REDACTED]  
E-mail: [REDACTED] [@executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk](mailto:[REDACTED]@executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk)

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**From:** [StandardsCommissioner@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:StandardsCommissioner@niassembly.gov.uk)  
<[StandardsCommissioner@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:StandardsCommissioner@niassembly.gov.uk)>  
**Sent:** 29 January 2025 08:24  
**To:** [REDACTED] [@executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk](mailto:[REDACTED]@executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk)>  
**Subject:** Case ID - 202400026

Dear FM O'Neill

Please find attached communication from the Commissioner for Standards, Dr Melissa McCullough.

Kind regards

Office of the Commissioner for Standards

