

Written Ministerial Statement

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Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service: Further Allegations

Published at 4.30 pm on Tuesday 16 April 2013

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I wish to make a statement to the Assembly to update members on the outcome of the investigation into further allegations made against the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS).

In my statement of 1 November 2012 I advised members that I had received a number of further allegations about potential fraud, theft or other irregularities in NIFRS and that I had tasked the Departmental Accounting Officer with the responsibility of ensuring a satisfactory and independent investigation of the material specific allegations that have been made. These allegations were in addition to those included within the reports published by my Department on 16 October 2012.

The Department of Social Development's Corporate Investigations Unit investigated the majority of the material allegations. Allegations relating to the World Police and Fire Games were investigated by the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure. Other allegations, which related to operational or HR issues and which fell outside the expertise of the DSD Corporate Investigations Unit, have been forwarded to the NIFRS for the consideration of its recently appointed Director of Human Resources.

I am today placing the DSD Corporate Investigation Unit's Report on my Department's website.

None of the allegations investigated to date have been substantiated and I will advise you should ongoing work change that position.

I know that members had expressed particular concern about the allegations relating to the supply of woodchip to Orange Halls. The DSD team has considered the correlation of the amounts of woodchip purchased by the NIFRS against the likely amounts used in confirmed burns. While this cannot be an exact science, it has found no clear evidence to suggest any theft of woodchip material.

Similarly it has found no evidence of unauthorised use of NIFRS vehicles to transport woodchip.

The DSD investigation has, however, highlighted shortcomings with NIFRS internal control systems and identified the need for additional capacity within its Internal Audit Team. These areas have previously been identified in other reviews: stock control in the second Whistle blowing Report which I published on 16 October 2012 and the capacity of Internal Audit in the Comptroller and Auditor General's report published on 8 April 2013.

I have, therefore, asked the NIFRS interim Chief Executive to urgently consider the recommendations in this report and develop an action plan to address the issues raised. I have also asked him for a report on how he intends to progress the ongoing internal review of the NIFRS Internal Audit function.

The Report also recommends that the Department should make clear to the NIFRS Board and Audit Committee the extent and nature of their responsibilities with regard to the oversight of the NIFRS Internal Audit Function and I have again tasked the Departmental Accounting Officer to ensure that the roles and responsibilities of NIFRS Board and committee members are clearly explained.

The DSD team also considered whether the Department had been made aware of concerns about the Fire Authority management dating back to February 2002. It found that two of the issues had been referred to the then Minister on 26 February 2003 as part of supporting information about ongoing performance issues; that the Department appeared to have focused on those issues and that there did not appear to have been a specific investigation of the allegations.

The Report again draws attention to management failures which the NIFRS should already be addressing. None of this reflects on the courageous team of firefighters who continue to protect the whole community. I know, however, that as the public face of the organisation their morale may have been affected by the ongoing criticisms of the corporate governance arrangements within NIFRS. I know all Members would support me, therefore, in supporting and applauding our firefighters and the dedicated work that they do.

The Report is published on the Department's website today. I am very grateful to the Department of Social Development's Corporate Investigations Unit for its commitment in working through these allegations.

As I have said previously, I fully support anyone who has issues of concern to raise them through their line management or through whistleblowing procedures. This investigation has not substantiated the allegations but it is also consistent with previous reviews in identifying a number of shortcomings in corporate governance.

In that respect, following the PAC hearing on 24 April, it is vital that the organisation is able to move on and address the recommendations made, and thereby improve the effectiveness and efficiency of NIFRS HQ. I believe that the senior management team and the Board are committed to doing so and my Department will give them every support in this challenging agenda.