

Written Ministerial Statement

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Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Potential Trust Procurement Issues

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Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): This Statement draws to the Assembly's attention audit investigations arising from information reported by whistle-blowers about potential malpractice in the procurement and management of building maintenance in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust.

Assurance and accountability is fundamental as it is important to know that ALBs are complying with relevant guidance and regulations. One area which can be particularly challenging is that of procurement given the wide range of local, national and European legislation, regulations and guidance. Adherence to these requirements is essential if we are to demonstrate value for money for Health and Social Care and ensure equitable treatment to all our suppliers and contractors. I expect nothing less from those in my Department and its Arms Length Bodies.

However within the Northern Health and Social Care Trust whistleblowing allegations have been made of procurement and potential contract management malpractice within the estates function, alongside others relating to managerial issues. Under my Department's oversight, BSO Internal Audit and investigation specialists are investigating these allegations.

Although a report has not yet been finalised, it is apparent that there are a number of procurement control weaknesses in the Trust's Estates function and investigations are still ongoing. In this respect, external audit, as part of their audit on the 2012/13 Annual Accounts, have identified £860,000 of payments in respect of Measured Day Term Contracts (MDTC), which may be potentially irregular due to procurement issues. The Trust has already moved to take some corrective action and Health Estates Investment Group, within my Department, will also undertake a series of compliance checks across all Trusts and further audits are planned for 2013.

My Department is ensuring that all allegations are investigated with appropriate rigour to ensure that when any necessary improvements have been made, the public can have full confidence in NHSC Trust Estates procurement practices.

It is appropriate and important that where anyone has information about abuse of public money this is brought to light so that the specific issues can be resolved, appropriate lessons learned, and public confidence restored. Where wrongdoing has occurred it must be addressed, with a proportionate and appropriate response.

I will provide further information to the Assembly following completion of all the investigations.