



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Severe Winter Weather and Ongoing
Supply Problems: Briefing by Northern
Ireland Water**

6 January 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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Briefing by Northern Ireland Water**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Fred Cobain (Chairperson)

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Billy Armstrong

Mr Cathal Boylan

Mr Allan Bresland

Mr Billy Leonard

Ms Anna Lo

Mr Fra McCann

Mr Ian McCrea

Mr Conall McDevitt

Mr George Robinson

Witnesses:

Mr Trevor Haslett)

Mr Liam Mulholland) Northern Ireland Water

Ms Sara Venning)

The Chairperson (Mr Cobain):

There is only one item of business today, and that is the briefing from Northern Ireland Water on the handling of the supply issues resulting from the severe winter conditions. I have no apologies from members.

Mr Leonard:

On a point of clarification, in terms of the Minister making himself available to come before the Committee, would there not have been a case for getting him to come today? Who made the decision that he should not? Even though it would have been a long meeting —

The Chairperson:

I, personally, felt that because of the length of such a meeting, it would be better to hear from Northern Ireland Water first. We can hear from the Minister next week, rather than having them all together. Had we had them here together, we would have been talking about a five- or six-hour meeting.

Mr Leonard:

With all due respect, would it not have been better to have that long meeting today to get the Minister before the Committee, if he was saying that he was available and willing to come forward on such a serious issue?

The Chairperson:

That may be so, but I thought, when we talked about this, that it would be better to have two separate meetings. It will give more focus. Members can, after meetings lasting four or five hours, lose focus. That was the decision that I took because I thought it best for the Committee.

Mr Leonard:

I do not want to labour the point. However, if the Minister had been willing to come today, and given the gravity of the issue and the level of public concern, there is a case for saying to heck with the number of hours and that we should take the Minister's evidence and hear his side of the story, so that, as early as possible, we get the full story. That is my point.

Mr G Robinson:

Mr Chairperson, I think that you took the right decision. I am convinced that you did.

Mr Boylan:

I respect the fact that the Chairperson made that decision. We know that the Minister will come to the Committee and he will have questions to answer, and we respect that. Can we ensure that this meeting is conducted properly in order to ascertain the most information from the relevant

bodies through the questions that we ask? The Committee can then give the Minister his opportunity to answer questions next week or the week after.

The Chairperson:

Absolutely.

I will make a couple of quick points before we start. First, on behalf of the Committee, I thank all the staff of Northern Ireland Water, who we know have worked long hours over the last number of weeks, if not months, to try to address the problems. We appreciate all the work that has been done.

Mr Trevor Haslett (Northern Ireland Water):

Thank you, Chairman and Committee.

The Chairperson:

The next thing that I have to say is that we are deeply disappointed that we do not have the chief executive here, who is still the chief executive of Northern Ireland Water until tomorrow, I believe.

Mr Haslett:

I apologise that Laurence is not here. I think that he said in a press statement that he was responsible and, therefore, he feels accountable, and that led to his resignation. Currently, the board recommended to the Minister to accept his resignation.

The Chairperson:

I know that, Trevor. All that I am saying to you is that —

Mr Haslett:

He is attending to some issues this morning around that resignation.

The Chairperson:

The point that I am trying to make to you is that he is still the head of Northern Ireland Water, and he should have been here. This is a huge issue for not just this Committee and the Assembly but the thousands of people who have suffered over the past number of months, and he has a

responsibility to those people. I do not want to labour this point. However, as far as we are concerned, he should have been here, but he is not, and the Committee notes that.

Everyone in Northern Ireland knows about the issues around these problems. I know that you have to make a presentation, and we appreciate that. However, we would also appreciate it if you could keep the presentation to about 15 minutes or so, because we have a lot of questions that we need answered.

This is purely an information-gathering exercise; it is not a witch-hunt. We are trying to find out information and to inform ourselves as best we can about the issues around Northern Ireland Water. Although the questions probably will be probing enough, this is not headhunting.

The chief executive is not here. Therefore, when you are making a presentation or are going to answer a question, will you individually state your name and in what capacity you are here? Trevor, perhaps you and your personnel could do that now, just for the record.

Mr Haslett:

For those of you who do not know me, I am Trevor Haslett, director of engineering procurement.

Mr Liam Mulholland (Northern Ireland Water):

I am the head of customer service transformation.

Ms Sara Venning (Northern Ireland Water):

I am the director of customer service delivery.

Mr Haslett:

First, on behalf of Northern Ireland Water, I apologise to all of our customers who were seriously inconvenienced over a lengthy period. I do not think that anyone in Northern Ireland Water — the board and the executive team — is happy about that. We have already implemented a number of actions to bring about a short-term improvement. However, we will be talking about some action plans later on.

On the first page of the presentation, there is a brief overview. We are going to be talking about the prolonged freeze and, of course, the sudden thaw, about which some information will

be presented later. We will be replaying the impact on the demand on the water that we put into the distribution system during that period; how our service reservoirs fell and why there were reduced levels in storage over a very short period of time; why customers were off supply, which includes private pipe damage, the service reservoir levels, the lack of pressure and why we rotated supplies during that period; our call-handling capacity, which is an area on which we have obviously already focused; the recovery following the rotation of supplies for customers; and the fact that the incident was downgraded yesterday morning.

There are a number of key issues that I would like to cover briefly. The unprecedented nature — and the word “unprecedented” has probably been used quite a lot over the past week — and the rapid speed of the thaw from 26 December to 27 December will be covered by Liam in just a few moments. We had a swing of about 20°C. The prolonged day and night sub-zero temperatures over a period of two weeks meant that we saw the temperature progressively go down to record levels. Our call centre capacity and the request for assistance that we put in will also be covered by Liam.

We identify that communication with our customers and stakeholders and with elected representatives through the hotline that we put in place is a key area of improvement for us. We believe that the information on the website simply was not suitable for that sort of state of emergency. We made improvements during the incident, but we have a lot of work to do.

As regards the alternative water supply plan, I should point out that at all times we ensured that the major hospitals were kept in supply on rotation, irrespective of a potential minor incident at the Royal Victoria Hospital, on which I am happy to take questions.

With the next slide, I will quickly talk you through the water cycle network to explain why we rotated the supplies. Even before we get to our water treatment works, we have a number of impounded sources. When we talk about reservoirs being low, we are talking about service reservoirs. Around 50% of our water is taken from Lough Neagh, which is a virtually infinite source. We also have impounded sources all around the country, and water levels in those are fine. What we are talking about is the water that comes from treatment works.

We have about 44 major treatment works, which were running at capacity during this incident. We feed those into the network through service reservoirs. We have about 490 service reservoirs,

which are basically large concrete tanks or small concrete tanks in rural areas. The water from those goes into discrete distribution zones, of which we have around 1,100. We have boundary valves in those zones. Therefore, if we look at a district metered area — for example, Breda — and find later that we have problems, we can move water around in that zone by closing valves. That makes sure that the reservoir level is protected and everybody gets water. I wanted to cover that.

I will hand over to Liam, for a quick run-through of the next slides.

Mr Mulholland:

Thank you, Mr Chairman.

The next slide gives the temperatures, as background information. There has been quite a bit in the press about that. Three words will remain with me for ever around this incident: “crisis”, “shambolic”, and “unprecedented”. All those words are apt. In his introduction, the Chairman used the word “suffering”. Yes, the response that we gave caused suffering and was not adequate to meet the unprecedented nature of what had happened.

The BBC weather people are saying that this is the coldest winter in 100 years. Four things on the temperature slide are important. First, there were two spells of cold weather in December: one in early December and one in late December. The depth and length of the second cold spell is critical. That is what caused the unprecedented event that followed. One could say, knowing all the information that was there and given that temperatures were of that level and the freezing, a major thaw was almost inevitable. However, I ask the Committee to take into account the fact that the nature of the move from freeze to thaw is unpredictable and the speed at which thaw will occur is unpredictable. The most unpredictable thing of all is knowing where pipes will burst; that is not known at that point.

I will take you through the preparation for a thaw. Northern Ireland Water did have a winter contingency plan already established and in place. The plan was activated and covered both cold spells that I have described. The plan is in line with industry standards and has been reviewed and, indeed, revised on at least four occasions. When I say that the plan is in line with industry standards, I mean that it is similar to the plans used by many police forces and other water companies in the United Kingdom.

Between 9 December and 12 December, the first thaw was managed as a category 1 incident, which was the highest category that we had at that point in the major incident plan. On 17 December, Northern Ireland Water staff and contractors were on high alert. By 20 December, there was a significant increase in “no water” calls. It is important to make the point that, from that period until Christmas Eve, our call volume trebled, yet our service level agreements with customers were maintained. That is reflective of the last freeze/thaw that we had, during which we coped with a trebling of input.

We did have an impact on customers, which I will go through in more detail in the next slide, because what I am about to take you through is absolutely horrendous and huge. On Christmas Day, we struggled a little, but not that badly. By Boxing Day, the volume of calls increased sixfold; there was a 600% increase. Normally, we take 1,000 calls a day; on Boxing Day, we took 6,000 calls. Quite simply, the system was overwhelmed. Therefore, the incident escalated rapidly and exponentially. A category 1 incident was called by the incident director, and the relevant teams commenced on the morning of 27 December. As I said, that was unprecedented, and the impact on customers was huge.

The next slide is about call volume. I apologise to the Committee for the tabular nature of the information presented, but that is the simplest way to lay it out. I draw your attention to the Boxing Day numbers, by way of example. You can see that the increase in the level of calls received was stark; a sixfold increase from where we normally operate and almost twice that of any previous incident.

I add that I have removed a number of columns from the table. For example, 1,087 calls on Boxing Day dropped off on the IVR. That means that the person calling heard a message that seemed to satisfy their need and they hung up at that point. *[Interruption.]*

The Chairperson:

Anyone who has a mobile phone should make sure that it is switched off, please.

Mr Mulholland:

Thank you, Chairman. The most startling figures are in the second column in the relevant table in our presentation, which reflects the total number of calls attempted that received an engaged tone.

Some 200 lines come into our call centre, but if members look at the 27, 28 and 29 December 2010, there were somewhere in the region of 600,000 attempted calls to our business. That is an enormous amount of attempted customer contact. At that point, I guess that I have to admit that it is, therefore, no wonder that we see the levels of anger and frustration among our customers. There is nothing more frustrating than trying to get through to a call centre that you cannot get through to. There is a fairly clear indication as to why they were not getting through.

I also highlight that there was a high level of repeat calls from customers, and, again, that adds to frustration. We are currently trying to disseminate that information and understand how many customers were trying to contact us and how many times they tried to do so. Therefore, we are still working towards understanding those details. One can only be amazed at the scale of that. One can only apologise for the breakdown that happened there and the suffering that it caused our customers. The experience they went through is, I guess, somewhat embarrassing for us as a company.

I have two things to say about the call handlers. First, we attempted to ramp up our call-answering numbers, resourcing and people as quickly as possible, but, again, it is evident that lessons are to be learned from the event, and we needed to do that more quickly. Secondly, and this is not meant as any form of excuse, but the scale and the magnitude of the contact from customers in relation to the particular event was not planned for in any scheme. Not many call centres could have handled that level of impact.

The next columns in the table relate to the call volumes. They aim to show the number of calls offered versus calls answered. They do not highlight the calls that were met with engaged tones, which helped to drive up the frustration. The key issue is the move from freeze to thaw and the speed with which that came upon us and impacted on our network. The impact on the service to customers came from two key areas; the volume of calls, which overwhelmed the call-handling systems, and the number of staff that were available versus the number that would have been needed to attempt to handle an incident of such magnitude.

The calls, however, came as a result of three things: bursts or leaks on our network; bursts or leaks on customers' supply networks; and leaks on both, which put immense pressure on our service reservoirs. The drop in those reservoirs led to further no-water situations for our customers.

That is a brief layout. The only other thing that I would like to mention is that it was not just about call volumes. Customers were trying to contact us through many media, particularly e-mail. I would like to inform the Committee that we took 10,000 e-mails in the course of this event. Those 10,000 e-mails have been responded to, both through automatic and individual responses. We are currently working through the process of loading those onto our systems, so that they are there for auditing and reporting purposes. However, that is being dealt with. Sara will talk about what happened with the website.

Ms Venning:

The major incident plan utilises the website to give supplementary information to customers. Therefore, as designed, it was not intended to be the primary method of communicating with customers. It was designed to cope with 15,000 to 20,000 visits a day. On average, the company website has approximately 500 visits a day. The previous biggest incident resulted in 6,500 visits to our website. Therefore, it was scaled for the level of contact that we were used to.

However, as Liam explained, as the call centre became overwhelmed, it was necessary to divert customers to the website to get information. That had the desired impact of reducing the stress on the call centre and the number of callers who were trying to access it.

On 27 December, the website took 22,000 visits and coped with them. On 28 December, it took 55,000 visits and started to struggle. At that point, we needed to increase capacity on our website. We did that on the evening of 28 December, and it allowed 145,000 website visits to be facilitated on 29 December. That coincided with the launch of our crisis management page on the website. In total over the event, we have had almost 500,000 visits to our website.

Liam mentioned our service reservoirs, their levels and the impact that the event had. We manage and maintain 490 service reservoirs, which are concrete repositories that hold treated drinking water. A service reservoir can go as deep as 4 m or 5 m, and, as reservoir levels lower, customers will start to experience intermittent or low pressure supplies. We can manage levels in small rural reservoirs with tankering operations, but that is not at all practical for the larger reservoirs that can hold many millions of litres of water.

As a result of the thaw in early December, which was the first thaw event, we were tankering to a very small number of reservoirs. The graph indicates the number of reservoirs that have a

depth of less than half a metre. Up to 26 December, that was not an unduly high number. However, as the thaw kicked in through 27 December, the number of low-level reservoirs increased fivefold. That shows the scale of the event. Through 28 December, as the thaw continued, the number increased to 64. An exceedingly high demand was placed on the network for drinking water as the thaw came about and pipes burst, which saw the reservoir levels plummet very quickly. That necessitated an immediate and prompt response to start to protect water supplies to key customers and key sites, such as hospitals.

The other side of the graph shows the recovery that started to kick in as we took measures such as rotating supplies. The steepness of the incline demonstrates how many reservoirs dropped to less than 500 mm, and a steady improvement can be seen through to the closure of the event on 4 January.

The next graph is about distribution input, which is the amount of treated water that we put into our distribution network each day. There are three lines: one for 2008, when we did not have any significant freeze or thaw event; the next one for 2009, when we experienced a freeze and thaw in December and running into January; and the red line is for December 2010. From 20 December, we started to see an increase in demand for treated water. We were very much in a freeze situation and sub-zero temperatures, and the level of our reservoirs was fine and our distribution network was very much intact. We believe that the increase in demand was down to customers running water constantly in an attempt to prevent their pipes freezing. As the thaw kicked in from 27 December, demand rose very sharply: it increased by over 100 million litres of water a day. In fact, compared to a normal December, we saw an increase of 40% in demand for treated drinking water. Our water factories responded to that, so we were able to increase our input into the distribution network by a factor of 40%. It is quite notable that, in doing so, water quality was not compromised at any stage.

We were faced with a vastly increased demand for water in our network. We had not connected any additional customers to our network, so it is logical to conclude that the water was leaking through a number of defects. Our teams in Northern Ireland Water have been studying flows in the distribution network to identify areas in which there were increased flows and to locate and repair bursts. During the course of the event, we located, repaired or isolated over 800 bursts. The chart identifies the defects that we located. The blue chunk, which is by far and away the biggest part of the chart, shows that the majority of defects were in customers' private

property. Over 70% of the defects that we found were in private customers' property. The remainder lie within our own network. The dark-blue chunk refers to defects in our water main network. It is notable that we have not located, and we do not believe that we will locate, defects in our trunk mains, which form the backbone of the water network. Those large, high-capacity, high-volume water carrying pipes have not been compromised. The maroon and yellow chunks relate to valves where we found defects and to communication pipes, which go from the mains to the boundaries of customers' properties.

As the event progressed, it was apparent to us from the flows that leakage was distributive and cumulative. In other words, there were a lot of small- to medium-volume customer-side leaks, which added up to a big demand. We deployed our own staff and brought in additional leakage detection teams to locate, isolate and repair bursts.

Before I hand over to Trevor, consider, for example, large commercial premises with bursts. Remember that this was the Christmas holiday period, so people were not there. We made numerous attempts to ask keyholders to go back to premises, but some people did not. A leak in commercial premises could amount to three million litres of water a day. We were putting in an extra 200 million litres a day, but leaks from 50 large commercial customers could amount to 150 million litres. We have found some instances — not 50 — of large commercial premises with very large leaks. Think about the number of private houses with leaks. A group of 20 houses leaking 24/7 consumes 250,000 litres of water a day. That puts the scale of the problem in context.

Mr Haslett:

I will be brief with a final look at the slides. We already covered mobilisation and recovery. We mobilised 500 staff and contractors. Gold/silver response is standard practice, and it is referred to in the plan. The gold team is the top incident team, and the silver teams, of which we had four, including lower bronze teams, are out in areas. We protected supplies to hospitals, and we rotated supplies.

The next two graphs were put in to demonstrate where we rotated supplies in the west and the east. Surprisingly, compared with last year, this year we did not have many problems in the west. However, I can come back to that. On 28 December, the largest number of customers we had was in the Cookstown area, and that was really because of one reservoir. After we picked that

problem up, it tailed off. In the east, we rotated supplies in a lot of areas, particularly south and east Belfast and the south-east of the Province. In fact, on 29 December, I was just about to go into a meeting with the executive committee when I got the news that Breda had run empty, which is why the 70,000 properties that you see for that day were on rotational supplies that evening. We will be looking closely at Breda, Newry, Rathfriland and, in particular, the Mourne and Warrenpoint.

The final few slides provide you with details of the amount of bottled water that we issued — 360,000 litres — mostly through council points. I will cover those later. We made direct deliveries to domestic and commercial premises, and our staff delivered to care, nursing and residential homes and picked up on vulnerable customers. We had 139 static tanks around the country. We installed standpipes as well, and we tankered water from County Louth. We established a critical livestock protocol, which is important, because we had good co-operation with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), which established a helpline through which to relay specific enquires concerning farmers or animals in distress. That worked quite well.

With respect to non-Northern Ireland Water resources, during the emergency, I was part of the civil contingencies group Northern Ireland, which covers a lot of public services and local government. I pay personal tribute to council staff, particularly in Belfast and Lisburn, although I do not discount anybody else, who were involved in helping us through the emergency. We had civil service call handlers; people from DARD, who I just mentioned; the Department for Regional Development (DRD) and Roads Service staff delivered bottled water; we worked very closely with the education and library boards, particularly to make sure that the opening of primary schools on Tuesday went as smoothly as it could; and the health sector helped as well. The rest was a combined effort with the NIE delivering bottled water and the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, both of which are part of the CCG (NI). Of course, the PSNI helped us with some aerial surveillance. The Red Cross, Rivers Agency and, finally, Royal Mail also helped.

The final slide gives an update of where we are today. Service reservoir levels have largely recovered. We may still be concerned about one or two, but they are more or less back to normal. We have no rotational interruptions on supplies, and they have been restored across Northern Ireland. We are recovering most of our static tanks, and they should all be back in by today. The

call centre that we acquired on New Year's Eve through Thames Water through the mutual aid is to be stood down as well.

We are back, we think, to normal operations and business as usual, but the organisation is still at heightened awareness. We have downgraded the incident to a category 2 incident, and, therefore, the silver teams are still in place to monitor reservoirs, consumption and telephone complaints that come in. We have also developed an action plan over the past few days, and we are confident that that will provide resilience up to March this year. Thank you for your patience: we are open for questions.

The Chairperson:

Thanks very much, Trevor. I will begin by asking a couple of questions for clarification on the issue. Given that NI Water is a utility that is water-dependent and, in some ways, weather-dependent, do you take on board all the weather forecasting in advance to prepare for what might be a difficult winter?

Mr Haslett:

Yes.

The Chairperson:

So, like everyone else, you would have been on alert because you knew that this was probably going to be the coldest winter in history.

Mr Haslett:

We were on alert, yes. We get forecasts from the Met Office.

The Chairperson:

You talked about moving to a category 1 gold mobilisation. Were all your staff on alert?

Mr Haslett:

Our incident teams, the personnel and the roles are set out quite clearly in the incident plan. Our incident teams — gold, silver and bronze — are all set out. We have people earmarked on rotation to work those roles. We also put individuals in the company on alert who we might require to come in as well.

The Chairperson:

If you went to gold alert mobilisation, I assume that people would physically be in the company rather than on the other end of a telephone, would they not?

Mr Haslett:

Physically, we had sufficient resources in the company. We have already said that, in hindsight, we probably could have provided more call handlers or looked at that resource. That is exactly what we have been doing over the past week or so.

The Chairperson:

The point that I am trying to make, Trevor, is that you had clear advance notice that this was going to be the coldest winter in history. OK?

Mr Haslett:

It developed into the coldest winter in history. If you look at last year's temperatures and how we dealt with the thaw last year —

The Chairperson:

I will come to that.

Mr Haslett:

The plan worked well.

The Chairperson:

OK. There are a lot of rumours about; maybe you can scotch some of those rumours for us. What percentage of your staff was on holidays during that period?

Mr Haslett:

We do not have that percentage. We do not have those figures with us this morning. I am not trying to be evasive, we just do not have them.

The Chairperson:

Could you get those for us?

Mr Haslett:

Yes, we could get those.

The Chairperson:

The second thing that I want to talk to you about — it is an important issue for us — is the contingency plan that you have worked out to deal with this issue. You talked about the mutual aid proposals, and that is, obviously, part of your winter contingency plan.

Mr Haslett:

The mutual aid agreement that we have with Water UK gives us access to a schedule of plant equipment and materials. What we can get is quite clearly set out in that schedule. We looked at that schedule and were confident that we did not require any access to plant equipment. For example, we hired 26 local tankers progressively over the period. Therefore, we have access to contractors, contracting staff, plumbers and all those resources.

The one area that we had to go back on was the call centre support. Our clear understanding at the time was that we did not have access to call-handling support. I look forward to having a conversation with Water UK to take up that issue with it. Eventually, we resourced through Thames Water the call support that I referred to in Bangor, but that was some time after the start of this incident.

The Chairperson:

We have a winter contingency plan, and part of it that could help is the mutual agreement that you have. Are you saying that, as far as you were concerned, the facilities that were offered through that agreement were not actually needed and that what you needed was help with call handling and that that was not included in the agreement? Is that what you are saying? What people are saying —

Mr Haslett:

That is correct. We did —

The Chairperson:

I want to finish the point, because it is important. The spokesperson for the mutual agreement issues said that when it was asked for within three hours it was provided.

Mr Haslett:

That is right. After the issue was clarified, because —

The Chairperson:

Why did you wait until last Friday to clarify the issue? One of the big issues for us is that of information and information given and of customers being able to phone and get some sort of response. Why did you wait until last Friday? That was the weakest point of your whole plan.

Mr Haslett:

It was our understanding at the time that we did not have access through the mutual agreement. We endeavoured to get resources for call handlers locally, and you can see that the numbers were ramped up through the Civil Service and through other agencies.

The Chairperson:

Yes, I know that.

Mr Haslett:

We did access some containers of bottled water.

The Chairperson:

I am not asking that question, Trevor. My question is on call handling. To be absolutely clear for the Committee: you spoke to individuals who were involved in the mutual agreement with other water companies in the rest of the United Kingdom. I assume that you had a conversation with those people. Did you?

Mr Haslett:

Yes.

The Chairperson:

Your understanding was that that conversation led you to believe that call handling was not part of the agreement. Is that correct?

Mr Haslett:

Yes.

The Chairperson:

What changed last Friday? Do you have protocols with those companies?

Mr Haslett:

We do not have hard and fast protocols. Obviously, we have contacts in each of the water companies to whom we can make individual phone calls if we need any help. It came about through several meetings that I had, which were followed up through other individuals who put the CEO of Water UK in contact with our chief executive. They had that phone call, and, of course, it then transpired that Water UK could offer, through one of its members Thames Water, access to call handlers.

The Chairperson:

Did you ask for help with call handling before last Friday?

Mr Haslett:

Not through Water UK.

The Chairperson:

Water UK is the centralising body for the mutual agreement pact. Is that correct?

Mr Haslett:

That is right. It manages it.

The Chairperson:

But, when you were dealing with Water UK over the past number of weeks, did you not ring it to ask it about call handling?

Mr Haslett:

Not to my knowledge. No one in the incident team reported that they did. No.

The Chairperson:

One of the most important issues for Northern Ireland Water was dealing with its customers, and no one thought to ask whether Water UK could provide additional call handling.

Mr Haslett:

That is right, and we openly admit that. We are not trying to conceal that.

The Chairperson:

Another important issue is that of your being ready for what might turn out be a very difficult period. Last year, the Utility Regulator produced a report that stated:

“An exceptional period of cold weather in December 2009 and January 2010 resulted in widespread operational problems including a significant increase in the number of burst mains. The severe weather also adversely affected NI Water’s ability to respond to and resolve these problems.”

I mean, you had a year’s notice about this. Last year’s weather was not as inclement as this year’s. You had a year’s notice that your plan for last year did not even meet the needs of the weather that was pertinent at that time.

Mr Haslett:

This year’s problems came from the unprecedented swing in temperatures combined with the period that a lot of vacant property was not occupied and that a lot of commercial and industrial premises were not occupied. Put those two factors together. In fact, as Sara said, if you look at the graph that compares water distribution over the three years, there is a marked difference between what happened in 2009 and what happened in 2010. In 2009, the incident plan that we had in place coped. We reviewed it and looked at it. We did not expect that violent change in temperatures. If you look at the forecast, I do not believe —

The Chairperson:

Trevor, weather forecasters predicted a severe downturn in temperatures. You got notice of that weeks in advance.

Mr Haslett:

Yes. We did.

The Chairperson:

You say that you were unaware that the weather would be as inclement as it was. Everyone knew that it would be that inclement.

Mr Haslett:

Yes. However, we did not get news on how rapid the thaw would be. I remember that, one day,

there were nine inches of snow where I live. The next morning, it was gone. It surprised me. We all looked at the temperature forecast for Monday 27 December. It was certainly not 10°C; it was around 0°C or 2°C. There was quite a swing. If you look at the event in the previous year's terms, that was the main issue. In particular, it occurred during the Christmas holidays with, as Sara pointed out, 70% of defects being on private property. In the vast majority of those instances, we had problems with vacant industrial estates and unoccupied premises during the Christmas holidays.

The Chairperson:

Therefore, basically, the difficulty that we have at present is that much of the blame lies with commercial customers who did not go back to check their properties. Is that what you are saying?

Mr Haslett:

Well, as Sara pointed out, we came across a number of breaches.

The Chairperson:

I know that she pointed that out.

Mr Haslett:

We had to isolate those breaches. A number of them were throwing out around four megalitres of water a day. That is around 0.5% of the amount of water that we were putting into the supply. There needs to be only around 50 such breaches and you can see the scale of the problem that can arise.

The Chairperson:

We do not know that there were 50 such breaches. We cannot quantify how many there were.

Mr Haslett:

We have kept a record of that. When the review takes place, much of that information will be made available. It is not completely finished yet because it has been less than 24 hours since we downgraded the incident.

The Chairperson:

You believe that much of the responsibility for the incident lies with commercial companies and individuals who did not go back to check their properties. Is that correct?

Mr Haslett:

It lies with many owners of vacant industrial premises and properties. Of course, we own up to our part with regard to the number of burst pipes that we repaired in our infrastructure. However, if you look at the prolonged nature of the event and the sudden drop in the level of water in reservoirs, particularly in the Belfast area, it leaves you in no doubt that the same pattern was happening right around the Belfast ring.

The Chairperson:

OK. There was also an issue about the information that was provided to customers, the website's weaknesses, customers' frustration when they phoned in and all of that. You are saying, and this is one of the big issues for us, that the mutual agreement did not cover that.

Mr Haslett:

We need to be clear that our understanding at the time was that —

The Chairperson:

The agreement either covered it or it did not. You are saying that it did not cover it. Had it covered it, you would, hopefully, have had —

Mr Haslett:

We would have made that call on Monday 27 December, yes.

The Chairperson:

OK.

Mr McDevitt:

Just to start off, at what point during the incident did each of you return to work? On what day did each of you return to your desks?

Mr Haslett:

I returned to work on 28 December. I had family commitments. When I said that I was unavailable, I was completely unavailable. On that Tuesday night, I actually prepared the outline of a recovery strategy. Therefore, when I got back into work, I hit the ground running. I have been in work since.

Mr McDevitt:

Basically, therefore, you were back at work on 29 December?

Mr Haslett:

I was back on 28 December.

The Chairperson:

You were at your desk on 28 December?

Mr Haslett:

I was at the incident centre. I spent a great deal of time at Stormont Castle and here.

Mr McDevitt:

What about you, Ms Venning?

Ms Venning:

On 24 December, while I was at home, I took calls throughout the day from my head of networks water. Therefore, we were monitoring reservoirs and liaising on 24 December and on Christmas Day. From the afternoon of 26 December, which is Boxing Day, I was in our call centre. From 27 December, I was in the incident centre. I remained there every day.

Mr Mulholland:

My situation is very similar to Sara's. I was in the office on 24 December. I worked from home on 25 and 26 December, and I handled the other half of what Sara was doing on Boxing Day. On 27 December, I was in the incident centre, and I have been there ever since.

Mr McDevitt:

Whose job was it to announce the escalation on 26 December?

Ms Venning:

I called the escalation.

Mr McDevitt:

So it was your decision to escalate it?

Ms Venning:

Yes.

Mr McDevitt:

Looking back earlier in the month, the Chairman has raised a lot of concerns about severe weather forecasts, and we could debate whether or not you knew that this was coming for a long time. Did the senior executive team discuss preparedness for Christmas at any meetings in the second half of December?

Mr Haslett:

There was an executive committee meeting on the last week that we broke up, and, although it was not a formal item on the agenda —

Mr McDevitt:

So it was not on the agenda?

Mr Haslett:

It was not a formal item on the agenda, but it was discussed. The majority of the senior management team have been in since the start of the incident and have been meeting and debriefing twice a day in the incident room.

Mr McDevitt:

So it was not a formal item on the last agenda of the senior executive team's meeting before Christmas?

Mr Haslett:

No.

Mr McDevitt:

OK. When did the board last meet before Christmas?

Ms Venning:

It met on 20 December.

Mr McDevitt:

Was it an item on the board meeting's agenda?

Ms Venning:

Again, it was not a formal item on the agenda.

Mr McDevitt:

So, before Christmas, neither the senior executive team nor the board had discussed potential crisis planning over the Christmas break?

Mr Haslett:

Not formally as an agenda item.

Mr McDevitt:

I will ask you a very simple question: how many customers were off supply each day between 26 December and 4 January?

Mr Haslett:

When you say off supply, do you mean permanently off supply or on rotation?

Mr McDevitt:

Either. How many households or businesses — how many customers — were off supply each day?

Mr Haslett:

When we started the incident, our estimate was over 40,000 customers. Within five or six days, we closed that down to about 400. I will get back to the numbers in a minute. Yesterday, we shut the incident down with 30 customers off supply. I gave you the rotational numbers because they

went up and down quite a bit, which makes it difficult to determine no supply or rotational supply. The 40,000 had no supply.

Mr McDevitt:

You said the word “estimate”, Mr Haslett. Do you know how many people were off supply each day during the incident?

Mr Haslett:

Yes, we have a record of that.

Mr McDevitt:

Can you tell us those figures?

Mr Haslett:

I do not have those figures with me. We were going to put them in as a slide, but we had to reduce the presentation.

Mr McDevitt:

It might be helpful for us to get that information. A new piece of information, which is possibly surprising to us all, is that more than 70% of all bursts were not on your network. Therefore, this is not an underinvestment problem or a network problem. Are you saying that the fundamental issue here in terms of massive loss from the system and the consequent decline in the reservoirs is not breaches on Northern Ireland Water-owned pipes but bursts that were happening on the private side, either in homes or in commercial properties?

Mr Haslett:

A significant number of the 72%, yes, but we do not have any powers over the private sector and investment. Our 30% — if you want to call it that — is where we target our investment, which is water mains rehabilitation.

Mr McDevitt:

Do you not have a duty in your licence to ensure that private customers are aware of their duty to preserve water and of their duties to their neighbours and to the network? They cannot be wasteful or neglect their water infrastructure. You have such a duty, do you not?

Mr Haslett:

We do, and we isolated a number of supplies where we found water running in properties.

Mr McDevitt:

Back to the point about engineering resource. I am no water expert, but if you knew early on that the problem was on those private properties, surely there would have been a great opportunity to deploy a considerable number of people on the ground to simply go after those problems and identify them.

Mr Haslett:

That is exactly what we did. I brought in a lot of my own engineering resource and plumbing contractors to carry out that work.

Mr McDevitt:

Do you believe that you had enough people doing that work?

Mr Haslett:

I believe that we did have enough people, because we targeted the areas with the highest consumption, such as Breda and Poleglass in Belfast, and Hannahstown. We are able to target the areas of high usage through the district metered area zones. Those are all monitored on telemetry, so we can compare historical trends and peaks.

Mr McDevitt:

So you are saying that, under the mutual aid assistance, for example, there was an agreement that would have given you access to engineering resource. No one seems to debate that; it seems to be clear. However, at this stage, Mr Haslett, you still do not believe that you could have done with an extra 200 or 300 engineers chasing down private sector leaks at any point during the crisis, in spite of the amount of seepage from the system as a result of them.

Mr Haslett:

Our record of reducing the number of customers out of supply — from 40,000 to 400 in what was a relatively short period, during what are also public holidays in the UK — is witness to the fact that Northern Ireland Water worked very hard and was committed to reducing that figure, along with the contractors that we brought in and the other resources that other public and government

agencies supplied to us.

Mr Mulholland:

We also tried, as far as possible, to get the point across in the media that we knew that there was an issue on the private side. We made many pleas on radio and television for people to return to their premises, lag their pipes, know where their stopcock is and conserve water.

Mr McDevitt:

Mr Mulholland, I am sure that most of my colleagues around the table will have phoned or emailed in details of stuff that we saw on the streets. It strikes me that that would have been an obvious place to draw down resource in a hurry, given that you knew that the problem was happening on the private side, as you describe it. I just do not understand why that resource was not drawn down.

I will ask one final question. On 28 December you recorded 403,000 call attempts to the call centre, and 3,344 were answered. That is less than 1%. That is an abysmal performance. That is worse than what your worst-case scenario could possibly look like.

Mr Mulholland:

As I said earlier, you could not plan for that. I used the word embarrassing earlier, which it is. The sheer scale of that and the suffering that it caused to customers is very serious.

Mr McDevitt:

On Saturday morning, Mr Haslett, you will be chief executive. Do you think that the chief executive could, and should, have been here this morning?

Mr Haslett:

I am really not prepared to comment on that. I left Westland House last night at 12.10 am and discussed the situation with the board and with Lawrence himself. It is obviously a personal decision for Lawrence.

Mr McDevitt:

He is still chief executive; he has a corporate duty to the organisation. He is still your boss.

Mr Haslett:

He has a number of personal issues to sort out with his resignation, even as we speak.

Mr McDevitt:

So he is spending this morning sorting out the details of his pay-off and his resignation rather than coming here to be accountable.

Mr Haslett:

I imagine that he is determining some of the details of his resignation.

The Chairperson:

To clarify, Trevor: 70% of the leakage was in the commercial system and 30% was in yours, is that right?

Mr Haslett:

Seventy per cent of the defects —

The Chairperson:

— were in commercial companies, and 30% were in yours.

Ms Venning:

Private customers, not commercial.

The Chairperson:

What percentage of the overall leakage was the 30% leaking out of your pipes?

Mr Haslett:

We are going to be working that out.

The Chairperson:

So you do not know?

Mr Haslett:

We can work it out.

The Chairperson:

The point that I am trying to make is that, although you can say that 70% of the defects were in the commercial system, that could be 10% of the loss.

Mr Haslett:

We will be going back through the records and working out the number of repairs that we carried out on our mains and the size of those mains. We will then work out estimates of flow figures and volume in actual terms.

The Chairperson:

The issue is the leakage of water; it is not the bursts.

Mr Haslett:

I would widen it to the increase in demand, because that could take other things into consideration.

The Chairperson:

The point that I am trying to make is that, even though 70% of the defects were outside of your bailiwick, the 30% that you had responsibility for could account for 80% of the leakage.

Ms Venning:

There is nothing in our figures to suggest that.

The Chairperson:

But we do not know. What is the figure?

Ms Venning:

As I explained, the trunk mains, which are the high-volume pipes, are not leaking; they did not leak.

The Chairperson:

What is your leakage figure? If it is not that, tell us what it is.

Mr Haslett:

Mr Chairman, we will provide that figure whenever —

The Chairperson:

Just a minute, Trevor: what is the figure for leakage? What percentage of the leakage belongs to Northern Ireland Water?

Ms Venning:

We will provide that figure —

The Chairperson:

No. Do not tell me —

Ms Venning:

I do not have that figure with me at the minute.

The Chairperson:

Do not tell me that you do not know —

Ms Venning:

There is nothing in the work that we have carried out to suggest that the majority of the volume of water leaking from —

The Chairperson:

Give us a ballpark figure, then. Tell me what the ballpark figure is.

Ms Venning:

With respect, I would like to come back with that figure as opposed to pulling a figure —

The Chairperson:

Pardon?

Ms Venning:

With respect, I would like to come back to the Committee with that figure.

Mr I McCrea:

Thank you for coming along. I still believe that the chief executive should be here, but that is another story for another day. He is not here, so, we have to deal with that.

A number of the issues that I have to raise have been partly addressed in your presentation or through questions asked by other members. My biggest concern about the whole process is the lack of communication, primarily to customers. First, they were not able to get through. We have heard about the contingency and the call-handling side of things, and that it did get better.

The information on the website was poor, to say the least. I could go to the BBC — it is not too often that I commend it on anything — and it was able to break down the school closures to counties and to every single school over the period of the freeze. Northern Ireland Water could barely get up-to-date information to customers about whether the water was going to be off. There were times when information said that water was going to be off on a rotation basis and it was not, and there were times when it was to be on and was not. The information stated that water in some postcodes and areas, which did not even have water in the first place, were to be rotated.

The date that you referred to, which I think was 28 December, was the peak. There was a high volume of calls that day in Cookstown. That was probably the highest volume of calls that my office staff have had in one day. I have to be honest; people who did not get through to you, which was a large number of people over that period of time, were contacting elected representatives to try and get through. Yes, we had a dedicated number to ring, but the information that we were getting was no different. The staff — and I commend them for the work that they were doing — were basically reading what was on the website. That was of no use, because I had already read that before I rang them.

My difficulty in this whole process was that, as an elected representative, I was ringing on behalf of constituents and the call was being logged. I was telling people that an engineer would be out within 24 hours, but that was not happening in every case. On top of that, there were circumstances where people were being just told the same thing when they did get through. Some people felt that they were being talked down; that it was their fault and not Northern Ireland Water's fault.

There are a number of complaints, but communication is a big one. I would like to know what has been learned from this and what steps are being taken. I started to get responses in the past few days — I thank you for that, but it was a long time coming — about how I could respond to my constituents who were contacting me to find out when somebody was going to be out and what the problem was. In one of those cases, it took until two days ago to find out that it was actually on their property, because they did not know that it was their problem. I spoke to some of the officers individually, and I continue to do so, but communication and how people were being informed was a big problem.

What about people who did not have access to the Internet, such as the elderly? Anybody who rang was given a blanket response: check the website. How were people who did not have access to websites and to the Internet supposed to get that information? When those people rang, as I said, they were read the stuff that was on a website, which was of no value to anybody.

So, a lot of work needs to be done. I hope that we do not face such a situation again, but, if we do, a lot of lessons have to be learned from this and a lot more modern, easy and accessible ways of communication have to be made available to everyone, not just to those who have access to the Internet. As I said, the response was poor to say the least.

Mr Mulholland:

A number of points have been touched on there.

First, you are absolutely right. The core issue for us, from a customer point of view, was the lack of information and communication and how we were communicating even what we knew. There are massive lessons for us to learn from that, which will form the core and the most important part of any review.

I also want to offer thanks — and I am not being, to use a bad word, cheesy — to the elected representatives for the amount of work and information that they helped us with as this incident went on by getting information back to us about certain areas and certain things. I hope that we tried our best to get information back out there. Our elected representative hotline had a serious issue in the middle of the incident, like every other line. Part of the reason for that was that the number got into the public domain, which did not help. We quickly moved to introduce three mobile phones for the people who were involved to get the vital links to the elected

representatives back and to get that information flow going again.

We struggled badly to get good information on to the website. We were not able to get that information out at street level, which is what customers were really looking for, because postcodes such as BT9 cover a great many areas. So, there have to be lessons learned from that, and we have to do that quickly.

You said that there have to be better technologies, and there are. If you call up other utilities in this part of the world because you are off-supply, they will tell you who you are, what area you are in and when the supply is coming back on. Often, those utilities beat their customers' expectation. That is where we need to get to.

Mr I McCrea:

Do you accept that that is not in place, which is a major failing?

Mr Mulholland:

Absolutely; it is a major failing, and we are a long way from that capability. I want the Committee to understand that there is a lot to be done to get to that level of capability. One must have good customer data and good infrastructure data, because you need to be able to link the customer to the infrastructure. You then need to have the technology to be able to identify the phone numbers and give the right information. Then, you have got to be able to deliver on the ground by setting an expectation and meeting it within a set recovery time. That is where we need to get to. We failed very badly through what we gave to our customers.

Mr I McCrea:

Will you also tell us how long you feel it is going to take? I appreciate that a review is going to happen, but how long will it take to reach that level? How much investment needs to be made to bring about that level of information?

Mr Mulholland:

There are a number of points to make on that. There is a level of investment needed, but I do not want to sit here today and pretend that I know exactly what that level is. There are things that we can do quite quickly regarding some of the call centre technology that we already have involving IVRs and so on. Many customers do not like IVRs and prefer to speak to a warm voice.

However, when situations like this occur, it is often better to use non-warm-voice technology to help to deal with the problem. We will move towards that very quickly and will make the quick-win improvements that we can as fast as possible.

One other issue that you touched on was the customers who do not have Internet access. You are right that there are a great many older and vulnerable customers who do not have Internet access. We attempted to use Ceefax to get information out there. There are other things that we are considering as part of our action plan, which I am sure that Trevor will touch on later, to help those who do not have Internet access.

The Chairperson:

The question should be why that was not in place in the first place.

Mr F McCann:

Chairperson, you and Ian both raised the whole question of communications, which probably goes to the crux of the matter — a lack of communication with people. Who had responsibility for ensuring that an effective communication plan was put in operation? Is there a broad acceptance that there was no communication plan and that whatever you had planned just did not work? I take it that that was the case.

Mr Haslett:

There was a communication plan, but it was obviously not fit for purpose on the scale of this incident. Northern Ireland Water admits to that, and that is the very first area that we have looked at. We need to act urgently to bring about what improvements we can in the very short space of time that we have in case we find ourselves in a similar situation, although probably not in the next few weeks. However, we have made significant strides in improving that.

We have a fairly sophisticated system of telemetry. We know exactly where our water is going and in which areas it is used. It is the disjoint between that and our operatives or contractors out in the field who are carrying out repairs, and how that information gets back to the call centre accurately. At the minute we carry our information mostly on BT codes. We do carry it in streets, but we found that if we tried to put in the information by street, the website was, in blunt terms, clogged up. We are looking at how we can provide better information.

We are also looking at the rest of the UK, because I know that other water companies have experienced similar difficulties, but those were not as widely publicised. We will certainly be following through our contacts with them to see how companies such as Yorkshire Water, in particular, coped.

Mr F McCann:

Conall raised the point about a private water supply matching a public water supply. I know that in the cold period, from two or three days before Christmas right through to yesterday, tens of thousands of people were in touch with the Housing Executive regarding burst pipes and a lack of heating all over the Christmas period. They seemed to have the same difficulties and problems that you faced. Will your review take that into consideration, or does there need to be a separate review of how that operation was handled?

Mr Haslett:

Northern Ireland Water will be carrying out its own specific review. The Civil Contingencies Group for Northern Ireland (CCG(NI)), of which I am a member, will be carrying out a review among all the agencies, particularly the Housing Executive, because it also experienced high call volumes over that period. That CCG(NI) review will take place, and lessons will be learned, probably within the next week or so.

Mr F McCann:

I tried to ring on 27 December, I think. Unlike Ian, who seemed to get through right away, I made 62 calls in a row to the dedicated helpline. I found it difficult when I did not get through, and if I found it difficult to get through to a dedicated helpline, what was it like for people trying to phone in on other numbers? A big lot of people were obviously phoning the people around this table. So, there was a communication problem not only on a wider basis, but also between elected representatives and NI Water. Does operational responsibility for emergency planning lie with NI Water or the Department?

Mr Haslett:

The emergency plan that we work to is the major incident plan (MIP), and we have a dedicated emergency officer who reviews that. We also carry out regular mock incidents to test that plan. So, Northern Ireland Water has a dedicated person internally who looks after that. The emergency plan going up to the next grade is looked at or managed by what is called gold

command of the CCG(NI), which contains public agencies, the PSNI and the Fire and Rescue Service — all the people you expect to be involved or implicated with an emergency such as this, or flooding, or something else.

Mr F McCann:

Ultimately, it lies with NI Water?

Mr Haslett:

Yes, where it is our infrastructure. If the impact of what happens to us impacts on other services such as the health sector, it is upgraded to the CCG(NI) group. We are responsible for managing our own emergency plan and updating, testing and reviewing it on our own infrastructure.

Mr Boylan:

Thank you for coming along. I want to go back over a few points to seek clarification on your answers. They are not acceptable. We can go down the communication line. As to the contingency plan, there had been 10 to 14 nights of frost, and there had been snow for three or four weeks in some areas, not all. Knowing the weather reports that you were getting, I find it unacceptable that you say that you were not fully prepared to deal with it. Trevor, you are an engineer — is that correct?

Mr Haslett:

That is right.

Mr Boylan:

Before going off for the holiday break, I spoke to plumbers. Those guys told me that they had told customers and the public to be very careful because, when the thaw came, there would be a lot of burst pipes. Surely to God, you should have been more geared up for exactly what was coming down the tracks. You talked about the 70% private defects and the 30% mains. A lot of the people who contacted me, private customers, got their own pipes fixed. I cannot accept that there are not stop valves. You mentioned businesses. You cannot say to me that, when you realised, you tried to get people to contact you and go back into premises to switch off water, stopcocks and everything else. It is surprising that you could not have dealt with such situations by yourselves from the mains. I will let you answer that in a minute. I find that totally unacceptable.

I am also surprised that the percentage figures are not now nailed down. You talk about the 70%. When it comes down to it, given the businesses, the commercial sector and the private sector, and taking the Housing Executive properties into account as well among that 70%, I do not put it down to an increase in demand for water. I put it down to the loss of it. You put it across as an increase in demand. It is actually loss.

Ms Venning:

Yes. It is the loss of water through leaks.

Mr Boylan:

I would like you to comment on that. I do not think that you were geared up. It is very flippant to say that it was a contingency plan that came up in 1990. You are dealing with customers all the time, but the communications were diabolical. You gave out three numbers. I was lucky; I had some private, personal numbers and I got through. I had the hotline and another number. I got through. However, when I phoned the three numbers, the person who answered was reading off a screen to me.

I want to commend some of those who answered telephones. Some had clearly worked in the service and could tell me exactly what was going on in each postcode with the pipes, reservoirs, levels, pressures and build-up. Others read the website to me over the telephone. I can read the website for myself. There is no point in telephoning for someone to read out the website to me. I want you to touch on that point. I have a few other questions.

Mr Haslett:

I will let Sara answer on the lead-up to the contingency. You are right, Mr Boylan. We isolated over 400 private supplies. Where we saw water running, we isolated it and left a card for the property owner explaining that we had turned their water off. A number of schools were involved in that process, and we had to go back to them.

On the issue of working out the volume, we have already covered it. We will put it under review. It is not a simple process, and you will have to accept my word on it. Sara will cover the lead-up to contingency and the identification that there was a problem coming with the temperatures.

Ms Venning:

Through the whole of December, we closely monitored our network and prepared. We could not predict the impact or its scale. The thaw came so quickly and, in the lead-up to it in that week of 20 December, there were conflicting weather reports. Some said that the thaw could be gradual. Had it been so, in all likelihood, we would not be sitting here today. We would not have seen the same quantity of burst pipes or the same call for water to flow through the burst pipes. It is leakage, as you quite rightly say.

Mr Boylan:

I understand that, because you have said it twice. Let us be honest. With severe frost and weather conditions, there should have been a better backup. You can say to me that there was a quick thaw and everything else. All I say to you is that, in the private sector, ordinary plumbers on the ground were getting ready. They were faced with it, and they dealt with it. Some of those guys had Christmas Day off, and then they worked right through. Let us accept it for what it is. You say that there was a quick thaw, but there was not enough backup.

Ms Venning:

Can I say that, from the beginning of December —

The Chairperson:

Hold on.

Mr Boylan:

Excuse me, when you saw how difficult the situation was that Wednesday, why were more subcontractors not brought in to deal with that? There should have been. However, that will be covered in the review.

Ms Venning:

The review shall bear out that we brought in additional staff and that we put additional contract staff on notice to be available to us.

Mr Boylan:

Given that people were off for two or three days in a row, more could, obviously, have been done. That will come up in the review.

I want to go on to the communication problems. I know that members mentioned different media groups, but I will just talk about the media network that was available to all of us. Liam, if communication was not a problem, why did the message not get out to the media through your PR? All that you had to do was contact the media and say, “Look it, —”. When did you first start to roll out that whole process?

Mr Mulholland:

I want to touch on two things. I will take a step back to the elected rep situation: I guess that I am partially labouring that, but it is very important. We will be, very quickly, taking steps to address some of the issues to which you just referred about the elected reps’ line, such as how to protect and man that, and how to man it over a protracted period in a major incident. That is all part of what we are starting to look at right now.

As regards communication, during the early part of the freeze coming into the Christmas period, many people said that they were sick of listening to and looking at me because I was on every radio station and trying to get on to every show to say, “Please, be aware. There are going to be issues. It is coming.” We tried to get the message across that we felt that there were potentially big problems on the customer side. However, interviewers were sometimes more interested in other things and did not let us get that point across, unfortunately. Right through from before Christmas, we were trying to get the message out there.

We struggled with communication. In the middle of the incident, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister came into the business and commented immediately that communication is at the core of this. We did everything that we could. We tried to use Ceefax and we tried to improve the website, which progressed, but not nearly fast enough. The information that was there was not telling customers what they really wanted to know, which was when the water would be going off and coming on. We have definitely learned lessons that will need to be addressed quickly as part of the review.

Mr I McCrea:

The information was not good enough, never mind not fast enough.

Mr Mulholland:

Absolutely. At one point, it was well documented that we had put on —

The Chairperson:

Just leave it, Liam. It was a shambles.

Mr Boylan:

I have a couple of other points to make. Obviously, the chief executive is now gone.

Mr I McCrea:

He is not. He is still here.

Mr Boylan:

He is here until tomorrow. That is right; I stand corrected.

Was a message sent to the board that you would be able to cover all eventualities? Did the chief executive send a blog or message?

Ms Venning:

On 23 December, I drafted a note to the board updating it on the work that we had undertaken in response to our last thaw event and on how we were progressing through the Christmas period.

Mr Boylan:

Did you send that on behalf of the chief executive?

Ms Venning:

On behalf of my team, which was involved in the winter contingency and preparation —

Mr Boylan:

Did the chief executive send a message that all eventualities would be covered and that NIW would be able to deal with this?

Mr Haslett:

What Sara is saying is that she copied that note to the chief executive and the rest of the board. Is that right?

Ms Venning:

Yes.

Mr Boylan:

As regards DRD's responsibility, did it seek any assurances before the holiday period that NIW would be able to deal with a crisis if one arose? Did shareholders or anybody from DRD seek any assurance or talk to anybody?

Ms Venning:

They would have been copied in to my note, so they would have been covered in the note that I issued.

Mr Boylan:

That was just in the response. You sent the response around those people to say that you were capable of dealing with every and any eventuality.

Ms Venning:

It was to make people aware of the preparation that was in hand.

Mr Boylan:

But they had not contacted you, it was just included in the e-mail that you copied to them.

Ms Venning:

I issued a note.

Mr Boylan:

I have one final question. The public have suffered enough. Can you clarify the call costs to NIW? I was on to NIW for four full days, for my own benefit. I know that people were trying to get through, especially on 27 December and 28 December. What is the cost of all that from your and a customer point of view?

Mr Mulholland:

I think that what you are driving at is that the 08457 number is a local rate number and the Leakline number is a free phone number. When we come to the review, inevitably, that is

something that will be looked at.

The Chairperson:

I have a couple of questions. The fundamental failing of Northern Ireland Water has always been around data. We have had enormous difficulties around proper data being provided by Northern Ireland Water. The company got a substantial amount of money to improve its data in line with the regulator. Where did that money go? Is this not part of the data that we are talking about?

Mr Haslett:

It is a question of information as opposed to data. I already said that we have quite sophisticated information on our telemetry. We know where the customer addresses were in the areas that we turned off. There may well be a disjoint, which is the problem in getting that information from the field to the call centre and to the customer.

The Chairperson:

Is that not a data issue?

Mr Haslett:

I do not think that it is a question of data but of information and communication.

The Chairperson:

OK. What about the people who you registered as vulnerable? Did you phone all those people?

Mr Haslett:

We have a register of vulnerable people. Our difficulty, I suppose, is that people have to register to be on that.

The Chairperson:

Did you phone all the people who are registered?

Mr Haslett:

I would have to check that information. However, we have an interface with the councils, the health sector — with a lot of the care homes, nursing homes and residential homes — and community centres, and a lot of the information for people outside our register was picked up

during this incident, and the provision of bottled water —

The Chairperson:

What I am saying is that the most vulnerable people register as vulnerable with Northern Ireland Water because of the situations that they are in. I am asking whether Northern Ireland Water, knowing that those people are vulnerable and are registered as such, specifically contacted those people.

Mr Haslett:

I will have to check that information, Mr Chairman, before I can come back to you.

Ms Venning:

Throughout the crisis, we worked with the health agencies, which obviously have an extensive list of —

The Chairperson:

I am not asking that question. The question I am asking is whether you had a register of people who registered as vulnerable with Northern Ireland Water.

Mr Haslett:

I understand the question.

The Chairperson:

Irrespective of the Health Service, you have a responsibility. I am asking whether you, as a company, rang those people registered as being vulnerable.

Mr Haslett:

I will come back on that and give you a categorical answer.

Mr Armstrong:

In the area that I represent, I found out that the information that I received from dedicated phone lines was totally useless. The persons I spoke to did not even know as much as I knew myself. I know three or four local engineers, and they were able to give me the information. If you, as a dedicated helpline, had had that same information, you would have been able to help a lot more

people.

You need more people on the ground in local areas. That is your deficiency. The local people knew how to manage the system, but you up at the top did not. You need a local water service with more staff and more engineers out there helping to manage the lines. When lines burst, you should be able, as with telephone lines, to turn off that water and divert it to some other area that maybe does not have as many burst pipes.

You have to realise that most businesspeople have their own dedicated water supply and do not need your water. Where would you have been had those businesspeople not had their own water and bore wells? You would not have had enough water in the system if people had not had their own bore wells.

You said that you would use the Police Service for giving out information on whether pipes were burst here, there or the other place. That was a good enough idea, but, maybe, if people had been able to get through to your telephone lines, they could have given you that information. Nobody could get through or get information. We, as MLAs, are out there on the ground, and we need to be able to give our constituents information. We would not have been able to do that, only that we have the private numbers of engineers. You have to look at getting more people on the ground and having not so many people, who are supposed to know something but who know very little, sitting up in offices.

Mr Haslett:

I accept what you say, Mr Armstrong. I have admitted that one of the key areas that we are under way in improving is getting information from the work site to the call centre. As soon as the engineer or the contractor arrives, it is water off or water on, and they should let the call centre know.

Mr Armstrong:

You need to work a bit more with your local engineers and get a few more extra ones on the ground.

Mr Bresland:

You are welcome, but my points are similar to Mr Armstrong's. In 2009-2010, you reorganised

the plumbing inspectors. I would like to see local men on the ground who know every tap and every valve. I want to know whether the men with whom you replaced local plumbing inspectors at that time are doing as many inspections now. How often are they doing it? Are you satisfied that the change from local people to whoever does it now represents value for money?

Mr Haslett:

You have probably guessed that I come from an era of knowing that there were a lot more people on the ground than there are now. There are still local plumbing inspectors, but we moved over to, if you like, self-regulation on the plumbing side through building control. In other words, we use accredited plumbers and firms, and that is all self-certified, which is supposed to do away with the need for a large number of plumbing inspectors. Many people have left the organisation over a number of years after we introduced mobile work management, which was intended to deliver efficiency savings. We should not forget that Northern Ireland Water has been subject to efficiency savings targets over the years.

If we are going to replace staff, no matter what they work at, we must look at the need to ensure that all of the replacement management and information systems are joined up so that the proper information gets through in conditions such as this, when we have an emergency during which we do not have — to take up Mr Robinson's point — people out on the ground with the eyes and understanding of where the infrastructure is and which valves to turn off and on. I can accept that.

Mr Bresland:

Were all the plumbers who are left called out in the freeze? Were they out on the ground as well?

Mr Haslett:

I do not believe that anybody who had left the organisation recently was called back in.

Mr Bresland:

That is separate and is not what I am asking. Were any who are still with Northern Ireland Water out working in the freeze?

Mr Haslett:

The majority of what we term the local operational staff in the field worked on rota systems over

that time. We put in additional engineering resources from my own directorate and others on the ground as well in targeted areas of high leakage.

Mr G Robinson:

I thank the team for coming today. Sara touched on the issue of derelict commercial properties, which is the first of several points that I will make. I had one example in the Coleraine area of a property that has been derelict for quite a while, and the water was absolutely pouring out of that for two or three days. Due to that, the whole estate around the Greenmount area had no water. Some of the people living on the estate rang Waterline to let it know, but it was a couple of days before anyone came near it to try to contact the owner and so forth.

I had great difficulty in trying to get through on the three numbers that I had. Eventually, I received an e-mail. I do not mind mentioning the person in question: I spoke to Graham Smith, and that bloke was absolutely brilliant. I was greatly relieved after speaking to him. I was so frustrated for two or three days until I eventually got him. He gave me so much help; it was unbelievable, and I thank him. The workers on the ground did a very sterling job in light of the severe weather that we had, as temperatures plummeted to -18°C or -20°C. Those people, and all of the staff, are to be commended very highly.

I have a question about the line of communication that you have with the Met Office during the winter. There seems to be something lax. There should be better communication with the Met Office at this time of the year. For example, allegedly, we will be back to square one later this week because there will be more snow and ice and so forth. I hate to ask, but how will you cope this time around? Are there any contingency plans? I am looking forward, rather than back, but we have been through an awful time.

Lots of people, particularly the elderly, still use radios as well as TVs. More radio and TV bulletins should have been given out over those peak two or three days for people who cannot access websites. Quite a lot of people use radios for communication and so on. To my mind, that was never used, even though it would have been a great line of communication. I suggested that to the communication bloke, and he thought that it was an excellent idea. It is something that you should look at for the future. There was no mention whatsoever on Ceefax of the Coleraine area, which was very badly affected. Somebody fell down badly in that regard.

Mr Haslett:

I will work my way quickly through those points. We used Ceefax as a medium to put forward messages. I agree with the point about radio communication. Liam tried to give out bulletins. One of the actions going forward is to issue bulletins on the hour every hour with a regular update. The report states that we have downgraded to a category 2, but we are still in a state of readiness: the incident teams are still in place.

We get a daily report from the Met Office on the forecast for the day ahead and a short-range forecast for the forthcoming week. We — Liam, others and I — continually put out the message about keyholders checking their premises. The last point, and, I suppose, the most important one, is that we still rely on our staff and others and members of the public reporting visible runs of water. Our leakage detection teams are into the more sophisticated leaks that cannot be seen above ground and are buried. Those teams worked after midnight. I know that that was self-defeating because people may not have been able to get through to the line to report them. We accept that.

Mr G Robinson:

Allegedly, some elected representatives gave the hotline number that we have to some of your customers. That bunged up the whole system; it did not help.

Mr Mulholland:

That is true.

Some kind words have been said today about the ground staff and so on, both call centre and field. I have spoken to many of those staff, and members have no idea how much those kind words mean. Thank you.

The Chairperson:

I have a question about the issue about sharing information among you, customers, management and all of that.

In the strategic business plan, you got additional money for the mobile preparation work on information sharing. You got extra money to do that. Where was that money spent?

Mr Haslett:

What do you mean by information? I am a bit unsighted on the question.

The Chairperson:

We are talking about the discussion around information and contact between management, the staff on the ground and your customers. In the strategic business plan, you got additional money to upgrade that system so that the information that staff, management and customers have could be easily disseminated. You got additional money for that. Where was that money spent?

Mr Haslett:

That is right. It is mobile work management in the field, which I touched on. It is one of the areas that I am keen to look at.

The Chairperson:

What I am saying to you, Trevor, is that you got additional money to do that. Is it done? Was the money spent? Clearly the communication issues have not been addressed.

Mr Haslett:

The bulk of the investment has been made in mobile work management and Toughbooks for when the operatives are out in the field, and, as part of the review, we need to look at how efficiently that was done, because information on where work is being carried out is supposed to go straight back to appear on call centre screens. That is part of the review.

The Chairperson:

This is going to be some review.

Mr Haslett:

It is going to be some review.

Mr Leonard:

Thanks very much, folks, for being here this morning and this afternoon. Liam, on the subject of thanking the people who were out doing the real hard graft, I add my voice, because an awful lot of hours were put in, in absolutely dreadful circumstances. In the big debate on what was covered, some staff may be feeling bombarded, so it must go out that their work is appreciated.

Nevertheless, questions remain to be asked. I have a couple of quickies. On a point of clarification, people are seeking assurances about what was in place. My understanding is that, before the holiday period, the Department's shareholder unit sought assurances that everything was in place to deal with all situations. Can you confirm that?

Ms Venning:

In all likelihood, the communication came through our company secretary, so that assurance can be provided, although I do not have it with me now.

Mr Leonard:

It is important that we confirm that with absolute clarity, because the assurance was given before the holiday break, and the Department's shareholder unit was obviously doing its job properly in that regard.

You know that the Executive will be discussing the review, which has been mentioned many times. Obviously, the company has a massive responsibility to co-operate with that review. Will that include the co-operation of Mr MacKenzie? Has he assured you that he will co-operate fully with the review, even after his resignation takes effect? If he has not given that assurance, did you seek an assurance from him that he would be available to contribute to and co-operate with the review procedure?

Mr Haslett:

I have not seen the terms of reference of the review. We have carried out a review at board level, which, I believe, has been passed on to the Minister's office. Nor have I had sight of the terms of Laurence MacKenzie's resignation to determine whether what Mr Leonard said is part of it. All that we can do is to take note of your question and concerns and, possibly, come back. I am unsighted on the particular issues that you referred to, nor would I expect to be sighted on them.

Mr Leonard:

I appreciate that you have not seen the terms of reference, but do you think that, on a point of principle, you, as the custodians of NI Water, could expect such co-operation as a matter of form? Given the severity of the situation and the public disquiet, would you expect that he would participate fully? Did you not make that fully clear?

Mr Haslett:

I do not know whether that was made clear in the agreement.

Mr Leonard:

Would you not have made that clear from yourselves?

Mr Haslett:

You say “from yourselves”, not being part of the agreement, the agreement was done quite late last night, and I do not know a lot of the terms that are in it. You are asking me a personal question —

Mr Leonard:

I am asking you as representatives of NI Water before this Committee and the public.

Mr Haslett:

Then I cannot answer it from the point of view of Northern Ireland Water.

Mr Leonard:

OK. I will move on to some of the nitty-gritty about which people were at work, not at work and returning from holidays on the crucial dates of 26, 27 and 28 December. I am not being cynical; in public life, we all know what it is like to get phone calls and have people arrive at the door at various times. Regardless of whether people worked from home or were back at the office — there has been talk about silver and gold, and I appreciate that you have your formations and so on — I have strong information that senior NI Water people were told by many others, including politicians, that the organisation was just not reacting quickly enough. I know that you have shared sequences, numbers, and so on with us. Do you accept that people on the ground knew of the gravity of the situation before you did? I take the point about briefings and meetings and so on, but there was a disconnect, and members of the public were very much making and seeing that case. Regardless of the form of your decision-making process, do you accept that people on the ground were ahead of you?

Mr Haslett:

No, because we have, as I said, a thoroughly sophisticated telemetry system. All the information on that system will be a matter of record. Whenever this incident was upgraded, it was obvious

from the printouts and the screens that the demand for water to be put through the system had significantly increased. I have been in the business nearly 37 years, and I worked in Belfast for four years. I have never seen a profile like it. As soon as that profile was detected — not even at the top of it but just at the start of it — the incident was upgraded immediately to category 1.

Mr Leonard:

Trevor, Sara or Liam, you would have to accept that, once you realised that profile, some members of the public, including senior politicians, were ahead of the game about your lack of communication. I do not want to spend too much more time on the communication issue; it has been well hit this morning.

Mr Haslett:

I accept the point about communication, but we had access to our own information that confirmed to us that something unusual was happening at a fairly early stage.

Mr Leonard:

In light of the Minister's request for this plan and to try to avoid repetition of any or all of the parts — heaven forbid that it is all of the parts — part of your action plan is to develop resilience until March 2011. Will you give us an indication of where you are going with that? I know that we have touched on some of that, but where is that short-term plan? Is it winging its way to somebody's desk? Will it be shared fully with DRD and the Committee? Where are we going with this?

Mr Haslett:

The reason why I put it in as one line is because it has already been delivered to the permanent secretary of DRD. As far as I know, it is with the Minister at the moment, but it covers all the aspects that we have covered today, from communications, particularly on our website and in call centres, to access to additional resources and Met Office reports. It covers the whole gamut of what we can do almost immediately to carry out improvements. As Mr McDevitt said, some other improvements on the investment side will be targeted to the areas where there were particular problems, such as Cookstown, Newry and Warrenpoint. Why did they seem to suffer more than other areas, where people enjoyed a water supply through the whole situation? That is probably about 5% of the population. That is the sort of area where we would like to target investment. Do we need to increase storage in some of those areas? Those are the sorts of the

questions that we want to answer.

Mr Leonard:

Would you have compiled that action plan if you had not been asked to? Would you have decided on 29 or 30 December that you need a review for the rest of this winter? Would you have done that yourselves?

Mr Haslett:

As part of the incident plan, we already capture learning points in case they are missed. I was already picking up on some of the points that I had learnt from the CCG(NI). One small example includes a council member being part of the incident team. That was kindly provided for us by local councils on a rota basis. That proved invaluable in getting messages out to the council. Building control inspectors were sent out to look at all sites in those areas, because we experienced problems where sites were left unattended, and we found a number of defects on those sites. A lot of work has been recorded and captured for future reference.

Mr Leonard:

I declare an interest and say that councils have their good uses. With the action plan, can you give some assurance not only to the Committee but to the ordinary people, and I say that with all due respect, that there will be a much improved reaction to the weather that is forecast from tomorrow onwards and that there will be improved handling of circumstances in any bad weather?

Mr Haslett:

There will be an improved response if that happens again, even in the short term.

Mr Leonard:

None of us wishes that that will be put to the test, but the bottom line is that it may be. In listing the non-NIW resources, you referred to other organisations. It seems that the Housing Executive is a glaring omission from that. Has someone left that out as a typo, or what was the link with the Housing Executive? Did the Housing Executive come to you? No matter what areas we are from, large swathes of Housing Executive tenants were affected.

Mr Haslett:

There is a Housing Executive representative on the Civil Contingencies Group.

Mr Leonard:

I appreciate that, but —

Ms Venning:

I made contact with the Housing Executive before the Christmas break and offered advice on how it could best deal with its customers and the problems that they were having and on how we could best help with ensuring that customers were not passed from pillar to post. That was on 23 December. I also attended a meeting with the Housing Executive at which its Minister was present. I believe that that was on 27 December, but you will forgive me if I am fuzzy on the dates. We did not mean for the Housing Executive to be omitted from that list, and I apologise for that.

Mr Leonard:

I appreciate what you said about contingency, and there are many agencies on the list. I am asking about the ongoing management. There was a meeting in and around 27 December, but thousands of Housing Executive tenants were affected. From experience of my constituency, they were among the people who felt most isolated. What was the ongoing connection in the levels of management between senior Housing Executive management and senior NIW management?

Ms Venning:

Following my meeting with the Housing Executive, we also ensured that it was one of our stakeholders that got daily updates on how our situation was progressing and that it had a contact in our incident centre to ensure that that link was increased.

Ms Lo:

Thank you for your presentation. A lot of criticism has been made about the poor communication, and I will not repeat those points, except to say that, when you are looking at improving communication in the future, you should think about the community and voluntary sector. Community centres have good networks to spread the word around. They said that, if they were given information on when water was being stopped or reconnected, they could go

around in cars with a loudspeaker to alert residents, as the Water Service used to do in the old days. You should perhaps think about that ahead of the next round of problems.

On top of the communication problem, NIW failed to supply and distribute water when the supply was turned off in homes. Indeed, the initial response came from local councils. On 28 December, councils started to provide water facilities for people to have showers. On that day, I got a call from a constituent saying that he had had no water for two days and that there was no bottled water to be bought anywhere in south Belfast. He said that he had to travel miles and miles out of Belfast to get any bottled water. Plans should be in place to help people by supplying water.

On 29 December, I went to the Olympia Leisure Centre. It was a chaotic scene. People were queuing up with buckets at the standpipe outside the leisure centre. Many questions were asked, such as why more standpipes had not been opened up in various areas and why people had to travel for miles to get to the water tank at the Olympia Leisure Centre. The standpipe was just beside the water tank. Why were more not utilised?

I heard someone from Tullycarnet say that elderly people in that area could not come down to the leisure centre to get water from the standpipe. I actually borrowed three 500-gallon water tanks from a friend who has a bathroom-fitting business. During the next two days, I delivered water to sheltered housing schemes. I rang every single housing association in South Belfast that has a sheltered housing scheme in the area. Some organisations were not open. We went to the sheltered housing schemes and knocked on doors to ask people whether they needed water. An elderly gentleman burst into tears when I knocked on the door to ask him whether he needed water and to say that we would deliver some to him. He had had no water for four days, and now, at least, someone had come along and asked him whether he needed water.

You need to think about such issues as additional water supplies in your contingency plan. You cannot simply leave people without water for days and days. For many people, such as those who are on dialysis and who need water for medical reasons, lack of water is a health and safety issue. You cannot simply leave people high and dry — pardon the pun.

I want to ask you about another issue. In a number of public-housing estates in south and east Belfast, such as Taughmonagh, Belvoir and Tullycarnet, the water supply was turned off very

quickly, whereas a constant supply to privately-owned houses on the edges of those estates remained. Does that mean that large public-housing estates were targeted? Perhaps, it is easier to turn off the water supply to larger developments. However, people who live in those estates asked me whether their homes had been easy targets.

Mr Haslett:

Categorically: no. The problem on the Belvoir estate was a major leak, which took us at least two days to find. It was one of the more difficult ones. The estate suffered from low pressure. Some houses were getting water. The way in which we worked the rotation system was strictly by district meter areas. If you happened to be on the wrong side of the boundary, you were without water. We tried to protect hospitals' feeds, which meant that anybody who lives near a hospital was probably fortunate enough to have water during the incident. We had to concentrate on other areas. I can state categorically that we looked at how best we could feed areas and not exactly at what was in those areas.

Ms Lo:

What about Taughmonagh, which had no water for days and days? Again, its community centre contacted me to say that it should have water tanks in its car park.

The Chairperson:

It is getting too close to the election, Anna. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Lo:

Well, yes. *[Laughter.]*

Taughmonagh had no water. There is no hospital to run in that area.

Mr Haslett:

We had problems with the Poleglass reservoir, which, I believe, feeds Taughmonagh. Although it did not ever run out of water, its levels were low. The level was sitting at about 50 cm for around three days. The higher an area is towards the Poleglass reservoir — I believe that Taughmonagh is reasonably high — the more its feed was affected.

Ms Lo:

Finally, we have not mentioned the elephant in the room, which is the lack of investment over the years. What are we doing about it long term? You said that you have an action plan to cover the period up to March 2011. Surely, we need to think of putting long-term investment into upgrading our system, some of which was built in the nineteenth century. It is ridiculous to think that we are still using that system.

Mr Haslett:

Over the past three years, Northern Ireland Water has invested about £670 million. Out of that £670 million, about £100 million has gone towards water mains rehabilitation, which is the area that we are into here. That has managed to replace about 910 km of water main. Post-2009, we looked at areas that were vulnerable, and we targeted a lot of that expenditure in those areas. During this freeze, we did not have any problems in those areas. We are going to do the same over the next few months, not years, to see if we can help any of the areas that suffered. Going forward, the investment profile for water mains rehabilitation for the current three-year period, which started in April 2010, is around £90 million. This financial year, we will probably invest around £30 million in water mains rehabilitation. That will renew about 1.1% of the mains. The comparator in the rest of the UK is 1.7%. Therefore, we are lagging behind in investment, but the rest of the UK has had a 20-year head start.

Ms Lo:

It is not just water. The sewerage system is very poor. When there is flooding or heavy rain, raw sewage comes into people's backyards and onto the streets.

Mr Haslett:

Out of that £670 million, £500 million over a three-year period is actually targeted on waste water, which includes the new Belfast sewers project.

Miss McIlveen:

Members will be glad to hear that, with the exception of Portaferry, the Strangford constituency was fine. I will touch the desk on that one for the future.

Thank you for coming this morning. In many respects, I am relieved that in your opening statement you admitted that you recognised that there was a crisis, that it was shambolic and that

you are not defending the indefensible. There is gratitude from that point of view. Hindsight is a wonderful thing, and we all benefit from it today. However, as you sit today, the company has been discredited, and you have a major piece of work to do to restore customer confidence. That goes without saying. For Northern Ireland to be depicted on the world news as a Third World country is absolutely disgraceful.

There were media reports in relation to scares in and around hospitals, and Trevor alluded to the Royal Victoria Hospital. Can you expand on that? What was the situation there?

Mr Haslett:

For about a two-hour window, the Royal Victoria Hospital was at risk of losing supply. I will not go into details of where it is supplied from, but the reservoir level was low. However, in conjunction with the Royal Victoria Hospital, and assisted for a very short time by the Fire and Rescue Service, we mitigated that two-hour window. In fact, before and after that time, the Royal Victoria Hospital did not have an issue with supply. Liam talked about the matter on the radio.

Mr Mulholland:

There were three hospitals concerned. As Trevor has just said, the questions that I was asked were specifically around the Royal Victoria Hospital. There were also issues with the Lagan Valley Hospital, which lost some supply for a short time. However, there is always a close liaison between the hospitals and us. We re-zoned and fixed that problem very quickly, and they thanked us for the work that went on there.

There was a different type of problem for the South Tyrone Hospital as it has very high tanks and various bits and pieces. We had to liaise on that situation not just with the hospital but with the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service to let them do the supply. Hospitals are our highest priority customer, as you would expect them to be.

Miss McIlveen:

I am going to touch on a few other issues. In relation to the contingency plan, what budget has been set aside for emergencies?

Mr Haslett:

There is an amount in the budget, which we review each year. On the back of the expenditure

that we had last year, 2009, there is an amount. I am not quite sure what it is.

Miss McIlveen:

At this stage, has the cost of the last few weeks been calculated?

Mr Haslett:

We are in the process of working that cost out. There may be external costs coming in for a number of weeks before we can close that down.

Miss McIlveen:

But will that be made available quite shortly?

Mr Haslett:

Yes.

Miss McIlveen:

You mentioned the non-NIW resources, as did Mr Leonard. In your presentation, Trevor, you mentioned the PSNI and you said that its input was aerial surveillance. Was it asked to do anything else, or did it offer any additional service?

Mr Haslett:

It also carried out some door-to-door work and reported back to us runs of water in vacant property.

Miss McIlveen:

That was the role that the PSNI carried out. In many respects, the intervention of the Executive really made Northern Ireland Water look incompetent, particularly in relation to the supply of additional water from Scotland. Did the request for that additional resource come from Northern Ireland Water or was it made separately by the Executive?

Mr Haslett:

The request and the order were placed by us. The best way to describe that is that it was prompted by the discussion at the Executive — not necessarily the Executive, but the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Miss McIlveen:

The action plan that has been developed has been discussed at length, as has the issue of communications. You said that the plan is currently with the permanent secretary and the Minister. When will the Committee see that? Is there any possibility of getting any pre-planning documentation?

Mr Haslett:

I believe, although I cannot confirm, that it may well be discussed this afternoon at the Executive Committee meeting. I cannot confirm that, but that is my inclination, because I have been asked to stand by in readiness for the Executive Committee meeting this afternoon.

Miss McIlveen:

In conclusion, what I and other members want is the level of service that we need and deserve. There are loads of lessons that have to be learned, and I hope that they have been learned. I am refreshed today by comments that you have made. We will be returning to this issue; it has not gone away.

The Chairperson:

We will have three or four quick questions, Trevor. Not speeches; questions.

Mr McDevitt:

I will follow on from your earlier comments about the fact that it was not an agenda item at the last board meeting before Christmas and it was not an agenda item with the senior executive team. Ms Venning, you tell us that you wrote a memo to the board on 23 December. What did you say in that memo?

Ms Venning:

It detailed the preparations that we had made. It outlined that there was a cold spell, we had experienced and recovered from a previous thaw, and we had teams in place to deal with emergency situations, should they occur.

Mr McDevitt:

I am trying to understand the content of the memo. Were you telling everyone that it was OK and they should go and have their Christmas because it was in hand, or were you saying that there

was a big problem coming down the line and they needed to get serious about it?

Ms Venning:

My sense, in terms of the fact —

Mr McDevitt:

What did the memo say?

Ms Venning:

If I could just say, we had an emergency plan, we had a major emergency plan and a winter contingency plan. I had staff on the ground and was monitoring my reservoirs —

The Chairperson:

It did not work.

Mr McDevitt:

I know that, Ms Venning. I am just trying to understand the memo that you sent on 23 December, which will reflect your mind at that time. Did it say to its distribution list that there is a potential issue, but do not worry, it is fine, we will be OK; or did it say that an emergency is imminent, extra resources are needed and we must prepare for a major incident?

Ms Venning:

It certainly did not say that I needed extra resources. At that time, there was nothing to indicate to me that I needed extra resources.

Mr McDevitt:

So, you were content at that point. That was on 23 December, which was 10 days into the major freeze, and, as you say, at a point that the thaw was beginning to happen.

Ms Venning:

No. On 23 December, the freeze was very much still in place.

Mr McDevitt:

However, the temperatures had peaked, if memory serves me right. The temperatures had peaked

in their lows on 21 or 22 December.

Ms Venning:

They peaked in their lows, but a freeze was still very much in place. There was no indication of a thaw on 23 December.

The Chairperson:

OK.

Mr McDevitt:

Just so that we are clear, Mr Chairman, because I think that this is an important point. Our purpose here is to try to understand whether the organisation was prepared and whether the Department was prepared. You are saying that, on 23 December, you saw no reason to be particularly worried about the resources available to you.

Ms Venning:

I felt that my plans were sufficient to get us through.

Mr McDevitt:

All right. Thank you.

The Chairperson:

The thaw was being forecast for the following week, followed by another intense period of cold weather. On 23 December, if you were looking at the weather forecast, you would have known that a thaw was predicted for the following week. I was specifically looking at the forecast because my daughter was flying in. It was not as if people did not know that the thaw was on its way. Everyone knew that the thaw was on its way, and everyone knew that it was going to happen in the next week.

Mr Haslett:

I accept that, Mr Chairman.

Mr F McCann:

I understand that the media carried reports that the chief executive said on his blog that all

eventualities had been covered. Is that what you based your information on or was it you who gave him the information to use on his blog?

Mr Haslett:

I can confirm that that is what the chief executive had on his blog at that time. That has been widely reported.

Mr F McCann:

So, that is where that information came from. Obviously, somebody had to report to the chief executive that everything was OK.

Mr Haslett:

I do not know the exact lines of communication that supported —

The Chairperson:

Sorry to cut across you, Trevor, but the best thing to do would be to provide the memo to the Committee. That would be easier, because then we could read it for ourselves. Will you do that?

Ms Venning:

Yes.

Mr F McCann:

I was just picking up on something that Conall said, but the point that I was going to pick up on is one that a number of members asked about or raised the possibility of, which is about severe weather this week or the week after. From what we have heard this morning, can we say that all eventualities have been taken care of and that we will not have a repeat of what has happened over the past week?

Mr Haslett:

We still have the incident teams — the two silver teams — in place.

Mr F McCann:

What does that mean? Does that mean that all eventualities have been covered?

Mr Haslett:

It means there is a state of readiness if there is the eventuality of another similar situation.

Mr F McCann:

The point about keyholders was crucial. My understanding is that most councils, Land and Property Services and the police have access to keyholders for all properties. Did it ever come into someone's mind to contact them and ask for contact numbers for those keyholders so that they could be phoned and asked to check whether there had been major leaks in their properties?

Mr Haslett:

No; but it is something that I will take on board. It tended to be the other way around: if we saw a leak, we tried to contact the keyholder. However, we had put the broad message out that all keyholders should go back to their premises and check them.

Mr Armstrong:

My question will be a quick one. As there were no burst pipes in your system, does that mean that the water should be coming to the reservoirs at full rate? Are they at a full 100% or are they at 90%? Do you have leeway in increasing the water going to the reservoirs since there were no burst pipes in your system?

Mr Haslett:

We increased production up to a peak of just over 860 megalitres.

Mr Armstrong:

Is that 100%; is that 80%; or is that 110%?

Mr Haslett:

I think that that is quite close to 100%, because it is a figure that I have never seen before. Bear in mind that we normally run 625 megalitres into distribution from these plants, so that is quite a lot of headroom; it is an increase of about 40%. I would not like to have gone back to ask any of the plants to try to increase above 860 megalitres. We still had some headroom left at some of the water take-up plants, but we had to have them in the right area. There is no point in having plenty of headroom in an area that does not have a problem. It is the areas where we had difficulty in feeding where I would look at the headroom of the plant and the productivity figures: the likes of

Fofanny and Dunore Point.

Mr Armstrong:

The reservoirs in my area were all sitting at low, at 1.5 m. You even have plans to make bigger reservoirs in my area, but you still do not have the capacity even to fill the reservoirs that you have if there is high water usage.

Mr Haslett:

This was an extraordinary event. Being able to produce over 860 megalitres over a continual period was a significant test of the system. Our problem was at the other end. I am not saying the customer tap end, because I am not trying to blame the customer, but the usage end. We were putting sufficient amounts into the reservoirs, but unfortunately there was considerable leakage and usage. I am not saying that there were not bursts in our pipes as well, because we do admit to that. We will certainly review that, but only in the areas where we had difficulties, particularly in the south-east area of Newry and south Down. Cookstown also had an issue, as well as parts of Belfast and Donore Point.

Mr Armstrong:

Lough Neagh itself, which supplies a good part of Cookstown, was running low, and water had to come from Magherafelt. Really and truly, not enough water is coming. So, if it came to a drought situation somewhere, you would still run out of water.

Mr Haslett:

That is a different matter, because of impounded storage levels. Do not forget that Lough Neagh supplies about 50% of our raw water needs, which is a virtually infinite source. It is the other, smaller impounded reservoirs such as Lough Fea and others that you are talking about that have limited storage.

Mr Armstrong:

Maybe they could bring all the water from Lough Neagh towards that area.

The Chairperson:

Two or three other people want to speak. Try to keep your questions as succinct as possible.

Mr Boylan:

Thanks, Chairperson, for letting me back in. My question is definitely not parochial. I need clarification on some points. I asked earlier about the chief executive sending a blog. Mr McCann also asked about that. I think that there is a communication problem there, because, Sara, you said that you sent a memo. Are you aware of whether or not the chief executive sent information to you, because it was said that it was sent to the board and the staff that all eventualities would be covered? Right? If you have not got that information, you are saying that maybe he used the memo. The Committee needs clarification and evidence, and we need that memo. That is one point.

I also asked about contact from DRD, and you said no, you had e-mailed DRD. Still, when my colleague Mr Leonard asked about the shareholder unit representing DRD, you said that you did not know, but to me you said that you had e-mailed them. There seems to be a gap, weakness or breakdown in communication somewhere, and that needs clearing up. I want that clarified for the Committee, because there are definitely problems there. If that is the way that it has been going on, I can see only too well now what has happened over that period, and we need clarification about that. OK?

Mr Haslett:

Can we come back on that?

The Chairperson:

OK.

Mr G Robinson:

I want to ask about the detection of leaks and the PSNI situation. You asked the Post Office and postmen and so forth. What sort of a response did you get from them?

Mr Haslett:

The first day that they were out and back on the postal service, we got something like 12 responses, which were reported to me through the committee. That is ongoing. They are a useful additional resource out on the ground, particularly in rural areas. We will continue with that to see what sort of levels we can get coming in, but it was of that order.

Mr G Robinson:

Do you feel that you are well enough prepared for this weekend, or will we be back to the same scenario? You have learned a lot of lessons, particularly after what you have heard from a lot of elected representatives here today.

Mr Haslett:

Yes, a combination of events clearly drove this situation. We are in a better state of readiness for this weekend.

Mr Bresland:

Is it illegal for somebody to leave a tap running? You will see water taps running at night.

Mr Haslett:

Yes. Under the Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, if we detect waste in a property — running a tap in a property is running to waste — we have the right to close that supply off.

The Chairperson:

Trevor, can I ask you two quick questions before we finish? Thank you for your time and patience. The issue around infrastructure is of importance to the Committee, and I am sure that it is of importance to you. Across the water, the number of replacements is about twice what it is here.

Mr Haslett:

In round terms, yes it is.

The Chairperson:

The point that I am coming to is the point that Anna made around capital investment. Are we talking about huge amounts of money to catch up?

Mr Haslett:

Potentially, yes, because a lot of our funding over the past three years has been directed towards waste-water compliance. That took priority because of EU directives. The rehab work and the drinking water quality are important, but the rehabilitation has really just kick-started over the

past six years.

The Chairperson:

There is another thing that I want to ask so that people are aware of the difficulties that Northern Ireland Water face compared with other companies throughout the United Kingdom. Huge improvements, according to the regulator, have to be made in a short period of time to catch up. We are miles behind all of the other water companies in the rest of the United Kingdom. Is the company, as the First Minister said, not fit for purpose?

With all the difficulties that you are facing, some of which are very basic, the amount of catch-up that you will have to do to make yourself in any way competitive with other companies and to deal with the issue around infrastructural investments is considerable. Do you agree with the First Minister? I am trying to get some sort of clarification. Is Northern Ireland Water fit for purpose?

Mr Haslett:

Northern Ireland Water has made considerable improvements over the past 10 years, certainly since 2000. Recently, our funding levels and our outputs that are determined from those levels have been assessed and determined by the Northern Ireland Utility Regulator. If we had more funding made available to us for water-mains rehab, we would undoubtedly be able to invest in that area. However, those funding levels are determined by the regulator. We might put the business case forward, as we did, but the funding level is determined by the regulator.

The Chairperson:

The regulator is talking about a 40% improvement, Trevor.

Mr Haslett:

That is quite a challenging target.

The Chairperson:

“Challenging” is not the right word, is it?

Mr Haslett:

A lot of those savings will be made on the operational side. The capital side spend over the next

three years has been reduced. Although we are spending less in monetary terms, we are spending a larger proportion of the £460 million on mains rehab.

The Chairperson:

On behalf of the Committee, I thank you very much for your attendance this morning. Trevor, as so many of the questions that we asked are going to be part of a review, I did not get as much information as I thought that I would have got on the big issues. I am sure that we will be seeing you on regular occasions over the next six to eight weeks.

Mr Haslett:

Thank you, Chairperson.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much for your time.