



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

COMMITTEE FOR JUSTICE

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Northern Ireland Prison Service

9 June 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR JUSTICE

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Givan (Chairperson)
Mr Raymond McCartney (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sydney Anderson
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr Colum Eastwood
Mr Seán Lynch
Mr Basil McCrea
Mr Peter Weir

Witnesses:

Mr Ronnie Armour) Northern Ireland Prison Service
Mr Colin McConnell)
Mr Max Murray)
Mr Graeme Wilkinson)

The Chairperson:

I welcome Colin McConnell, the director general of the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS); Ronnie Armour, the director of human resources and organisational development; Graeme Wilkinson, the director of finance, planning and corporate compliance and Max Murray, the director of offender delivery and regimes. You are all very welcome.

As I should have indicated to the previous group of witnesses, there is usually a 10-minute period to give an overview and introduction. Members have received a written briefing, and I am sure that they have gone through that and prepared their questions. Perhaps you will give a

general introduction for 10 or 15 minutes, and then members will want to get into detail. This briefing, as with the previous one, will be recorded by Hansard. I hand over to you, Colin, thank you.

Mr Colin McConnell (Northern Ireland Prison Service):

Thanks very much, Chairman. We look forward to a good engagement with the Committee — that is certainly our intention.

On behalf of my fellow directors and I, I will say that we are very grateful for the opportunity to brief the Committee today on the Northern Ireland Prison Service and the journey of reform that it is about to undertake. We are aware that the Minister of Justice and his permanent secretary have already had an opportunity to meet the Justice Committee to touch on a number of issues that currently affect the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

In this briefing, I specifically want to touch on the current challenges facing the service and update you on a number of issues that were in play before the election, such as the erroneous release of a number of prisoners, deaths in custody, the rising prison population and progress on reform of the service. Like a number of commentators, I am clear that this is a critical turning point for the Northern Ireland Prison Service and an opportunity to transform the service into an example of best practice in public service.

The current challenges facing the service have been well rehearsed. They include, for example: responding to past criticisms and failures; moderating our past focus on security to take a more balanced approach that places the offender at the centre of our focus; developing a culture of accountability; managing high levels of staff sickness absence; improving industrial relations; responding to the pressures and needs of a rising and more diverse prison population; developing a prison estate to best meet the demands likely to be placed upon it in the future; living within the financial constraints faced by the whole public sector; and, of course, crucially, we also have the challenge of consistently getting the basics right.

I turn now to those issues that were in play prior to the election. The Committee will be aware of the incidents last year in which three prisoners — Mr Paliutis, Mr Cummins and Mr Cahill —

were separately released from custody in error. Investigations into each of those incidents confirmed different causes, and NIPS has taken remedial action to clarify processes in communications, to better train and support staff, to address procedural weaknesses and to ensure that additional cross-checks with court information and instructions are in place. In the case of the erroneous release of Mr Cummins, disciplinary action was taken against two prisoner custody officers who were charged with having failed to follow established procedures. Disciplinary action was not considered in either of the two other cases. Mr Cummins and Mr Cahill have been returned to custody in Northern Ireland. Mr Paliutis is in custody in the Republic of Ireland and has elected to be tried there.

Turning to the sad subject of deaths in custody, members will also be aware of the three tragic deaths that occurred in May, those of Samuel Carson and Frances McKeown at Hydebank Wood, and of Aaron Hogg in Maghaberry prison. The Prisoner Ombudsman is investigating each of the deaths, and we await the outcome of her findings. I am aware of the many criticisms that have been levelled against the Northern Ireland Prison Service in relation to the support provided for vulnerable prisoners in our care, and I assure the Committee that I take those criticisms very seriously. I consider any death in custody a tragic issue for the Northern Ireland Prison Service, and I am anxious to ensure that we have in place, and adhere to, appropriate mechanisms to identify support for all those who pass into our care, and, more particularly, those who are considered to be at significant risk. We are currently taking forward a corporate audit of safer custody processes to ensure that those procedures and interventions are in place and that we comply with them across our service. However, members will be aware of the level of need in the prisoner population when it comes to issues such as substance abuse, poor mental health and learning difficulties.

The challenge for the Northern Ireland Prison Service is significant, and we are seeking to respond to that challenge, but the roots of the problem spread much further than prisons, so the Northern Ireland Prison Service cannot meet the challenge alone and will struggle without the support and input of stakeholders and partners in the Committee, the Executive and across the justice system and the wider community.

The Northern Ireland Prison Service is currently dealing with unprecedented growth in the

prison population. For example, in the past 12 months, the overall population increased by 223, which is a 13% increase. The male unsentenced population is up by 17%, and the sentenced population is up by more than 13%. With respect to the specific pressures on our establishments, that means, for example, that the Maghaberry population rose by 136, which is a rise of nearly 15%, and the Hydebank male population rose by more than 13%. Magilligan prison saw a rise in population of just over 11%. The situation has been compounded by recent rises in the sentenced and remand populations. We will need to monitor the situation closely in order to predict future trends.

Those population rises put considerable pressure on accommodation, especially when set against the reality that some accommodation blocks and wings are necessarily underutilised because they were designated specifically for certain types of prisoners. For example, there is a need to provide discrete accommodation for separated prisoners, juveniles and women in custody. However, I am pleased to tell the Committee that those rising demands are being proactively managed by governors and staff at a local level. For example, progress is being made by regularly moving prisoners internally and robustly managing the process for transferring suitable adult male sentenced prisoners from Maghaberry to Magilligan. I want to make the point to the Committee that I am grateful to my staff for their flexibility, to our trade union partners for their general understanding and support and, of course, to the offenders in our care who are experiencing a more crowded living environment.

The business of running prisons day to day is very demanding and challenging, but that has not deflected us from the need to change and improve. As I said, this is a critical turning point for the Northern Ireland Prison Service, and we are committed to moving forward into a new era of reform. Both the 2010 report on corporate governance arrangements from the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) and the independent Prison Review Team have dramatically reinforced the need for fundamental, end-to-end reform of the service. Dame Anne Owers observed that we now have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to deliver fundamental reform.

Our own strategic efficiency and effectiveness (SEE) programme will be launched formally on 28 June, and that will be the vehicle through which we will deliver transformational change. We seek to create a leaner staffing structure and an increasingly professional, flexible and well-

trained workforce, energised by a culture of service delivery, performance management and accountability. As we work to deliver that change, we must also strive daily to consistently get the basics right, while balancing and managing pressures such as protests by separated prisoners, unprecedented pressures on accommodation and, of course, in common with the general public service, resource constraints.

Change for the service will not occur overnight. It is a three-year change programme. In the first year, we have two main aims. First, we need to get the basics right and create a solid platform on which we can build and improve. Secondly, we need to put in place preparations for the wholesale structural changes that we will introduce in year two, including changes to the way in which we deliver services to offenders, firmly reducing the risk of reoffending on release and, of course, maximising the deployment of key staff resources across our establishments. In moving forward through those necessary structural changes, the focus will turn to delivering cultural change, including redefining the role of the prison officer and ensuring that staff are properly equipped and trained to deliver that new role.

Change is already under way. We have a new management team and a restructured headquarters that better reflects the changing needs of the service. A new change management team is being recruited. We are working closely with internal audit and other external stakeholders to demonstrate the significant work that has been done to enhance our governance and accountability arrangements across the service. We are also subject to scrutiny from the Northern Ireland Audit Office.

Governors are now responsible directly to me for performance and accountability. A centralised detailing approach was introduced at the beginning of May, and we have begun to deploy our staff more efficiently and effectively. Proposals for a staff exit scheme are well advanced, and a review of our estate strategy, informed by the Prison Review Team's interim report, is also under way.

My vision for the service at the end of the three-year change programme is that we will be well led and competently managed. We will have a fit, flexible, motivated, well-trained and well-rewarded staff. We will be compact and cost-effective. The offender will be at the centre of our

focus. We will reduce the risk of offenders reoffending on release, and we will be respected and valued by the community that we serve. I recognise that it will take time and determination to make effective change happen and stick. It will require commitment and support from the prison officers working directly with prisoners, from all levels of management, from our partners and stakeholders, and from political leaders right across the political spectrum in Northern Ireland.

I look forward to hearing the Committee's views. I look to secure your support in navigating the Prison Service forward on this challenging journey of change.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much for that overview, Colin. I know that members will have some general and specific questions. We, as a committee, are keen to work with you and your team. There may be times when we want you to come before the Committee but it is not appropriate to hold the meeting in public session. We may want to be in private to try to get into some real detail and ensure that the Committee can play a constructive part in transforming and managing things. I am happy to ensure that we facilitate that. We will go into a lot more detail in future.

Before I put my questions to you, I declare an interest that I have a family member who is employed in the Prison Service. When do you think that the draft SEE programme will be available for the Committee's consideration?

Mr McConnell:

As I have already indicated, Paul, we seek to formally launch a programme on 28 June. David Ford, the Justice Minister, will lead that launch. We are working up the detail of the programme, and we will be happy to share that with the Committee in due course. That would probably be best done in written format following the formal launch of the programme at the end of the month. I would have thought that early July would be a good time to engage on that.

The Chairperson:

We would have been keen to see a draft that we could input into rather than respond to a formal launch. Members may not agree with what is in the document at the formal launch. It would have been useful for us to be able to feed into some of the proposals. Our points may not have

been taken on board, but we could have at least been given that opportunity.

Mr McConnell:

I hope that the Committee will appreciate that, because of the change agenda that the service faces, we have not been in a position where we can stand still. We have to move forward. We have had to be a proactive management team with our staff and wider workforce to develop the change proposals. Those have been pretty much tested in the wider Department. We have received significant backing from the Justice Minister to go in the direction that we are setting out. However, we must give due respect to the Committee and work with it and listen to the views and ideas that it will have in due course.

The Chairperson:

Is there currently a freeze in recruitment to the Prison Service across the board?

Mr Ronnie Armour (Northern Ireland Prison Service):

Yes. We are not recruiting at the moment. However, under the terms of the SEE programme, we are looking at recruiting to support grades later this year and into 2012.

The Chairperson:

So, there will be recruitment to support grades. It has been pointed out to me that main grade officers are supplementing the work that support grade officers are doing, and that is obviously distorting the figures when it comes to the efficiency of particular units. Therefore, there is a concern about that.

Mr Armour:

That is absolutely correct, and that is one of the issues that we want to address under the SEE programme. We will bring forward proposals shortly on an exit strategy that will allow officers to leave the service. At that stage, we will recruit support grades to address the shortfall that you mentioned.

The Chairperson:

Obviously, a rationalisation programme will take place, but will there be recruitment to the main

grade officer posts?

Mr Armour:

There are no proposals to recruit into main grade posts at the moment. As I said, we will be bringing forward exit arrangements. It is difficult to exit staff and recruit to the same grade, so we do not have any plans to recruit main grade officers at the moment. Undoubtedly, it will happen in the years to come, but the focus will be on the supports grades initially.

The Chairperson:

Historically, or of late, support grade officers could almost see a progression route to a main grade position. Is that still the intention when you recruit at whatever stage, whether to main grade or support grades?

Mr Armour:

Yes, it is very much our intention to have a system of progression through the organisation.

Mr McConnell:

We have had face-to-face discussions with staff, and, ideally, we want to create a career structure where a member of staff could start at the most junior position in the organisation and progress right through to the most senior level. That is certainly an aim that we have set out to achieve.

The Chairperson:

You have majored on the turning point and the fact that there is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to introduce reform, and you have highlighted the fact that you have support teams working on that. Do you also have external advisers to advise the Prison Service? If so, what budget is that coming from?

Mr McConnell:

I will comment more generally and then ask Graeme and Ronnie to flesh out the issue as far as the Committee would like.

We recognise that we do not exist in a vacuum, and it would be dangerous for us to imagine

that we know all the answers. As I mentioned already, we are out in the marketplace looking to recruit professional change managers into the service. Essentially, there will be one professional programme manager to help us to manage the programme overall, and we will then seek to embed change or project managers in each of the key directorates so that we have a professional programme and change management approach throughout the change initiative. So, that is already under way.

Of course, we have the Justice Committee, and Dame Anne Owers and the Prison Review Team. More regularly, we engage with CJINI. The Prisoner Ombudsman also has views. There is a wide range of stakeholders and opinion-formers that we want to hear from and engage with. Moving forward, the views that we want to take into consideration for the change programme will be very eclectic. I imagine that they will be well researched and well grounded by the time we come to implementation.

The Chairperson:

Is the emergency control room budget on target to be spent and to have the surveillance cameras at Maghaberry brought up to standard?

Mr McConnell:

Yes, it is.

The Chairperson:

Will that be dealt with this year?

Mr Graeme Wilkinson (Northern Ireland Prison Service):

The scheme is being taken forward, and I am working with the estates advisers to ensure that it happens. It is a priority for us at the minute, and it will be done in this financial year.

The Chairperson:

Thank you for that.

Mr Eastwood:

My question is about the ongoing dispute at Roe House at Maghaberry. The Minister was here two weeks ago and said that meetings were coming up and that things were, hopefully, progressing. We all know how important it is for that dispute to be resolved, if possible. Prison disputes have a history of playing out in the streets in this part of the world, and we need to do our best to ensure that we resolve the situation to everyone's satisfaction. Have you any more details on what has happened?

Mr McConnell:

“Dispute” is a very general term, but the ongoing dispute remains. It is fair to say that the nature of it has changed. There is no one distinct grouping as such, and there are different views in play. I think that the governor at Maghaberry is handling the situation very well and very sensitively, and there are some signs of progress with some prisoners who are currently located in Roe House. For example, at one point all the prisoners in Roe House were subject to rule 32, which effectively constrains association. As of two days ago, we were in the beneficial position where some prisoners' relationships and behaviours had improved to the degree that we could discontinue rule 32 for the majority, and, with those prisoners, we are getting back to some semblance of the position that we were in prior to the start of the dispute.

However, another group of prisoners is still very much protesting, and those protests include spillage of urine and faeces around some small areas of the accommodation. However, we are managing that, and that is a good indication that the way forward is undoubtedly through a steady hand, sensitivity and dialogue. Gradually, the governor at Maghaberry is successfully taking that forward. Now, I do not know whether that will, ultimately, produce a lasting solution. We have to gradually work at that and see where it takes us.

Mr Eastwood:

Is dialogue continuing?

Mr McConnell:

Yes, dialogue is continuing.

The Chairperson:

Surely the lasting solution will not change from the agreement that ended the last protest?

Mr McConnell:

You are quite right, Chair. The position is that the Northern Ireland Prison Service remains committed to the implementation of the 12 August agreement. We will seek to get back to a focus on making that agreement work.

Mr S Anderson:

Thank you for your presentation. Through the reforms, your intention is to achieve a reduction of 500 staff over three years.

Mr Armour:

In welcoming Dame Anne Owers's report earlier this year, the Minister said that the number of staff that we would allow to leave the service would be in the hundreds. Clearly, we want to allow as many staff as possible to leave with dignity. However, we have not finalised that number yet, nor have we agreed it with the Minister, but the number will certainly be significant.

Mr S Anderson:

So it could be 500?

Mr Armour:

Potentially, it could be, yes.

Mr S Anderson:

Do we have any idea what that will cost?

Mr Armour:

We do. Graeme might want to say something about the funding.

Mr Wilkinson:

We have been working on different scenarios to develop our business case, which will,

ultimately, go to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) for approval. The costs attributable to that will depend on which scenario is agreed with DFP. We have some funding in our current baseline, but we might need to return to that when the final option is agreed.

The Chairperson:

The total amount, as your paper indicates, is a £17 million invest to save scheme. This package is supposed to be part of that.

Mr S Anderson:

You must have a pot of money in the pipeline to cover the package in the exit strategy. How much is that?

Mr Wilkinson:

We have some money in the baseline, but it is a matter of developing the business case and the options. Until such times as we finalise that, we will not know the total cost of the scheme.

Mr S Anderson:

So, we will not know the cost of the exit strategy today. How are industrial relations with the unions and the Prison Officers' Association (POA) with regard to the exit strategy?

Mr Armour:

I will talk about industrial relations generally and then come to the exit strategy. We have a framework in place that governs our relationship with the three unions in the Prison Service: the POA, the Prison Governors' Association and the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA), which looks after the admin staff.

In December of last year, I negotiated a further agreement with the POA that committed both sides to working together towards the reform agenda that we are developing under the SEE programme. The focus of that is to move away from the blame culture of the past and consider how we can work together to meet the very challenging demands that the service will have to face this year and in years to come. Underpinning that agreement, we both committed to a number of goodwill gestures. The POA agreed to the introduction of centralised detailing, which I must say

was a significant move by the union. For our part, we agreed to some adjustments to the process for handling sick absence for officers injured on duty.

We are committed to working with all the unions as we move forward with the change agenda. I am conscious that we face unprecedented and challenging days ahead. There is much in the programme that I suspect the unions will not agree with, but there is much that they will endorse. I regularly meet POA members across the service, at both local and area levels. I also seek to spend as much time as possible with staff on landings to hear their concerns and fears at first hand. I hope that I have been honest with them in acknowledging the changes that are going to have to take place. I recognise, as I think the staff do, that many of those changes will be difficult for them as we try to deal with issues around working practices and how we do our business, with the objective of becoming more efficient and effective. I accept that that will be difficult for staff, but we are committed to working with them as we take forward this agenda.

My objective in this — I know that it is shared by my colleagues — is to create a professional and highly skilled workforce that is respected by the wider community for the contribution that it makes to reducing the risk of reoffending. Together with the unions, we can do that, but, to be honest, it will not be easy.

Mr S Anderson:

I have a couple of further small points, Chair. Colin talked about the increase in the prison population, which puts pressure on accommodation and causes more friction within prison walls. We talked about the reduction in the numbers of staff, protests and things that could happen at any time. Are you confident that, under this reform agenda, everything can be managed better than it is managed now? Will it reduce the annual cost per prisoner place from £90,000 to £75,000? That is a major concern, and I hope that it will be looked at. We also want the average annual absenteeism figure for officers to be reduced to 11 days. What does it presently sit at?

Mr Armour:

In 2010-11, average absenteeism stayed at 13.5 days.

Mr McConnell:

Your question is one of those rifle-shot questions that go right to the heart of the change issue, which is: “Could we, should we?” We do not seek to design a prison service for the future without taking into account not just the pressures that we face now but those that we are likely to face in years to come. However, to answer your question directly: absolutely, yes. We are committed to the change, but we are committed to it because we believe that it is right and because we believe that we can deliver it.

Going back to the comments that Ronnie made, it is not a case of the management team — Max, Ronnie, Graeme and myself — trying to do this in a smoke-filled room. Ronnie is working with our key trade union partners. We have to do this in partnership. We know that not only will it be difficult to create a robust workable design but it will be difficult to take the workforce with us. We are determined to get to the gunwales of that to make sure that we are persuasive, that we listen and that we design the organisation to reflect the views of not just the people we care for but the people who we need to do the caring.

Mr McCartney:

Thank you very much for the presentation. I know that this is an overview, and the Committee looks forward to engaging with you. My party has engaged with you at management and prison level, and we want to continue that, although we have particular issues. Colum raised one in particular about the protest.

I want to look at the wider strategic view. We await Dame Anne Owers’s report. She gave a preliminary report and, I think, indicated to the Committee and publicly that she does not foresee what she has already laid down changing much in her final report. Do you envisage any impact on the SEE programme with anything that she will bring forward or can the two run in tandem?

Mr McConnell:

Again, Raymond, it is necessary to see those two elements as one. We seek to deliver the recommendations, initiatives or issues that Dame Anne produces, flags up or highlights in her report, which we now expect in September. So, it is not a case of one or the other. The SEE programme is, effectively, delivery machinery. It is a change programme that should deliver the

recommendations or direction of travel that Dame Anne sets out. So, I see them as complementary and necessary components of a single change initiative.

Mr McCartney:

I think that you laid out where you would like to be in three years' time as regards well-led, competent management; fit, flexible and well-rewarded staff; and risk of reoffending. The main obstacles to that, and we have to state this, are the current customs and practices. In other words, we are not getting what we should out of our Prison Service. Michael Maguire's report flagged that up in precise terms: people are paid to work 37.5 hours a week, yet the shift patterns and lock-up regime does not get people working 37.5 hours a week. So, are you saying that, at the end of three years, your target is to ensure that that type of custom and practice ends?

Mr McConnell:

Yes.

Mr McCartney:

OK. Ronnie said that people may see that as challenging, but if we were told that our hospital staff or any other workers in the public service were being paid for 37.5 hours a week yet worked only 28 hours, there would be a public outcry. So, we have to lay out our stall, and if that means tackling what was accepted as custom and practice, there will be criticism about how such custom and practice came into place.

We now have to state clearly that people are doing a difficult job and they have to be rewarded for the job that they are doing, but they have to do a job that is there on paper. So, we need that commitment, and that is the scrutiny that we will be bringing to the change programme over time.

Mr McConnell:

We accept that analysis.

Mr McCartney:

What is the strategic outline for reducing the risk to the offender? You also talked publicly about, and we all accept, the stress that is placed on the families of the bereaved, the families of the staff

and, indeed, the staff themselves when they deal with these types of incident. However, have we in place robust measures, not just to deal with people who we already know are vulnerable but people who may be outside that sort of scale but who may become vulnerable?

Mr Max Murray (Northern Ireland Prison Service):

Within my directive, the focus is very much on the offender and putting the offender at the centre of everything we do because, ultimately, although we have a primary role of security, that is closely followed by public protection and addressing offending behaviour. Addressing offending behaviour means that, as the starting point, you have to provide a safe, secure and respectful environment in which to operate.

Part of the difficulty, as you know yourself because we mentioned it previously, is that the make-up of the population is quite complex. If you look at mental health issues and consider, for example, that 25% of those committed and who come through the system every year would say that they have been in touch with mental health services in the community. To translate that into numbers, 507 in the past three months have been in touch with mental health services before committal to custody. Sixty-five per cent of sentenced prisoners will have some form of personality disorder, as will 75% of remand prisoners. There are significant issues for us in addressing that. Addictions are a major problem, as are drugs in the community. We work closely with the Health Service providers in the South Eastern Trust on addiction management, mental health services and primary healthcare.

On the other side are the issues around offender management and what we do through the delivery of offender behaviour programmes, learning and skills, essential skills training and working with local colleges, other service providers and other external partners, including the Housing Executive on accommodation, NIACRO on Jobtrack and employment opportunities, and the Social Security Agency on benefits. It is about making sure that all those services are readily available in the prisons, so that the staff and the people who deal directly with prisoners can access them and be able to draw on that support to help the prisoner to do what he or she needs to do to address their offending behaviour. I do not know whether that answers your question.

Mr McCartney:

In the past mandate, the Committee visited Hydebank. We all came out of it with our eyes opened wider than they were when we went in. The senior management team who gave us a presentation gave a very open and frank account of the problems they face. One of the startling things that the governor said was that 70% of people in Hydebank had not reached level 1 literacy, and we wonder why they end up with the problems that they had prior to going into prison. Prison staff are trying to deal with that with a limited regime and resources. You are trying to tease that out.

In its report and bilateral meetings, Dame Anne Owers's team said that the resources are there but are not used to their optimum. We need to try to create the circumstances in which we do that, so that we can at least say honestly that all our resources are being used well and that, whatever happens, you are given responsibility to do it.

Mr Murray:

We accept that.

Mr Wilkinson:

You mentioned Michael Maguire's report on corporate governance. One of the key themes for us over the past while has been on developing the new corporate governance framework, particularly our corporate plan for the next four years, setting out what we will achieve over that four-year period and making sure that we have the clarity of purpose that the Prison Service needs. We hope to bring that to the Committee for consideration soon. Underneath all of that, certainly in the points that CJINI had raised, we also developed a performance management framework that supports our corporate and business plan. It looks in more detail at what each of our establishments is achieving. That will be used to help inform the director general's quarterly bilateral meetings with each of the governors. Hopefully, that will improve performance in each prison. I hope also that, where there are issues to be addressed, governors can agree with their director general what corrective action will need to be taken. We are taking on board the issues that were raised in the CJINI report and putting in place the building blocks. That will be developed in our corporate governance framework.

Mr B McCrea:

I will ask a specific question. We do, occasionally, have issues that are of public interest. They might be regrettable incidents, for instance. What processes are in place for members of the Committee to be informed quickly about such issues? I ask that because some people eventually end up having to talk in public about it.

Mr McConnell:

As I understand it, generally speaking, information is passed to the Committee through the Justice Minister's office. The Minister's office would normally consider contacting the Chair and Deputy Chair on sensitive or important issues. I do not imagine that there would be a situation where the Northern Ireland Prison Service would contact the Committee directly, without ministerial consideration. I think that that would probably be done, by convention, through the Minister's office.

Mr B McCrea:

That does not stop people talking about it the next day on 'The Stephen Nolan Show'. Usually, it is to people's advantage to be informed. I think that that is something that you, your Minister and the Chair may wish to consider, because these are issues.

I understand the issues that Ronnie was talking about in relation to bringing about some form of working relationship with the unions or whatever, but you also have a job of work to do with the public. What plans do you have to inform and convince the public that the reforms that you think are necessary are indeed appropriate?

Mr McConnell:

We have a recently revamped communications strategy that significantly looks at stakeholder management and stakeholder influencing, to use management speak. That aside, it is extraordinarily difficult at this stage in practical terms and based on what you have said for us to create a positive image for the Prison Service in the eye of the public in the sense that it is a service that, over a number of years, has suffered from a number of critical — some of them hugely critical — reports and commentary. I am realistic enough to realise that, probably, our stock as an efficient and effective organisation is not high in certain parts of the community and

perhaps more generally. Potentially, however, we will see a change in that, on 28 June, the change programme will be launched. The Minister will lead that launch, and I hope that it will be a reasonably accessible event. We may see some media coverage of it.

The starting point for us is to put to the public that we recognise that we serve the community and that we seek to increase public protection by way of reducing the risk of reoffending for those who pass through our care. That will take some persuasion, time and probably some regular activity, but the starting point — the launch of the SEE programme on 28 June aside — is to try to stop or calm down the bad publicity that we have had. Getting the basics right for the Prison Service is an absolute must so that we stay out of the public eye on negative issues in order to create the space and silence in which we can begin to be seen for the positive things that the service does already in some regards but will do more of in future.

Mr B McCrea:

I look forward to seeing what happens on 28 June, but I am not overly convinced that what I consider to be a core strategic objective for you is being adequately addressed. I am not sure who you think should be leading the argument to convince the public that the changes that you are bringing in are right, not only for those who are in prison but for prison officers and for the public at large. Whose job is that?

Mr McConnell:

My starting point is with this Committee and its Chair. It seems that there has to be a relationship, through challenge and explanation and through sharing experiences and ideas, so that, as we craft the future design of the service, the majority, if not all, of the members on this important Committee can share the vision and direction on which the Northern Ireland Prison Service embarks. I and my colleague directors will work hard with you but also on your behalf to make sure that the service moves forward in the appropriate way.

Mr B McCrea:

I will finish with the comment that we can all deal with long-term and strategic issues. We sit and talk about whatever here, but life is a 24/7 media event. The issue for your service is characterised by those events. You should have critical-incident strategies that involve making

sure that people are able to get information out earlier. What you have in mind sounds a little bit labyrinthine. That is just an observation. It will either work or it will not.

Although I understand the point that Raymond made about the level 1 education and mental health or, if one can be delicate, the mental capability of people in prison, I think that that is an issue on which the general public need some convincing, and that is not yet there. That is a challenge for you. You can make whatever structural changes you like, but you have to win the argument with the boss — the public.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much. I am sure that others wish to ask questions. However, I wish to pick up on some of your comments. The Prison Service has facilitated the Committee before, and I know that it facilitates politicians outside this Committee who want to engage proactively with the Prison Service governors by visiting institutions. I am sure that that is something that you are willing to ensure continues.

Mr McConnell:

Very much so.

The Chairperson:

There are obviously times when members need to resist the temptation to speak uninformed. When I have had to contact the Department, I do not always get the response as quickly as I would like, and sometimes I do not get it all. That is the Department's prerogative, but, ultimately, politicians are accountable for what they say as well. It should not always be a case of, "come to us and tell us".

Mr Dickson:

I thank the witnesses for their presentation. I appreciate that it was an overview. First, I will make a minor declaration of interest in relation to industrial relations matters. I will be a senior officer in the Labour Relations Agency until 14 June. Therefore, I will not comment on any of the employment relations issues that have been discussed.

I turn particularly to the issue of the increase in prison population. We have heard some of the background on the nature of the prisoners who you look after and are in your care. A fundamental question is: do they need to be in prison? To what extent do you engage with other aspects of the criminal justice system to ensure that the people in your care actually need to be in your care and that there are not other appropriate measures that could be taken, thereby reducing the prison population and stresses on you? That is the first part of my question, and I do not particularly need an answer to it now. However, at some stage in the future, I want a detailed analysis of the offences that have been committed and whether prisoners need to be there because of those offences. That is a question that needs to be answered.

Going back to the point raised by Mr McCrea, I appreciate your comment that the publicity and the reality of the Prison Service have not been great in the past. A number of major incidents and issues have been very problematic for your organisation. However, Mr McCrea is absolutely right — there are opportunities in relation to your communication strategy; there are good news stories and soft news stories about the Prison Service and its work. That was, undoubtedly, reflected in the comments made and the issues raised by Mr McCartney about the educational attainments and abilities of prisoners. The sad reality is that many people in the community believe that you go to prison to get a degree when the reality is that you go to prison to learn to read.

The Chairperson:

Before the witnesses go, I have a couple of points that no one else has picked up on. You talked a lot about staff and so on, but are there any elements of the Prison Service that you are looking at eventually privatising?

Mr McConnell:

Privatisation is not an issue for the Prison Service per se. Privatisation is a political consideration for Northern Ireland. As regards reforming the Prison Service as an organisation, as an expensive bit of the public sector it is incumbent on us to ensure that we have reviewed all aspects of our service delivery to ensure that we are delivering best value. So, to be clear to the Committee, it should not be assumed that our future operating model will necessarily have every aspect of delivery provided by directly employed staff. As part of the transformation process, we will look

at the delivery model to try to make some informed assessment as to whether the Northern Ireland Prison Service is best placed to deliver a particular service. We will assess whether a partner agency or, for that matter, some external organisation might be better placed to deliver it. No decisions have been taken at this stage, but it is certainly a matter for consideration.

The Chairperson:

OK. As regards consideration, has anything at this stage gone out for market testing?

Mr McConnell:

No.

The Chairperson:

OK. That is fine. Thank you very much for coming along. We look forward to working with you.