



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Criminal Justice Committee

**Wednesday 12 November 2025**

**Session 6**



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**CRIMINAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE**

**30<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2025, Session 6**

**CONVENER**

\*Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)

**DEPUTY CONVENER**

\*Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

\*Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab)

\*Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con)

\*Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)

\*Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)

\*Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)

\*Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab)

\*attended

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

Malcolm Graham (Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service)

Yvette Greener (Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service)

John Logue (Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service)

Sarah O'Donnell (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service)

Stuart Stevens (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service)

Andy Watt (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Stephen Imrie

**LOCATION**

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)



# Scottish Parliament

## Criminal Justice Committee

Wednesday 12 November 2025

*[The Convener opened the meeting in private at 09:31]*

10:46

*Meeting continued in public.*

### Pre-budget Scrutiny 2026-27

**The Convener (Audrey Nicoll):** Good morning, everybody, and welcome to the 30th meeting in 2025 of the Criminal Justice Committee. We have received no apologies.

Our first item of business in public is continuation of our pre-budget scrutiny. We will hear from two panels of witnesses, and I intend to allow up to 60 minutes for each panel. I refer members to papers 2 and 3.

I welcome to the meeting: Malcolm Graham, chief executive of the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service; John Logue, Crown Agent and chief executive of the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service; and Yvette Greener, chief operating officer of COPFS. A warm welcome to you all. I thank you for your detailed written submissions.

As time is tight, we will move straight to questions. I will begin with broad opening questions to get us started. I will come first to John Logue and then to Malcolm Graham. Have you found your funding in 2025-26 to be sufficient? What are your organisation's main asks for 2026-27? If those asks were to be unsuccessful, what would be the consequences?

**John Logue (Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service):** Good morning. The funding for the current year was consistent with the very fair approach that the Government has taken to our funding requirements during previous years, which I have spoken about at committee previously. This year's funding included additional money for more staff to deal with the additional pressures that I spoke about last year. We were very grateful for that.

It would be fair to say, however, that, even with that additional funding, there was a requirement for significant efficiency savings in the course of the year to enable us to live within the budget. We are on track to achieve approximately £7 million of efficiency savings within the budget. Despite those terms, it was important for us to have plans in

place to deliver the efficiency savings. We are on track with those, and my expectation at this stage of the year is that we will be able to achieve them.

Looking ahead to next year, our asks are essentially updated versions of what I outlined to the committee last year. Our two priorities are to continue dealing with the consequences of the disruption to courts in 2020-21 caused by the public health emergency. That work remains. In the past year we have made progress on that, but it is clear that there is still much more work to be done. That will be a priority for us next year.

Secondly, we want to make progress with and demonstrate the benefits of reform, which I talked about last year. The position that we are in this year is that I can be clearer for the committee that the reforms are delivering significant public benefit. Whereas in previous years I was scoping out our intention and our plans, this year I am in a position to be absolutely clear that those reforms are working. Therefore, our commitment is to conclude that work over the next year to two years. That will put our whole criminal justice system in a much stronger position, and it will look very different to the public.

It is implicit in those two priorities that if we cannot be funded to complete the reform work that I have highlighted, and if we cannot successfully deal with the consequences of the court disruption of a few years ago, the criminal justice system will continue to broadly look as it does at the moment—it will not operate any better for the public.

Those are our priorities for next year, and the consequences are implicit in what I have said: if we cannot make progress with reform, we will not be able to deliver a faster, modern justice system that delivers better outcomes for the public.

**The Convener:** The submission that we received from you was very detailed and helpful. Thank you for that and for your opening remarks.

I turn to Malcolm Graham.

**Malcolm Graham (Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service):** Good morning. Thanks for giving us the opportunity to attend the committee.

As is laid out in our submission, in 2024-25 we received around £8 million less than I had asked for, and the Government acknowledged that it was significantly less than our request. I had only asked for what I felt we really needed.

As a consequence, in the course of the year we have had to put in place stringent measures to control the size of our pay bill. We have introduced a 6.49 per cent vacancy factor, which means, in effect, that the pay bill, as it is budgeted for, is 6.49 per cent less than it should be for the number

of people that we actually need in the organisation.

In addition, we have had to make difficult choices about maintaining our estate. We are in a position whereby we are able to respond only to health and safety or wind and watertight issues across the critical estate in which the SCTS hosts other parts of the justice system and the courts and tribunals.

Furthermore, we have not been able to invest in making the reforms that we had planned to make or at the pace that we would have liked to make them.

For the year ahead, our main ask is that we have baselined into our budget the recover, renew and transform—RRT—programme funding that currently still sits with the SCTS on a temporary basis.

In essence, I feel that I could make a strong case for why the SCTS should be a larger organisation to meet growing demands, and the complexity of those demands, but I have not done that. What I have done, in line with the Scottish Government public sector reform strategy, is to sign up to suggested reductions—for instance, a reduction in corporate staff of 0.5 per cent per year.

I have asked for a budget that will allow us to keep the organisation at the same size, but, critically, I have made a plea for a greater level of systemic investment in digitisation across the justice system of which the SCTS is a key part. It is a matter of fact that there has been a structural deficit in the level of investment that is required if we are to benefit from the efficiencies that will allow us to become smaller organisations.

To answer the final part of your question, convener, if we are unsuccessful in our asks, the consequences are clear: we would need to be a smaller organisation; our services would take longer; trials would be delayed across the system, but particularly in the parts where there is greatest pressure, including, at the moment, High Court trials for the most serious offences; victims would not get the services that they need, and neither would witnesses or accused persons; and it is likely that there would be pressure on the prison population, because people would be on remand for longer. Ultimately, it would undermine trust and confidence in the courts and tribunals system.

**The Convener:** I have a couple of follow-up questions for Malcolm Graham. One issue raised in your submission, which I found very interesting, was how challenging things have become because your case management system is going out of date. That speaks to the wider digital transformation that you described in your submission. Could you cover that in a bit more

detail? It has perhaps not been on the committee's radar in the past. Nonetheless, it sounds as though a major piece of work will be coming down the track.

**Malcolm Graham:** The criminal case management system that the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service uses is 25 years old. In the course of at least the past decade it has been propped up in a way that we know is not sustainable.

The consequence is that it is very time consuming for staff to enter and process data. The system presents a series of data protection and cybersecurity risks that are difficult to mitigate. It does not provide the interconnectivity with other parts of the justice system that would allow us to benefit from re-engineering our processes to become more efficient and focused on service users in the way that citizens rightly expect of digital services in this day and age. Ultimately, it forms part of a bigger pitch for investment in digital systems that will be able to support processes for the 21st century.

**The Convener:** I am sure that members will drill into that a bit more.

I have a follow-up question for John Logue, referring again to your detailed submission. One of the pressures that you reflect on in your submission relates to deaths requiring investigation, the number of which remains high. You said that there was

"a 22% increase in 2024-25 compared to pre-pandemic levels".

That might be another issue that is, to a certain extent, not in the public eye. I am interested in hearing a bit more about the challenges faced by the Crown Office in its broader responsibility for the investigation of deaths.

**John Logue:** Our death investigation work is critical. We are dealing with a number of pressures, some of which I will highlight. If the committee wishes me to explore them in more detail, I can do so at a later stage.

The obvious place to start is that we are still dealing with a significant number of deaths that occurred during the pandemic. We have just over 6,000 cases of Covid-related deaths. The scale of that can be illustrated by the fact that, in an average year before the pandemic, we would receive approximately 10,000 deaths of all types to be investigated. We have a significant body of work, but we are making good progress. We have dedicated funding from the Scottish Government and a team of approximately 80 people who are working through those cases and making good progress. We have concluded our investigations in approximately 2,500 of those cases, with 3,500 to

go, so we are a little short of halfway through that piece of work.

There are pressures in a number of other areas. There is a degree of frustration for us that we cannot control the timescales of death investigations in the way that we can criminal investigations. There are a number of reasons for that. Death investigations involve a wide range of other public bodies that have their own investigatory interest in deaths, particularly in incidents where multiple fatalities happen at the same time. There is difficulty and complexity for us in having to co-ordinate our investigation with those of others, manage the timescales and meet the expectations of the public and, in particular, the bereaved nearest relatives of the person who has died. That is particularly acute and difficult for us in relation to deaths of children.

Another area of complexity, which has increased, relates to, unfortunately, deaths of those who are in custody. The numbers that we have indicate that, over a five-year period, we have been dealing with perhaps twice as many of those as we were four or five years ago. In one recent year—the most recent year that we have figures for—there were 63 custody deaths. Those are complex cases that require investigation of difficult issues relating to the conditions in which people were being held at the time of their death. There is increasing pressure there.

11:00

Our response over the past few years has been to try to develop not just an expertise in death investigation but sub-specialties of expertise. We now have a dedicated team who, on a day-to-day basis, look simply at deaths in custody. We have a dedicated team who look at the deaths of children. We are increasingly able to develop a thematic approach to that work and that will be a significant public benefit in years to come.

It is an area of work where there are no statutory time limits, whereas in our criminal work, the Parliament has decreed that there be statutory time limits. An obvious consequence is that, if we are not funded to the level at which we are able to progress the work to the standards that the public expect, we will have to focus our people on the work that has statutory time limits, and therefore our work on death investigations will, unfortunately, take longer. That is the pressure there, broadly speaking.

**The Convener:** Thank you. That was comprehensive and helpful.

**Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** Good morning. I will put a question to both panel members, starting with Malcolm Graham. Modelling suggests that there will be a need for

increased High Court capacity in the longer term. The RRT funding that was put in place following Covid, for additional High Court and sheriff solemn court capacity, ends in March 2026. Are resources available for the increased capacity of the High Court without continuation of that additional funding?

**Malcolm Graham:** The short answer to that question is no. In fact, if the RRT is baselined, we will still need to make considerable adjustments to the court programme to accommodate the extra demands on the High Court. As I lay out in more detail in our submission, the exceptional level of cases being indicted in the High Court is predicted to continue for some time. As has been mentioned, when the RRT funding was introduced, it was necessary and very welcome additional funding to deal with the Covid backlog. However, the world has changed significantly since those decisions were made. With the additional funding that has gone to the Crown and its capacity to prosecute more High Court cases—the vast majority of which are complex sexual offence cases that take more time and require more resource through the court system—we will have to do something different if we want to provide services that are adequate to those who expect to receive them. In essence, the modelling shows that, without some form of intervention, both the timescale for those cases to come to trial or be resolved, and the number of cases in the system, will double within 18 months to two years. That trajectory would continue to an unacceptable level a short time after that.

We are looking at plans for diverting, as best we can, capacity from other parts of the system. We have had some really good successes through summary case management in creating capacity at the lower end of the courts. There is the potential that we can convert some of that capacity into the High Court, but it is not a direct translation. It is different skills, different people and a different forum. We will still need something different on top of that.

The final point that I would mention briefly is the prospect of the specialist sexual offences court, which we are now starting the planning for. We do not anticipate that that will necessarily achieve any direct efficiencies, but it gives us an opportunity, collectively, working with judicial leadership, the Crown and other key court users, to look at how we can best use that opportunity to provide services to victims and others in the court system that are commensurate with the purpose that lies behind the sexual offences court. That is taking into account the significant increase in cases, which was not predicted at the time that those ideas were concepts.

**Liam Kerr:** Before I move to John Logue, I have another question. At the start of your answer, Malcolm, you talked about something being baselined. I want to give you the opportunity to clarify that for people who are watching the meeting. What did you mean by “baselined”? Is it not the case that the SCTS was treated differently in relation to baselined RRT funding than other organisations?

**Malcolm Graham:** Not initially. The RRT funding was made available to several justice organisations on a temporary basis. It was baselined at an earlier stage for other organisations, but it was not baselined for the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service. This time last year, I made the same plea at this committee and said that the signs showed that cases were going up and that the world was changing. I said that we would require the RRT funding to be baselined to be able to provide the services that I have just explained in some detail. In essence, as you said at the start of your observations, Mr Kerr, the funding is committed only until March 2026. If it is removed, it would have significant consequences of the nature that I described in my response to the first question.

**John Logue:** We are funded for the current capacity of the High Court. The short answer is that any increase in the capacity of the High Court would require either funding for additional people or finding ways of stopping other work in order to free up people to take on the additional capacity.

**Liam Kerr:** Thank you. I will go to John Logue first for my next question, because it is about solicitors. I remind everyone that I am a practising solicitor, regulated by the Law Society of Scotland.

In his answer, Malcolm Graham mentioned in passing the summary case management scheme. The FDA trade union has raised concerns about the capacity, with current staffing levels, to deliver improvements under the summary case management model. The Scottish Solicitors Bar Association said that defence solicitors are due to withdraw from the scheme due to their concerns about legal aid rates. Will you update the committee on the summary case management roll-out and any resource impact that it might have? Also, if you do not mind, will you respond to the FDA’s suggestion and give us an update on the Scottish Solicitors Bar Association’s position?

**John Logue:** The roll-out of the summary case management project is almost complete. We are almost at the stage where it is the standard way of working in all the summary courts across the country. The final courts are due to come on board in December and the first few weeks in January. By January next year, summary case management will no longer be what it was when I

first described it to the committee; it will just be the standard way of working in our summary courts.

Summary case management has been very successful. In my 30 years as a prosecutor, it is the only project that I have seen succeed in bringing together, in partnership and led by the judiciary, all the different parties who work in the court. It has succeeded in changing not just the processes but the culture in the court, and it has changed expectations on the part of the public about what a busy summary court should be able to deliver for the local people who are served by that court.

Rather than give you a raft of statistics, the simplest way that I can illustrate that is with the example of Dundee sheriff court. We often talk about Dundee sheriff court, because that was one of the first courts to adopt the new way of working and it is further ahead. There is no doubt that the longer the period of time that a court operates the model for, the more sustained and significant the benefits become.

For some of the courts that are just coming on board with the model, we would not expect to see significant benefits for the public for perhaps another 12 to 18 months. However, we can take the position that has been achieved in Dundee and project it forward on a national basis. The current workload of all the summary courts is about 12,000 to 13,000 outstanding summary trials, with cases waiting to come to trial across the country. That is just slightly lower than it was before the pandemic.

We have succeeded in bringing it down from about 30,000 cases at the peak of the pandemic to slightly lower than it was before it. However, we have confidence on the basis of what has happened in Dundee that, if we project forward and can achieve the same benefit, with consistency, in all sheriff courts, we could conceivably be looking at a workload of about 6,000 cases. That is 6,000 cases that are more likely to come to trial the first time the trial is fixed, that require fewer witnesses to be cited—which has a benefit for the public—and that resolve more quickly. Under the old system, cases tended to resolve at the point of trial but we must remember that the majority of cases in the summary system resolve without the need for a trial—indeed, they resolve at a much earlier stage and, therefore, the system does not need to prepare them for trial.

It should be obvious to the committee, from its understanding of the system, that there are a multitude of benefits in what I am describing for the public, primarily, but also for the constituent parts of the system. We are able to make choices about how we use our people. That is a very quick summary of what has been achieved.

I understand the FDA's concern. We have had very good relationships and discussions with the FDA. I am confident that we are almost at the end of the roll-out. We have succeeded, and we are just about there in making that the standard way of working.

From the meetings that I have with colleagues in all our offices around the country, I see a very clear difference when I talk to prosecutors who work in courts where the model is established: they are more enthusiastic and find it a much more satisfying way to work. When I talk to colleagues in courts that have yet to adopt the model, they have an understandable concern about how it will work—I cannot speak for the FDA, but I think that it is reflecting that. However, looking at all the courts, we can have confidence that the model is working.

I cannot speak to the SSBA's position. I simply observe that it is obvious from what I have said that there are significant public benefits in every court in this country, apart from the one court where the SSBA is publicly stating that it is trying to frustrate the aims of summary case management. For me, given the spirit of partnership that I have spoken about, that is a very disappointing situation in which to find ourselves, and it is the public in Lothian and Borders who are suffering.

**Malcolm Graham:** I agree with all that the Crown Agent has said, so I will not repeat it. The peak of outstanding trials post-Covid was 43,000 cases, and we have now reduced that number to under 16,000 cases, which for the first time is below what it was before Covid. That is across all cases. Summary case management has played a significant part in that reduction in recent years. As the Crown Agent said, the roll-out is close to being complete, and it is anticipated that it will result in at least 3,200 fewer trials being fixed per year—at the moment, we are fixing about 40,000 summary trials—and will reduce the annual level of police witness citations by more than 50,000. Those significant data points speak for themselves.

Transitions to a new order are often challenging. This process requires a different way of working across all the justice partners, including the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service and the judiciary. It requires more up-front preparation and for us to programme in more case management hearings. However, getting through that transition is worth it for the significant benefits that can be evidenced as we come out the back of it.

**Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP):** This is a question for both your organisations—I asked it of Police Scotland and the Scottish Police Authority last week. What has been the impact of the increase to employer national insurance contributions on both your

organisations? Do you have the figures just now? If not, could you provide them later?

**Malcolm Graham:** I will come in first, if that is helpful. I do not have the figure to hand in relation to the financial consequence but the organisational consequence was that we had to make savings in other places to be able to afford that. That goes to the points that I made earlier about the consequences of the shortfall in the budget settlement compared with the ask from last year.

**Jamie Hepburn:** It would be really helpful if you were able to find and provide the figures.

**Malcolm Graham:** I am happy to supply them.

**Yvette Greener (Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service):** I do not have the exact figures for the increase to hand. However, as my colleague said, it is a matter of having to make adjustments.

Similarly, while our people have benefited hugely from the pay offer that has recently been published, which is positive for them, it is over and above the budget that we were allocated. Therefore, we will need to make adjustments if we are not going to receive extra funding. That will carry through into following years so that we can maintain our resource levels. I will be able to write with the exact figure.

11:15

**Jamie Hepburn:** That would be really helpful.

I have a few other questions. The first relates to the written submission from the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service. You note that

“£5m in efficiencies are embedded”

within what you say is your requirement for the next financial year. Could you talk a little bit more about what that constitutes and how that might impact on your service and operability?

**Yvette Greener:** As the Crown Agent said earlier, we are aiming for £7 million this year, which was our self-imposed efficiency. We are always looking for ways to achieve that. We have given ourselves the target of £5 million for next year. In part, some of that is about realism around recruitment and time lags, with a bit of optimism bias. We will consistently look for ways to reduce costs. Drawing a link here to summary case management, we have already reduced the costs of travel and subsistence and expenses claims from witnesses coming to court, because we are not calling as many people. Such moves bring through some of the wider efficiency to help support the £5 million in efficiencies that we are seeking and imposing on ourselves for next year.

**Jamie Hepburn:** So, that has been worked through.

**Yvette Greener:** Yes.

**Jamie Hepburn:** And that will not have an impact on the service that is provided.

**Yvette Greener:** No, it will not—we are constantly seeking to ensure that that does not happen. We will start to see benefits from some of our wider activity.

It is imperative that we maintain our resource levels for next year, and doing so will require a budget uplift. If we are unable to achieve that and are kept in a flat-cash situation, the risk applies to around 10 per cent of our workforce, which would not be funded for next year, based on what we know about pay increases, inflationary pressures and so on. In the circumstances, that would have a considerable impact on what we are able to deliver for the public.

**Jamie Hepburn:** I turn to the submission from the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service. This question picks up on something that the chief constable spoke about and concerns the challenge of cybersecurity, which is one of the threats that we know about and which continues to develop and change. You cite it as a risk across the board, and state that

“the threat picture continues to grow”.

It would not be sensible to ask about specific incidents, so I will not do that, but how much of a challenge is that issue, and what impact does it have on budget requirements? That might not have been cited in the same way in the Crown Office submission, but it would be useful to understand the issue in relation to that organisation. I invite Mr Graham to respond first, however.

**Malcolm Graham:** Thank you for asking for more detail on that. I will not go into specific incidents, but all committee members will be acutely aware of the existential threat that is posed to public service and other organisations by the potential for significant cyberattacks. It will not surprise you to know that, as an accountable officer, I take that prospect extremely seriously. It is one of the few areas—not quite uniquely—into which I have chosen to put additional investment during the course of this year, despite the budget pressures. That is for two reasons. The first is that there is an increasing requirement for us to provide a broader range of services across digital platforms that we need to support ourselves. Therefore, we are responsible for ensuring cybersafety and cybersecurity, not just for SCTS staff and the judiciary, but for other court users and members of the public. I take that duty extremely seriously.

My second point, which touches on the convener’s earlier question, concerns the inability to invest, at the scale and pace that we would like, in digital systems that are fit for the 21st century. We face an increasing risk of cyber insecurity in the systems that we have to continue running, and we have to spend more money, disproportionately, to try to shore up those systems and keep them safe. It gets to a point at which the only answer is to replace those systems and build them into a network of interfacing digital justice modules that can be designed to be cyber safe for the world that we now live in.

**Jamie Hepburn:** Perhaps Mr Logue or Ms Greener can talk about that from an organisational perspective.

**Yvette Greener:** It will not surprise the committee to hear that the impact that that issue might have features as one of the most serious risks on our strategic risk register. As chief operating officer, I am confident that the processes that we have in place are as good as they can be, and we specifically monitor threats at all times. Nonetheless, we are not complacent about that—it is something to address, not least as we roll out more public-facing systems such as the defence agent service, which we rolled out in the past year, as that increases risk. Our approach involves putting prospective measures in place.

Like my colleague from SCTS, we have challenges with ageing systems, in that we are finding it harder to maintain them and to keep them protected.

**Jamie Hepburn:** Mr Graham, does that touch on what you referred to earlier? Should these issues be addressed collaboratively across the justice system, or even more widely? It is not only the component parts of the justice system that are facing these challenges, so there is something to be said for ensuring that there is a wider collaborative effort on cyber resilience.

**Malcolm Graham:** Absolutely, and I give the Scottish Government credit for its efforts in creating the Scottish cyber co-ordination centre. We work extremely closely with the centre and with the Cyber and Fraud Centre in Scotland. Those bodies are mainly, although not exclusively, directed towards keeping public services safe and secure in the cyber world.

We work closely with UK agencies that provide support, and we also work with third-party private sector providers on things such as incident response and incident management and recovery. All of those measures are necessary, and it is diligent to put them in place, but we cannot do any of that on our own as an organisation. We do not have the opportunity, if we are not rebuilding a digital ecosystem across justice at the scale and

pace that we need, to build that stuff in at the foundations. We are having to retrospectively try to fit it on top of systems that, to be frank, were not designed for the threats that we face today.

**Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con):** Good morning. I start with a question for John Logue. The submission from COPFS sets out

“proposed essential resource funding and minimum capital requirements”

of £236.5 million and £7.6 million respectively, noting that that that

“does not fund expansion or additional service provision.”

What would be the consequences of not receiving those minimum requirements? If COPFS were to receive only that funding, what would it not be able to do in the coming year?

**John Logue:** It is important to stress that, from our perspective, protecting public safety is non-negotiable. The broad consequence of not having the funding that we need for next year is that the pace at which we are able to work—I include in that not only our operational work but the reform work that we have talked about this morning—will suffer. The consequence of that for the public will be most noticeable in relation to our casework. I spoke earlier in very general terms about that, saying that we would need to pivot our people towards casework that has time limits, because we cannot allow our criminal casework that has time limits to fail to meet those limits. There would, therefore, be a noticeable change for the public quite quickly in terms of what that would mean for them and the cases in which they are directly involved.

I can say a bit more about the detail of that to illustrate the point. For example, I spoke earlier about our Covid deaths investigation team. The approximately 80 people who are working on that are dealing with the 3,500 cases that we still have to investigate and conclude. Yvette Greener will be able to say more about the detail of the funding, but overall, the consequence of a flat-cash settlement, for example, would, as she highlighted, mean the equivalent of a shortfall of 10 per cent in our workforce, which is about 260 full-time equivalent people.

Our normal turnover every year is only about 100 people. On average, every year, around 100 people leave, retire or move to other jobs. If we have a shortfall of about 260, that normal turnover will not allow us to meet the financial savings that are required. We will have to then pivot people away from work. However, even if, for example, we were to stop specialising in Covid deaths and redirect those 80 people into work that had time limits, that is only 80 people, which would leave us with a shortfall of 180.

Broadly speaking, we would, over time, as people leave, need to replace those who are leaving from criminal casework that has time limits by moving people who are doing work on, for example, death investigations, where there is no time limit, or on large, complex criminal investigations that have not yet got to the point of someone being in court and there being a time limit.

We would not be dedicating teams of people—as we are currently able to do—to either criminal cases or large, complex death investigations such as the Jenners fire, the hotel fire in Perth or the tug sinking in the Clyde. The complexity of all those cases demands that we have a team of people on them, but we would no longer be able to do that, because we would gradually have to take people away from those teams to fill the gaps in criminal casework where there are time limits.

I am very clear that we would need to be up front with the families involved in those death investigations, and make it clear that we were having to slow down those investigations because, instead of having dedicated teams, we would end up with individuals carrying a number of cases, only some of which might involve Covid deaths. The ability of one individual to get through that casework in comparison to the ability of a dedicated team to do so is obvious in terms of its consequences.

That would be, at a very general level, the way in which I would describe the consequences of not having the resource that we need next year. However, it is important to stress that, in asking for that resource, we recognise the broader pressure on the public sector finances.

As Malcolm Graham said earlier, we could build a case around any one of a number of good, evidence-based reasons to argue for having an expanded capacity and more people. In relation to next year’s budget, however, we are not asking for that; we are asking to stay as we are to allow us to do what I described at the beginning of the meeting, which is to progress the reform work and deal with the consequences of the court disruption that was caused by the pandemic. If we can succeed in that, the criminal justice system will look very different between 2027 and 2030, and we will have much better public outcomes.

**Sharon Dowey:** Your submission also mentions cost pressures arising from the implementation of body-worn video, and says that that is “an unfunded responsibility”.

Could you tell us more about the cost pressures that you expect to face in that regard? Have you discussed extra funding for that with the Scottish Government?

**Yvette Greener:** At the moment, we are not yet clear what the cost will be, but we can see that it will be a pressure. It is unusual that any changes, whether those are changes to legislation or to operational procedures, do not bring some additional costs.

The reason why we are not yet clear is that there is a balance to be struck. With elements such as summary case management, we might see some benefits through body-worn video being able to produce evidence earlier and to bring some cases to conclusion at an earlier point. However, we may find that there is greater uplift in case numbers because there is more evidence to allow cases to proceed to prosecution. At the moment, therefore, we are not clear on what that cost will be. Naturally, we need to learn from other organisations, and from the police in England and Wales with regard to the impacts of body-worn video that they have seen. At present, we are flagging it as a risk, but one that we are not yet able to put a cost against.

**Sharon Dowey:** Is it safe to say that, although you are making efficiency savings, those are not actually going to be savings, because you need to focus that money elsewhere in order to continue with the improvements that you are currently making in the system?

**Yvette Greener:** Absolutely. There are a few things to consider. We are making efficiencies in order to deal with the increased case load that is coming our way and to continue to clear the backlogs, but also to reform as an organisation.

We come under a great amount of scrutiny, but without the resources it becomes harder to respond to things such as His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prosecution in Scotland's reports and recommendations as well as to progress the cases. Our aim is to ensure that we are able to maintain a steady state.

11:30

**Sharon Dowey:** You mentioned the increase in case volumes and the increasing complexity of cases. Your budget proposals include only essential funding requirements. Do they include a requirement for increased staff levels due to growth of the case load and the complexity of cases?

**Yvette Greener:** We have not asked for an increase in staff. The budget bid that we have submitted, which has increased slightly because of the pay deal, seeks to maintain the status quo. Although we say that we will be able to absorb some of the additional costs that come from the greater complexity of cases, that is part of a balance that involves finding efficiencies in the wider system.

**Sharon Dowey:** But you need to keep your staffing levels where they are now.

**Yvette Greener:** Absolutely. If we do not do that, we will not be able to deliver.

Building on what the Crown Agent said earlier, given that our churn is low, we must consider the practicality of how we would release people and reduce staff numbers. There is a no-redundancy agreement in place, so there is a real risk of breaching our control limits, if we are not careful.

**Sharon Dowey:** The Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Act 2025 includes a range of provisions that might be expected to impact on resources, such as the proposed sexual offences court. What stage of planning are your organisations at in preparing for the implementation of the 2025 act? Are you able to identify when any additional resources might be needed?

**Malcolm Graham:** The work to prepare for the sexual offences court has been on-going for some time. The Scottish Government temporarily funded a very small team in SCTS to support the development of the policy in preparation for the bill that is now an act. That team has now turned its attention to working with others to look at what the consequences of implementation will be.

At the point that formal submissions were made, we made it very clear—this was reflected in the financial memorandum—that it was not possible for us to fully account for the cost implications of that significant element of the proposals. There are many more such implications, and we are now going through the process of considering those. We will work closely with the Government and other organisations to ensure that that work develops and is articulated when it is available.

**John Logue:** We are in a very similar position to the one that the courts service is in, which Malcolm Graham has just outlined. I emphasise that the increased costs that will come with the act are not part of our plans for next year, because we are at such an early stage.

However, I must emphasise that our planning for, for example, the sexual offences court is based on the fact that very significant costs will be associated with its establishment, and we cannot absorb those costs alongside the other pressures that we have discussed. Therefore, over and above the existing discussions about next year's budget, there will need to be very specific discussions about the costs that come from implementation of the act.

**Sharon Dowey:** Thank you.

**Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** Good morning. My first question is for John Logue. You might have partly covered this in

response to my colleague Sharon Dowey's question, but the FDA and the Public and Commercial Services Union believe that resources are being targeted at high-priority areas, such as the High Court and the specialised casework that you have spoken about, at the expense of local court work. Do you recognise that? Will your budget asks be enough to cover both aspects and achieve a balance in that respect?

**John Logue:** I do not recognise that description, and I do not accept that it is correct. In terms of numbers, the part of our organisation that deals with casework in local sheriff courts is the largest part of the organisation, and it is a part of the organisation on which we have focused considerable effort, for example in relation to summary case management. In addition, some of the digital improvements that we have introduced this year have had a benefit solely or predominantly in the sheriff court. Therefore, I do not accept the characterisation that we prioritise other parts of the organisation at the expense of one part.

**Rona Mackay:** It is interesting to have that on the record. Once the summary case management initiative has been fully rolled out, it sounds as though it will be very successful or even transformative. I know that you are making efficiencies and that you have set yourself a target of £5 million. What operational changes could be made to save money? Are you up to the max with that? Are you doing that to the extent that you can?

**John Logue:** I am sorry—are you asking specifically about summary case management or about the situation more generally?

**Rona Mackay:** I am talking about general operational initiatives, which do not require a lot of money. Are you pursuing those to the max?

**John Logue:** I would never be complacent and say that we are doing absolutely everything, but summary case management is not our only focus in our efforts to be as efficient as possible and to improve the way that we work. We are always looking to do that, either at a national level or with other organisations across the system, such as the courts service. Even at a local level, we encourage people to find better ways of working. Personally, I would like us, as prosecutors, to look at what we can learn from summary case management that we can apply in other parts of our work. That is a possible future area of focus.

It would be wrong to say that we think that the system as a whole is operating at maximum efficiency. I would not want anyone to think that I thought that that was the case. There is always more that we can do. It is a question of having the right leadership focus on that. It is important that

we maintain the confidence of our colleagues who do the operational work and recognise the role that they have to play in that process. It is also a question of having the right plans in place and having discussions with the other parts of the system. One of the key learning points from summary case management is that one part of the system cannot change the whole system by itself. We really get the benefits when we work together.

**Rona Mackay:** That is useful.

Malcolm, you said that money for digital investment and expansion is an absolute priority. I might have missed it, but I do not think that I saw a figure for that in your submission. Are you able to put a figure on what you will need to spend on that?

**Malcolm Graham:** No. SCTS has a plan for next year, if we are successful in baselining the RRT funding, for the allocation that we could invest in digital, alongside running digital services, but it is very modest in relation to the quantum that we would need to make the changes that we know can bring service improvements and efficiencies to the things that we are doing.

The bigger prize is to look at it at a system level. There is a significant gap between the level of investment that has come into the justice system and what is needed to maximise those benefits. Like the Crown Agent, SCTS is constantly looking at what we can do with the resource that we have. I have spent a significant amount of my first year travelling around the country, visiting staff who are working in tribunals, courts and the Office of the Public Guardian, and they are all running hot. They are working at pace every day and do not have the capacity to think about and introduce new ways of working. We need to be able to support and fund people to do that, even if it does not require investment in new systems.

The biggest changes will come through moving an organisation that is cash heavy towards digital payments, moving an organisation that is paper heavy towards digital transactions and enabling an organisation that does not interface well with other partners in a logical or efficient way to be connected in a digital way that is safe and secure. That is what we need investment for across the system.

**Rona Mackay:** Do you envisage a phase-in of parts of the digital investment and expansion programme, depending on what investment you get, or are you going to do a wholesale digital transformation? Are you saying, "We could do that just now and it might help"? Is that the way that you are looking at it?

**Malcolm Graham:** It is in progress, but the pace has been slow and the success has been limited, because it has been confined by the low

level of investment, relative to what would be required.

We are working collectively, jointly with the Government, to try to build a compelling proposition that we can present at national level. The justice system is a critically important underlying part of the foundation of the democracy that we live in, and investment is needed to ensure that it is effective and efficient for the future, given the challenges that we face.

**Rona Mackay:** I presume that your view is that investment in digital will save money in future, so your budget asks might not be as great in the future, once the organisation is fully digitised and those efficiencies could be made.

**Malcolm Graham:** A positive, optimistic view of the future is that we can have smaller organisations that can provide better services more efficiently in digital ways. They will be connected with one another and will be more commensurate with what court users, tribunal users and the public expect. The optimistic role for leaders is to be able to paint that picture and do the evidence-based work so that we can come up with the benefits and articulate those against the costs in a data-driven way. That is the work that we are engaged in at the moment.

**Rona Mackay:** Do you have a target date—it might only be a wish—for when you would like that to be completed?

**Malcolm Graham:** We have agreed to do the first phase of work on that in advance of the election. I anticipate that, across the justice system, with the good faith and support of the other leaders, we would have to spend the first year building the case and articulating what the level of investment is likely to be, for a sustained period, to bring about the transformation that is required.

**Rona Mackay:** That is interesting.

**Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** Good morning. I will begin by asking John Logue about the time limits in the High Court, which we have discussed before. The Covid emergency time limit comes to an end in November, except for cases that have already started. I presume that that means that, at the end of November, we will go back to the time limits in the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995. What is the time period—does the Crown have 80 days to indict cases for the High Court?

**John Logue:** There are a number of different time limits, but you are correct that, for all accused who appear in court on or after 1 December, we will revert to the traditional limits that we operated to before the pandemic. If the accused is in custody, that will require us to serve an indictment

within 80 days, and it will require there to be a first diet or a preliminary hearing within 110 days. Different time limits apply if the accused is on bail. Obviously, there are also time limits that are unaffected by the change, which relate to summary cases.

**Pauline McNeill:** Is there anything built into the budget for that added pressure? Have you asked for anything for that? I presume that you will not meet those time limits on day 1, but maybe you will.

**John Logue:** We are required to do so—that is the consequence of the change that Parliament made this year. The broader point that I made last year was that we are having to adapt to the changes that Parliament has decided should be made. Parliament has decided that there should be an immediate change, which will come into effect from 1 December, so we will have to operate to those time limits for everyone who appears in court from 1 December.

That means that there will be a period of time—which I think will last for about 18 months—in which the criminal justice system will have to operate with two sets of time bars side by side, which is a more complicated picture than we have ever been used to. Prior to the pandemic, we had one set of time bars, which we were all used to, and, during the pandemic, we moved to elongated time bars, but there was still one set of time bars for everything. From the end of November, we will move to a dual system.

Although I have set out the complexity of that arrangement, as I said last year, it is preferable to what would have been the case at the end of November. I am very grateful to Parliament for making the change, but we knew that, in asking for that change—

**Pauline McNeill:** Will additional resource be required?

**John Logue:** We have been given additional resource. We were given additional resource this year for additional people to deal with that pressure. We have those people, and we are using that resource. Because we will have the dual system for 12 to 18 months, we think that we will need those people and that resource through 2026-27 and into the early part of 2027-28. That is part of the discussions for next year's budget.

11:45

**Pauline McNeill:** In your submission, you also talked about the impact of the change in the law on corroboration. Obviously, the slight change in the law will mean more work for prosecutors, but does it necessarily mean that there will be a lot more cases? I am trying to ascertain what

additional resource will be required for that law change.

**John Logue:** That is a much more difficult question to quantify. My personal view is that there will be more cases. That is already happening— anecdotally, prosecutors will say that they are now seeing cases being reported by the police that either would not have been reported before the change in the law or on which we would previously have been required to take no action, because of the prior understanding of the law of evidence. It is difficult to quantify what the situation will look like in one, two or five years from now, so it is difficult to build an evidence base and a resource bid around that. However, we are working on that and are sharing the information that we get from the Government.

I can tell you that, in the 2024-25 financial year, we served 1,100 High Court indictments. The projection for this year is that we will serve 1,300 High Court indictments. I cannot tell you how much of that increase is due to the change in the law, but I know from speaking to prosecutors who deal with this that such cases are now coming to us and that we are dealing with them. That consequence was obvious to us at the point when the law changed.

**Pauline McNeill:** Thank you. Malcolm Graham, on the same subject. What impact are delays in the High Court likely to have? We are not meeting the waiting times at the moment—in fact, post-Covid, I think that the waiting times have gone up, which is disappointing from everyone's point of view. However, when the time limits from the 1995 act kick in at the end of November, what impact will that have? Are the waiting times likely to go up again?

**Malcolm Graham:** Yes. As per the modelling that Liam Kerr referred to in his earlier questions, the prediction is that, without some change in the capacity of the system, waiting times will elongate and the number of cases in the system will grow. At the moment, the number of scheduled pending High Court trials is just over 900. I think that that is the highest that the number has ever been— certainly, the pre-Covid level in 2019-20 was 390. That gives you a sense of the scale of the number of cases that are in the system awaiting resolution.

As I pointed out earlier, the change in waiting times will happen rapidly without some level of intervention. The waiting times could potentially double within the next two years. Waiting times are already up to 41 or 42 weeks. That is the period between when somebody first appears and the case is resolved. There is often a long period of time—perhaps approaching a year—when the case is with the Crown, and a period before that from when the crime occurred, which can be very lengthy. The impact on victims and witnesses in

relation to anxiety and trauma is likely to be significant.

**Pauline McNeill:** I understand that. What do you need from the Government in the budget, given what you have said to the committee about the likely increase in waiting times for the High Court?

**Malcolm Graham:** We need the temporary RRT funding to be baselined, so that we can maintain the capacity in the system. We need investment in digitisation at a greater scale than we have had previously to allow us to make the systems more efficient, so that we can get through more work at a quicker pace.

Much as the Crown Agent said, we recognise the Government's requests and strong signals regarding public sector funding and in response, we are not asking for more resource to grow the organisation. However, that comes with an expectation. As the First Minister has said publicly, transformation through the digitisation of the public realm is the answer to the question of how to have more efficient and smaller public services. I am committed to doing our bit to keep the organisation the same size as it is and there is a commitment to make it smaller. However, at the moment, the public service reform strategy does not have a funding stream attached to it for such digitisation, but that is what we need.

**Pauline McNeill:** You are asking, so to speak, for that additional funding. If you get it, could you get those times back to where they should be—or closer to what they should be—in relation to the 1995 act?

**Malcolm Graham:** It is not quite as straightforward as there being a direct causal correlation between investment and digitisation and pulling those times back. We will need to manage and balance a large number of variables across the system.

**Pauline McNeill:** So, what do you need from this budget to stop that trend of lengthening waiting times in the High Court?

**Malcolm Graham:** It will be very difficult to stop that happening now, because of the nature of the cases that are coming in—

**Pauline McNeill:** So, is there nothing to be done?

**Malcolm Graham:** What we can do is seek to mitigate that rise by baselining the RRT funding and ensuring that we have sufficient investment to be able to make best use of the staff that we have, with better systems.

**Pauline McNeill:** What you are saying is that you cannot point to anything in particular and that, if you could get anything that you wanted to get

those times down, you cannot tell me what that would be.

**Malcolm Graham:** The size of the system is not purely constrained by SCTS resource. As the Crown Agent has said, its budget submission is founded on the current size of the High Court system—I think that I am right in saying that. Therefore, there would be implications for the Crown and for solicitors and for the Faculty of Advocates in relation to defence, because we might not have the court space to be able to grow the number of courts that we would need.

There are limiting factors other than budget with regard to the answer to that exceptional problem, which has come about for a variety of reasons—many of which are actually very positive, as they relate to dealing with some of the instances from the present in a very different way to how they have been dealt with in the past. We will have to think much more creatively and recognise a requirement for investment to tackle the issue in the years ahead.

**Pauline McNeill:** Finally, you said in your submission that, in addition to the work that you currently do, the SCTS is taking on additional work that introduces

“administrative costs without any associated revenue stream to offset some of those costs.”

Does that mean that you are absorbing existing costs?

**Malcolm Graham:** Yes. In some cases where tribunals have been devolved in recent years, there has been an arrangement whereby the funding from the Scottish Government remains flexible and we get it as an in-year settlement in relation to the cost of the system. However, other parts of the system have been baselined and growth has continued that is not funded additionally, so we have had to find ways of doing that work. If we cannot—which is what is happening in some parts of the system at the moment—we cannot deal with the level of case growth. The consequence is that it takes longer to resolve those cases and there are more cases in the system.

The best example of that—or, in some cases, perhaps the worst example—is the social security tribunal, which, as you will understand, has been subject to devolution. It is a critical part of Scotland’s social security system but it is under significant pressure, as new and different payments come in and are challenged. These are critical issues for people who are making a submission to the tribunal, and it is now taking an excessive length of time for those cases to be resolved. The delays are way beyond what is acceptable.

**The Convener:** I am aware that we are running over time. I am keen to get Fulton MacGregor in for a final question, if our witnesses are okay to stay a few moments longer.

**Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** The question might be answered briefly, given the convener’s comment on time. Last year, before the committee, both organisations set out the importance of multiyear funding allocations. Has there been any progress on that matter? Have there been any discussions with the Scottish Government or any other body about moving that forward? I remember both your organisations stressing last year that it would be important.

**John Logue:** For our part, the position remains as it was last year. To be perfectly frank, the opportunity for us as an organisation of prosecutors to influence the Government’s approach on all that is fairly limited. The Government continues to operate the budget in the way that it does.

What I have done in the past year, working with Yvette Greener and other colleagues, is to look at how, internally, we can develop our own planning for future years to try to overcome some of the difficulties that come with annual budget planning and to give a bit more certainty to some of our financial plans over a multiyear basis. From the position of being a relatively small organisation, our internal priorities are focused on that rather than on trying to effect a significant change to the way in which the Scottish Government manages its whole budget.

**Malcolm Graham:** The position remains that we cannot carry reserves and we are not allowed to borrow or to carry over underspend. The level of inflexibility that that produces on an annualised basis is a very inefficient way to run a large and complex public service.

Similarly to the Crown Agent, we have moved towards multiyear capital planning, jointly with the Government. However, it is notional, because we do not have any prediction or assurance about what the capital settlement will be for the years that we are planning ahead. What is positive is that, through a multiyear spending review period, we have had the opportunity to at least lay out our projections for both revenue and capital funding beyond the year ahead. That, at least, is welcomed.

**The Convener:** Thank you for that. I was going to ask one final question but we are short of time, so I will ask whether you would be happy to write to the committee about it. It is with regard to climate change. Parliamentary committees are looking a bit more closely at the work that stakeholders and public sector organisations are

undertaking with regard to reducing their carbon footprint and emissions and, in essence, meeting our collective climate change targets. Would you be able to set out a bit of detail on what your respective organisations are doing on that and whether you might require some further resource to support that work? I hope that that is fairly clear—it is a bit of a synopsis. We look forward to receiving your submissions on that question.

Thank you all for your attendance today. It has been a really interesting session. I will now suspend briefly to allow a changeover of witnesses.

11:57

*Meeting suspended.*

12:01

*On resuming—*

**The Convener:** I welcome to our meeting Stuart Stevens, chief officer of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service; Andy Watt, deputy chief officer; and Sarah O'Donnell, deputy chief officer for corporate services. You are all very welcome this morning, and I thank you for sending your detailed written submission.

I am conscious that we overran our previous evidence session, so apologies for that. There is a lot for us to get through. I anticipate that we will probably have to run over time again, with everybody's agreement, so it will be nearer 1 o'clock before we conclude this session. I hope that that works for witnesses and members.

I remind members and our witnesses that this evidence-taking session is focused in the main on budget issues for this and the next financial year. The committee is planning further evidence sessions in the coming weeks on the wider fire service modernisation agenda and proposed station closures.

I begin by asking our witnesses an opening question to get things under way. I will come to Stuart Stevens first. Can you update us on whether you have found the funding provision for 2025-26 to have been sufficient? What are your organisation's main asks for 2026-27? If you are unsuccessful in that respect, what will be the consequences?

**Stuart Stevens (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service):** Thank you, convener. Is it okay if I make some opening remarks as well?

**The Convener:** If you could weave in your answer to my question.

**Stuart Stevens:** Perfect. Thank you for this opportunity to provide evidence on behalf of the

Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and to expand on our written submission outlining our current challenges and forthcoming budget requirements.

We have a very clear vision for SFRS: to be a leading, sustainable, modern and technologically advanced fire and rescue service that is fit to meet the challenges of Scotland's future. Since our formation in 2013, we have delivered extensive reform—realising the intended benefits of fire reform with a projection to deliver more than £900 million in savings by 2027-28, significantly exceeding the original expectations of the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012. That has been realised through rationalisation of our corporate estate and control rooms, the streamlining of corporate functions and a reduction of staff across all our staff groups.

We have set out our challenges in our submission. Although those challenges and the financial pressures are real and require attention, let me be clear that ours is not a service in crisis. It is a service that has demonstrated resilience, the value of prevention, innovation and a commitment to public safety under challenging circumstances.

The outcomes are clear. We have routinely demonstrated the value of a single national service while continuing to respond to and resource every incident, including major incidents, and navigating significant national emergencies such as the Covid pandemic. The number of house fires is now at a record low in Scotland, with a reduction of more than a quarter since the inception of the service. Fatal fires are down by 9 per cent since 2013, the number of non-fatal casualties has reduced by almost a half since 2013, and non-domestic fires are at an all-time low.

That success is down to our dedicated staff, both uniformed and support, who selflessly and professionally work to protect Scotland's communities every day. What we seek from funding settlements is to ensure that that success continues and is not reversed.

Despite that record of delivery and reform, the pressures on the service are becoming increasingly acute. A real-terms reduction of around 18 per cent in our resource budget since 2013, combined with inflationary costs and higher employer national insurance contributions, is constraining our ability to deliver on our strategic priorities.

The demands on the service are also changing. Non-fire incidents have increased by around 75 per cent as we take on a wider role supporting public safety and resilience. The effects of climate change—wildfires, flooding and severe weather—are now a regular part of our operational reality, and the evidence suggests that those risks will

only intensify in the years ahead. Indeed, the incidence of wildfires has increased by 60 per cent this year, including the largest wildfire ever recorded in Scotland. The impact on our communities, environment, economy, ecology, public health and services is increasing as a result, and that is driving the need for both change and investment.

Risks associated with our geopolitical situation are driving the need for robust civil defence and capabilities to respond to national resilience events and acts of terrorism. Tragic events such as the Grenfell and Cameron House fires must serve as a reminder of the need to ensure that our built environment remains safe. Lessons from those inquiries must be actioned, and we require a resourced fire service with a robust focus on regulation, enforcement, prevention and operational preparedness.

The recent additional capital funding has been welcome, but pressures remain significant, and sustained investment is essential if we are to ensure the resilience of our front-line emergency service and provide safe, modern facilities for our staff while ensuring that our critical infrastructure remains fit for purpose. To deliver that, we are seeking capital funding of £61 million in 2026-27, rising to £77 million by 2029-30. To cover our baseline and unavoidable cost pressures, SFRS requires a resource budget uplift in 2026-27 of £30.854 million. An additional £5.7 million would enable us to advance our strategic priorities, including through the use of technology to improve firefighter safety, fire prevention, digital transformation and cybersecurity, with investment in leadership development to support a positive workforce culture.

SFRS has consistently shown that it can reform, deliver efficiencies, adapt to changing needs and do more for the people of Scotland. Our service, along with Police Scotland, has rightly been cited as an exemplar of public service reform, but that must go alongside sustained investment. Investment in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is not discretionary—it is essential. It is an investment in Scotland's resilience, in the protection of lives and property and in helping to build a service that is fit for Scotland's future.

Returning to your question, convener, I can expand on our ask at this stage.

**The Convener:** That would be helpful. I ask you to be fairly succinct, because we have limited time and I am keen for all members to come in. Thank you.

**Stuart Stevens:** The £30.85 million that I mentioned in my introduction covers our pay and pension inflation, our non-pay inflation, increased demand due to climate-related incidents,

reinvestment of firefighter posts to achieve our target operating model, the addressing of inquiry-led issues and health and safety-related pressures, and reducing our support staff vacancy back to the agreed level of 3 per cent.

The additional £5.7 million would enable us to advance our strategic priorities. As I touched on, that primarily concerns technology, investment in fire safety and prevention, developing our digital capabilities and cybersecurity, and development of our workforce.

That would mean looking to increase our uniformed personnel by 210 over the next three years. Our staff increase in year 1 of that, 2026-27, would be in the region of 71 uniformed personnel. Our support staff would increase beyond the vacancy factor by 30 over that period. That mainly relates to prevention, compliance, risk leadership and culture development.

Where would we invest those firefighter numbers? We would use them for improving our front-line resilience in rural areas, for specialist training instructors, for prevention and fire safety enforcement and for enhancing civil contingencies planning and preparedness.

**The Convener:** I will perhaps come back in later with a question on challenges around carrying financial reserves and working with annualised budgets.

In the spirit of time, however, I will now hand over to Liam Kerr.

**Liam Kerr:** I am grateful, convener.

Chief officer, your current budget gives you £332 million in resource funding. You have just said that you need an additional £30.854 million in the next budget, which would allow you to do the various things that you have set out. What extra resource funding do you require to ensure that you do not need to reduce firefighter posts to balance the budget?

**Stuart Stevens:** The £30.854 million is what would be required to ensure that we would not have to consider reducing firefighter numbers further. We are already starting from a very challenging financial position, and we believe that we have made all the efficiencies that we can drive from the organisation over the past 12 years. There are very few places that we can go to, apart from front-line firefighter numbers, given that more than 80 per cent of our resource budget is on head count.

Our corporate services staff are already running with a 10 per cent vacancy factor, so the challenges associated with moving that any further would be significant. That amount is what we would need in order to deal with our financial pressures and not reduce head count any further.

**Liam Kerr:** I understand.

On capital funding, you have stated in your submission that you require total capital investment, up to 2030-31, of £354 million, which you break down into various years. If the current £47 million a year of capital funding were to continue, that would leave you £119 million short by 2030-31. What would be the practical result of not getting that investment?

**Stuart Stevens:** I will perhaps bring in Sarah O'Donnell to provide some detail on the capital budget.

**Sarah O'Donnell (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service):** On the practical realities of not getting that funding, it is very much about the pace at which we can change. Our capital budget, at £47 million—ideally going up to £61 million—has to cover a broad range of assets. It covers our estate, with its 300-plus properties right across Scotland. It covers our fleet and the operational equipment that is required to keep firefighters safe and that allows them to deliver their service. It also covers digital and technology. A very broad range of capital infrastructure has to be funded from that budget, and if we were unable to increase it, we would continue with a position where significant aspects of that asset portfolio were not fit for purpose.

At this point in time, 45 per cent of our estate is in poor or bad condition, 75 per cent of it is deemed to be unsuitable in terms of the standards that we require from the buildings, and 61 per cent of the estate is more than 30 years old. That is what we are dealing with, and we have to spend more resource budget to maintain the estate as we are unable to bring it up to standard.

One of the well-documented challenges in the estate is the roofing made from reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—RAAC. If we are unable to replace or repair fire stations with such roofing, we will incur more on-going resource costs to ensure that those stations can function safely—not very satisfactorily, but safely. That would also inhibit our ability to tackle contaminant control, for example. It is a matter of redesigning the footprint within fire stations to provide safe systems of work inside the buildings. In addition, to make our buildings more fit for a diverse workforce, we need to provide the right facilities for all of our staff.

Those are some examples of what we would have to slow down on or be unable to tackle. We would have to continue to work as hard as we currently do in order to do the best that we can with the limited resources available.

12:15

**Jamie Hepburn:** I put this question to the previous panel, and to last week's panel. What impact have the increased employer national insurance contributions had on your service?

**Stuart Stevens:** The total impact of the national insurance changes on the service was £5.5 million. We received £3.42 million in support from the Scottish Government, and that left us with a gap of around £2 million. The full cost of that would have resulted in around 120 firefighter posts being lost. With a gap of £2 million, it would be 48 firefighters, and would equate to around two whole-time appliances.

Our priority, however, was to protect the front line and not reduce firefighter numbers in order to address the national insurance gap. That meant that we had to find the money elsewhere in the organisation to cover the cost, which had a detrimental impact, primarily on our corporate services but also on a number of our change investment areas in the organisation.

**Jamie Hepburn:** You have pre-empted my follow-up question, which was about how many firefighter posts that would equate to, so thank you for getting ahead of me.

The convener has told us—quite rightly—not to get into the detail on the service delivery review, and I do not intend to do so. However, you refer to it in your submission as it relates to the budgets, so I have a very quick question on that.

You say that the changes would enable you “to make savings”. That may be true, but my understanding—from engaging with organisations, and from what we have been told by the Minister for Victims and Community Safety, who presumably got the information from you—is that the changes are not driven by the budget, so if you were given an uplift in budget, you would still be looking to make those changes. Is that correct?

**Stuart Stevens:** To be clear on the service delivery review, the aim is to invest any savings or resources—people or money—back into the organisation to meet our strategic objectives and priorities. Part of the service delivery review also includes the removal of the 10 appliances that have been—

**Jamie Hepburn:** I understand and appreciate that—I am not looking to get into the detail. I just wanted to understand that the review is not driven by budgetary concerns per se.

**Stuart Stevens:** Yes.

**Jamie Hepburn:** That is all I wanted to understand on that.

I have one final quick question, which relates to another part of the SFRS submission, on the challenges around recruitment of on-call firefighters; I think that we all understand that. I might be asking Sharon Dowe's question, so I apologise to her—I am just going to crack on and ask it.

Your submission says:

"An additional £4million is being invested annually in revised terms and conditions".

I suppose the fundamental question is, first, is that continuing investment, and secondly, is it proving effective?

**Stuart Stevens:** I will bring in Andy Watt with an update on the on-call aspect.

When we were at the committee last year, we were still in the process of attempting to harmonise our on-call terms and conditions. We successfully did that at the beginning of this year. We have also, through the national joint council, improved retainer fees. There has been an investment of around £4.5 million in on-call as well. We have harmonised terms and conditions, and we have made that significant investment in on-call terms and conditions. I will bring in Andy to talk about the level of improvement.

**Andy Watt (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service):** To build on the comments from Stuart Stevens, we have, as he rightly says, invested that £4 million. That has come through the harmonisation of the on-call terms and conditions. We have also seen implemented this year new national contract bandings around our on-call contracts.

Both of those have the purpose of increasing contract flexibility, which we know that we require from the challenges that we see within the on-call service as result of the historical model that we have had in place. At this point, it is probably too early to say that we will see any direct benefits. We need time for the changes to bed in before we can truly understand the impact that they have had on the on-call element, on availability and on recruitment and retention. We will revisit the situation and review it in due course.

There are a number of other areas of work, including on-call processes and procedures and on-call appliance availability resilience, that have been going on through our on-call improvement team, which supports all of that. At a high level, the harmonisation of the terms and conditions and the new national contract banding give us more flexibility to attract more people into on-call, which can provide different availability during different periods of time and at different points of the week, when we require it most.

**The Convener:** Sharon, I can give you a moment, since Jamie stole your question. Are you happy to come in now?

**Sharon Dowe:** It is fine. Andy Watt, you may already have touched on some of this, but I was looking at the recruitment and retention of local on-call firefighters and further investment. I think that you said that you have just made an investment of £4 million.

**Andy Watt:** Yes.

**Sharon Dowe:** Right. You have lost 1,239 firefighters and you just said that part of your budget ask is for the recruitment of 210 firefighters and 30 civilian staff. Is that right?

**Andy Watt:** Yes—

**Sharon Dowe:** Will that be enough? Your submission says that you will make a total of £900 million in cost savings, which substantially exceeds the £328 million that was envisaged, but we have lost an awful lot of firefighters. One of the big concerns of people in rural communities is about the increase in response times. That is seen as being caused by a reduction in the number of firefighters, because we do not have as many available to be on call to go to fires when needed. Is investing in 210 staff enough, given that you have lost 1,239?

**Andy Watt:** I will break down the figure of 1,239 that is quoted. That includes about 550 posts that were removed as part of the reform process, including senior officers and firefighter posts from across the organisation. An additional 166 posts were removed in 2023 due to the significant in-year inflationary pressure that we had to deal with.

However, there are in the region of 300 vacant posts across the on-call duty system and we are actively and constantly trying to recruit into those posts. The vacancies are spread across about 356 stations in Scotland. Recruitment to the on-call system always remains a challenge and it is not unique to Scotland. It is a United Kingdom-wide—if not worldwide—challenge. We are attempting to address that through our on-call improvement group and by improving terms and conditions.

On your question about rural communities, we think that investment could be made. As I said at the outset, those posts would be targeted to address our priorities, but also to improve our resilience, primarily in remote rural communities. Essentially, we are providing whole-time firefighters using the cluster approach in order to improve resilience in rural communities.

**Sharon Dowe:** Does keeping our communities safe mean that we need to look at taking on more whole-time firefighters rather than retained firefighters?

**Andy Watt:** Those 210 posts are for whole-time firefighters.

**Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** I will also ask about response times, because it is a focus of the Fire Brigades Union Scotland. Call-handling times for risk-to-life calls have increased by more than 20 seconds, and response times to risk-to-life incidents have increased by 1 minute and 20 seconds since 2016. FBU Scotland told us that, unless there is a better budget settlement, response times will continue to rise. That is a massive concern for communities across Scotland.

As Sharon Dowe said, there have already been a huge number of firefighter job losses. It is clear that the organisation has been attempting to make significant savings. There have been real-terms cuts of £56 million, so the fat, we presume, has gone. To what extent is the potential for further increases in response times linked to budgetary issues, to staffing and to the availability of the appropriate appliance for a particular incident, which is also a significant issue?

**Stuart Stevens:** I will bring in Andy Watt on the response times and add something at the end, if that is okay.

**Andy Watt:** The subject of response times is quite complex to discuss in full detail. It is influenced by a number of factors, from the time of the call to the response of our fire appliances. You rightly highlighted that the call-handling times have increased, but we have invested in a new mobilising system for our control rooms. I am pleased to say that the first go-live date went ahead successfully yesterday, at Edinburgh control. That is a great step forward and has been well received in our operations control room.

We think that the implementation of the new mobilising system will streamline call handling significantly and, I hope, have a positive impact on the response times as a result. That is one factor, but there are a number of factors behind the response times. It is fair to say that we need to do more work to fully understand those in order to better understand where we can make efficiencies and make things better. We are looking both to commission academic research in order to help us understand that and to work with the Fire Brigades Union on the issue. A number of factors affect response times. It is not solely down to the number of personnel that we have for appliances; it is multifactorial. We need to do more comprehensive work to understand the full picture of what impacts response times and how to put solutions in place to reduce them.

In response to concerns about community risk, it is important to note that, over the period during which response times have increased, we have

seen improved outcomes around accidental dwelling fires, fire casualties and so on. Stuart talked about those figures. That is testament to the hard work of our prevention team and firefighters across the country. We are absolutely focused on outcomes for the community, but we acknowledge that we need to understand more about response times and their impact.

**Stuart Stevens:** All that I will add is that there are three obvious elements to response times: call handling, the time it takes to mobilise and the time it takes to arrive at an incident. For us, however, there is a fourth point, which is when a fire starts and is discovered. The amount of work that the service has done over the past 20 years through the home fire safety visit programme, allied with new legislation on smoke detection and standards, has helped to drive the number of fires down and ensure that outcomes do not reverse.

Clearly, with firefighters, you get two for one: you get a response and you get a prevention element. The volume of community safety and home safety work that we do helps to control those outcomes and mitigate the response time element. It is important to highlight that work.

**Katy Clark:** I have previously discussed response times with you, outside the committee, so I understand that the statistic refers to when the first appliance gets there. Sometimes, it might be that it is not possible to deal with the incident until a number of appliances and the right skill set are in place. I appreciate that response time is just a statistic, but it is indicative of something wider.

As you know, we will look at the proposals that come from the review that is taking place, which might propose significant changes to the service, such as the closure of stations, which is a particular cause of concern in many communities. Will the work on response times be available before decisions are taken, particularly on fire stations? We need to have the resource in place to ensure that response times do not increase and do not impact on safety. Will the work be completed in time?

**Andy Watt:** That is a bigger piece of work and it is for all stations, not only those that are included in the service delivery review options for change. The response times, which we shared as part of the consultation and the work that was done by the community risk index modelling—CRIM—team, were based on the current factors that influence them. The response times that we have set out in the consultation are current and relevant but, as you have rightly said, we need to better understand the trends. The piece of work around response times is for the whole service and not necessarily only for the SDR options for change. We are content with the work that we have done on response times and that we have shared

through the public consultation to this point, but we acknowledge that the increase in response times over a longer time means that a bigger piece of work for the entirety of the service is needed. That is important.

12:30

Stuart Stevens made a point touching on prevention, which is that climate change is another factor that plays into response times. There are more periods that would be classed as spate conditions, which means a high volume of calls for flooding, wildfires or in relation to bonfire night. We are seeing an increase there. The way in which we respond and the weight of the response will naturally have an impact on response times, as we are putting a large degree of resource into those incidents. That affects business as usual and the need to cover our other appliances. There are a number of different factors relating to response times; it is not purely down to numbers.

**Rona Mackay:** Katy Clark's questions lead into mine, which relate to your opening statement, Stuart. You mentioned wildfires and the impact of climate change and everything that goes with it. Could you say a bit more about that impact and the changing demands on the service? What does that mean for resources? Does your having to deal with that offset the welcome drop in the incidence of house fires? Could you talk us through that?

**Stuart Stevens:** It is a fact that wildfires and climate change-related incidents, more broadly, are becoming more severe and more frequent. That is driving the need for change within the organisation to ensure that we have the right resources in the right place to respond. That comes with an increased demand for the equipment, infrastructure and training that we need to provide to our firefighters so that they can respond. Part of our service delivery review process, part of the work that we are doing to change the organisation and part of the investment is intended to respond to that directly.

We have made a significant investment in flood and water rescue and wildfire equipment. That is all live now, but we need to build on that, as the number of those incidents is increasing. To put into context the impact of that on the organisation, this year there has been a 60 per cent increase in the number of incidents and the biggest wildfire in Scotland. That has come at a financial cost to the organisation. Many of those incidents happen in remote rural areas and require our on-call staff to respond—and they do so fantastically. They can be there for a prolonged period of time and that comes at a financial cost to the organisation. This year alone, through climate-driven demand, we have overspent on staff costs by about £1.3 million, which is primarily attributed to the on-call

and wildfire response. The costs of fuel are added on to that.

The challenge is real and is becoming increasingly significant. We are heavily involved with the Scottish Wildfire Forum and, beyond that, with organisations in other countries. According to research, the situation is predicted to become increasingly challenging over the next few years. My role is to ensure that the service and communities are appropriately prepared to deal with wildfires and other significant incidents. That is part of the reason why we need to drive organisational change.

Yes, there is a reduction in some elements of our activity, but that has been compensated for by increases—

**Rona Mackay:** It has been offset.

**Stuart Stevens:** Absolutely. Significant incidents require training a much more skilled workforce.

**Rona Mackay:** The nature of wildfires is that they will happen more often in rural areas. What are the challenges there? I know that rural services can be stretched even without wildfires. How are you forward planning for that?

**Stuart Stevens:** That is probably the crux of the service delivery review and of how we consider areas of investment: it is a question of forward planning to ensure that we have adequate resources in those places.

As for predicting things, we are doing a lot of work with organisations to get better at predicting where wildfires will happen. We have become very good at that over the past few years, working with partners, so that we can deploy resources ahead of time to deal with such incidents. However, that is putting huge pressure on our rural firefighters and their capabilities. We need to support them through equipment training and with additional personnel.

**Rona Mackay:** You mentioned training. Is there now standard training for your recruits to cope with climate events?

**Stuart Stevens:** No. We have specialist teams and we have invested heavily in training them. We have sent people to Spain to become tactical advisers, for example. We are enhancing the team. We also work with landowners and people in land management who train us in some very specialist techniques to deal with wildfires. We are taking that work forward, but we recognise that much more needs to be done.

**Rona Mackay:** Is it financially and resource intensive to have to do all that?

**Stuart Stevens:** It is indeed. In our submission for this year, we talked about investment in

training instructors. Given the type and scale of the fire service, we believe that we could be a wildfire centre of excellence and that people could be sent here to be trained, given the exposure that we could have. As part of our submission, we are trying to build and change the organisation to meet specialist demand.

The training that we have done is additional. We have seen a positive reduction in fire activity, but that does not mean that fires do not occur. We need to ensure that our firefighters are appropriately trained and equipped to deal with fires, because they might not get the level of experiential learning that they would want to have had. We need to ensure that we compensate for that through realistic and frequent training. Part of our submission is about ensuring that we can provide that. It is a good news story that the number of fires is coming down, but they still happen and we need to ensure that our crews are prepared.

**Pauline McNeill:** I will not go into the detail of the options for change at the moment—you have put that on hold anyway—but I will talk about your budget asks. If you get what you want, will it give you more money to look at the list of fire stations that you are considering closing?

**Stuart Stevens:** Yes. We made a decision to take more time before making any further decisions. We understand the nature of such changes and, throughout the process, we have been clear and committed to listening to communities and to being very transparent about the process and assuring people that no decisions have been made. I can categorically state that that is the case.

Every year, we need to think carefully about budget implications. For any additional budget, we would follow the same principles that we use for the service delivery review, to invest in line with our strategic priorities in areas of the organisation. I guess that, from a negative budget position, what we have proposed through the SDR process would pale into insignificance in comparison with the changes that we would need to make.

To come back to Liam Kerr's earlier question, the implications of a flat-cash settlement on the organisation would be significant. For context, a flat-cash amount would equate to around 720 whole-time firefighter posts, which would be approximately 30 whole-time fire appliances. That would be on top of the 10 appliances that we have currently withdrawn, so that would equate to about 886 fewer whole-time firefighters in Scotland and about 40 fewer appliances. That equates to a third of the whole-time fire appliances in Scotland. To illustrate the magnitude of that, it would probably equate to every whole-time fire appliance in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee and Aberdeen

having to be removed. Clearly, we would make changes across Scotland, but that shows the magnitude of the challenge that we would face if we received a flat-cash settlement.

**Pauline McNeill:** We have yet to find out whether the Government will concede the budget that you asked for. Will the result have any impact on the current options for change?

**Stuart Stevens:** The options for change that we are considering at the moment can be seen through the lenses of risk and demand. Clearly, it is incumbent on me to ensure that, as a public body, we continually review where our resources are allocated. We would follow the same methodology if additional budget were to be provided, but I cannot categorically state that it would change the outcomes, because we have not made any decisions at this point anyway.

**Pauline McNeill:** I do not know whether I understand what you are saying, to be honest.

I do not want to get into the detail, but I am a Glasgow member and two major fire stations are earmarked for closure there. The closure of either station would be a massive problem for Glasgow. Surely, in your strategic review and everything else, you need to ask for a budget that gives you scope not to have to make those decisions, or is there no relationship between the budget asks and the potential closures?

**Stuart Stevens:** No, there is no relationship between the budget asks and what has been proposed through the SDR. The SDR process was already under way, so there is no relationship between that and the budget.

What we are doing—rightly—is reviewing where our resources are. To use the Glasgow example, we are questioning whether we require to build two new fire stations in Glasgow. Is there an option whereby we could build only one and reinvest in other parts of the organisation the additional capital money that would be released? In line with what Sarah O'Donnell said, we have critical challenges across our estate that we could use that money for. That is the question that we are posing at the moment.

**Pauline McNeill:** Right, so that almost sits independently from the outcome on the budget.

**Stuart Stevens:** Absolutely.

**Pauline McNeill:** I want to ask you about the programme of decontamination. You have said quite a lot about the state of your estate. There is quite a bit of interest among MSPs about the rolling programme for decontamination facilities. What can you say about the progress that could be made on that if you got your capital ask?

**Stuart Stevens:** I will bring in Andy Watt to provide an update on the progress that we have made and where we would like the programme to go in the future.

**Andy Watt:** As you know, the matter of contamination is a priority for the service. We recently invested £3.2 million in additional personal protective equipment and contaminants infrastructure to support the implementation of our contaminants standard operating procedure, which is based on work that was done by the FBU and Professor Anna Stec. We worked with the FBU on developing and implementing that procedure. Over the past couple of years, significant work and investment have gone into getting us to this point, which is that the standard operating procedure was implemented at the start of this calendar year.

There are probably two strands to our approach to contaminants. One is absolutely about capital and resource investment to support the implementation of the standard operating procedure and to make improvements to our contaminants arrangements. The capital backlog is part of the issue, as we know.

Quite a significant element of our focus is on human behaviours, culture, attitudes, policies and procedures. We can take actions now that do not cost us money and, through our standard operating procedure, we have put in place post-incident actions and arrangements. We are now starting to see a change in the service's culture around contaminants. That aspect is considered much more, and our staff are adhering to the standard operating procedure, which is a positive step forward.

We know that we have challenges in our estate; those have been well documented over a long period of time. The approach that we have taken on contaminants is that we apply the highest level of control and mitigation measures possible in every station that we have, depending on the configuration of the station, the duty system, the activity level and the type of activity that the station attends. It is done through a risk-based approach.

There has been a significant amount of work on and capital investment in station zoning procedures to keep people safe, and there has been investment in decon equipment that has been made available to the market. For example, we have invested in specialised washing machines for our breathing apparatus sets—we are trialling four of those at the moment. We continually look at research on contaminants that comes to the fore.

To return to Pauline McNeill's question, I note that we will require on-going capital and resource investment to allow us to address the capital backlog, which will help us get to the point that we

need to on contaminants. We will also need resource funding to look at research on new technologies that come on board and at solutions that will help us to keep firefighters safe and to mitigate the effects of contaminants.

**The Convener:** Before I bring in Fulton MacGregor, I want to come back to the question on the budget that I indicated earlier that I intended to ask.

In your submission you shared information on the impact of the service being unable to carry financial reserves, working with an annualised budget process—the committee has covered that a fair bit—and not being able to exercise borrowing powers without ministerial approval. Have you had an opportunity to discuss those issues with the Scottish Government? Do you see any possible movement on that, given the considerable financial constraints and pressures that your service is under at the moment?

12:45

**Stuart Stevens:** I might bring in Sarah O'Donnell to provide more detail on that. On whether we have had discussions with the Scottish Government, I note that we have highlighted that issue as part of the Scottish spending review conversations. To be truthful, we have had that conversation numerous times in the period since the SFRS came into being; we have pushed for the ability to hold reserves, particularly for capital spend. Although we have a three-year capital programme, we have a one-year capital budget. When you are developing long-term capital spends and building new fire stations, which takes multiple years, it can be very challenging to phase that over those years. We would welcome the ability to hold reserves over financial years, particularly from a capital perspective. Perhaps Sarah can add to that.

**Sarah O'Donnell:** Stuart Stevens has largely covered the question. Back before reform, we had the luxury of having access to borrowing and to reserves, because our funding process was part of local government funding. Since becoming a national service, we have had to get used to not having that, which puts a strain on the people who manage our budgets. When things happen mid-year, we have to work particularly hard to ensure that we are able to fully spend the capital budget, for example. We have to have projects ready to bring forward from future years of our multiyear capital plan so that we can spend the money and make best use of it. I am pleased to say that we have consistently done that. We have been able to get investment into the service, but achieving it is certainly more challenging than it would be if we had those other financial levers at our disposal.

**The Convener:** Thank you for that. I bring in Fulton MacGregor.

**Fulton MacGregor:** Good afternoon. I was going to come in on the question that Pauline McNeill explored about harmful fire contaminants, but the issue has now been covered. It is one that I have had constituent contact about.

On the theme of fire officer safety, and in the spirit in which Jamie Hepburn and Pauline McNeill have already talked about the review, some people have raised concerns about fire officer safety if the review goes through. I know that no decision has been made on that but, without going into the review, is there anything in it that puts at risk, financially speaking, what you are doing as a service in general about fire officer safety?

**Stuart Stevens:** I will bring in Andy Watt to talk about work that we have done on safety, our safety culture and training, and about where we are with it.

I think that I said publicly when the SDR was launched that my focus will always be on ensuring the safety of communities and my firefighters, and I need to be absolutely assured that any decisions that we make will not impact safety. I am sure that you can understand the reasons why. We recognise the significance of the changes and the importance of getting them right, which is why we are taking more time to ensure that we do so. That cannot be rushed.

Andy will give an update on the specifics of fire officer safety.

**Andy Watt:** On firefighter safety training in general, there has been significant progress and improvement over the past couple of years, a lot of which has stemmed from recommendations from a number of audits, including by His Majesty's Fire Service Inspectorate in Scotland, and from the "Firestorm" report by the FBU.

The Covid-19 pandemic had an impact on our ability to train people, due to the social distancing protocols. That created a bit of a training backlog but, over the past couple of years, a significant amount of work has been done on that, and we have got back to where we need to be on core training, competency and currency. That has been a significant piece of work, with a lot of effort from the training department. To touch on Stuart Stevens's point, I would say that the working capacity that was required to do that is not sustainable in a business-as-usual model, and investment is required to allow us to move to a business-as-usual model for core training on firefighter safety.

Stuart also touched on the fact that, over a number of decades—certainly since we became a single service—there has been a significant

reduction in the number of fires that we attend. That is positive, but it means that firefighters have fewer opportunities to get experiential learning in fires. Also, because of pension remedy changes in the past few years, a high number of experienced firefighters have left the service, so a higher percentage of firefighters are now in development or early in service. I cannot stress enough the importance of ensuring that we are enhancing, investing and improving our training in firefighter safety to make communities safer.

There has been significant investment in the training department from capital funding. The current three-year capital plan has a £6 million commitment to training facilities, and we are in year 1 of that. Investment has been made in eight of our breathing apparatus training sites across the service. This year, Invergordon, Sumburgh, Kirkwall, Stornoway, Oban, Dregghorn, Dumfries and the national training centre have all had upgrades to their BA training facilities.

There is significant focus on and investment going into training. I stress that that is improving firefighter safety, but more needs to be done, particularly when we consider the emerging risks such as climate change that we need to train for in the future.

**Stuart Stevens:** In my opening statement, I talked about our desire to be much more technologically advanced. We have rolled out digital fireground radios to the whole organisation, we have invested more in PPE and we are commencing a project to roll out new breathing apparatus sets at a considerable cost to the organisation. Our intention is to provide the best for our firefighters.

Alongside that, through the Scottish Government's CivTech process, we won two bids. One is about situational awareness—technology to strengthen safety on the fireground—and the other is about decontamination. We are working in partnership with Professor Anna Stec, who has done the research on behalf of the Fire Brigades Union, on developing wearable technology and biometric screening to monitor the impact of contamination on firefighters to make sure that we can put those control measures in place. Firefighter safety is absolutely a priority for our organisation, and we will use technology and whatever other means, including better training, to make sure of that.

**Fulton MacGregor:** Thank you for those substantial answers. I have one final question. Your submission talks about the expansion of the firefighter role. Do you have any update on that and on the community resilience hub pilot?

**Stuart Stevens:** I will bring in Sarah O'Donnell to comment on community resilience. On the

expansion of the firefighter role, I absolutely believe that the fire service can do more for the communities of Scotland. We have an exceptional prevention record and we could apply that across the public sector more broadly. Equally, we could also take the pressure off other organisations in areas such as emergency medical response and response to terrorism. That business case has not been funded, but it is still our ambition to progress that and do more for communities.

**Sarah O'Donnell:** The community resilience hub business case was well received, but it has not been funded in full. However, within our existing capital programme, we are carrying out a pilot project at Portree. Our intention is to take the learning points from that project and work towards making the case for how we can deploy those community resilience hubs further in the future.

That also plays into some of the work that we have done with partners to share estate. We have properties across Scotland that are shared with emergency service partners and others. We are keen to develop that shared estate and use that model, which also has environmental benefits.

**Fulton MacGregor:** The convener has let me in with one final question, I think. Was that a nod, convener? I was just checking. I do not want to get on the wrong side of the convener.

This question is totally off track, but it came up while the answers were coming in. Last week, in the chamber, I raised a specific situation that has recently come up in my constituency. You will probably have heard about it, because it is quite rare. It is an old coal fire that has been burning in Coatbridge. The fire service had quite a large presence there in the early days, before responsibility was taken over by North Lanarkshire Council, and that would have had a significant impact on the service.

How do you plan for those emergency situations? Nobody saw that situation coming and we believe that it is the only one ever to have happened in Scotland, although I think that there have been two in Wales. It is a completely unique set of circumstances. How do you plan for such things? Is it similar to wildfires? The fire service had a large presence there for about a week, which would have required significant resource.

**Andy Watt:** The nature of the incident that you are talking about means that the fire is deep-seated in the pit. It is a protracted incident, so it is not necessarily about the speed of response; it is about the weight of response. We have the ability to pull resources from across the country to resource that, and that is not bound by legacy service boundaries. We have been resourcing that not just immediately from local stations but from the surrounding area. I know that local senior

officers are tied in closely with the local authority and others in trying to get to a resolution.

**The Convener:** I will come in with a final question, and then I will ask the same question that I asked previous witnesses about a written follow-up on climate change. First, you might have heard us discuss with previous witnesses the issues around cyber threat, which is mentioned in your submission. The implications for public sector organisations being targeted are obvious. I am interested in hearing a little more on what the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is doing to mitigate the threat.

**Stuart Stevens:** Sarah O'Donnell has done considerable work with the team on that. We see the severity of that risk, and it is at the top of our risk register at the moment.

**Sarah O'Donnell:** That was my first point. That issue is highlighted on our risk register, and it is certainly scrutinised and discussed regularly by our board and committees. I believe that a risk spotlight is coming at the next meeting of our audit and risk assurance committee. I just give you a bit of assurance that the issue is very much in the corporate sights.

We have also had a recent internal audit on cybersecurity. That gave us a thorough review of our maturity model, so we are now working carefully through a plan to implement the actions that the audit identified. We are also mindful of the need to ensure that we can respond effectively, so we are working on that particular element. Similarly, we have done a recent review of the structure of our digital and technology services to ensure that they are set up in the best way possible to resource the work that needs to be done on cyber. We recognise that as one of our key priorities.

That is an example of where the vacancy factor kicks in for us. We have undertaken that work, and we now have an excellent structure in place. We have been quite successful in recruiting into that structure, and now we are finding challenges with the vacancy factor and being able to afford all the posts that are in there. We need to do a bit of work to make sure that we can address the vacancy factor and resource posts such as the ones that are critical to ensure our cybersecurity as we move forward.

**The Convener:** Before we conclude, I will extend the same invitation to you that I extended to the previous witnesses with regard to what your organisation is doing to mitigate and reduce carbon emissions as we are looking to meet our climate change targets across Scotland. It will be more of an organisational response rather than an operational one, but we are keen to hear a bit about what the service is doing in that regard.

I thank you all for your attendance today. The session has been really helpful. That now concludes the public part of our meeting.

12:58

*Meeting continued in private until 13:12.*



This is the final edition of the *Official Report* of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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