OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Criminal Justice Committee

Wednesday 4 February 2026

Session 6

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CRIMINAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE
5th Meeting 2026, 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)
*Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
*Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
*Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Colin Brown (Fire Brigades Union)
John McKenzie (Fire Brigades Union)
Deborah Stanfield (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service)
Stuart Stevens (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service)
Andy Watt (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service)
Mhairi Wylie (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Stephen Imrie

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

Criminal Justice Committee

Wednesday 4 February 2026

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:01]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Audrey Nicoll): A very good morning, and welcome to the fifth meeting in 2026 of the Criminal Justice Committee. We have no apologies.

Our first item of business is a decision on taking business in private. Does the committee agree to take item 3 in private?

Members *indicated agreement*.

Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

10:02

The Convener: The next item of business is an evidence-taking session on the challenges and reforms facing the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. We have two panels of witnesses, and I refer members to papers 1 and 2.

For our first panel, I welcome from the Fire Brigades Union Colin Brown, executive council member for Scotland, and John McKenzie, Scottish regional secretary. It is nice to see you both.

As usual, I remind everyone to be succinct in their questions and responses. I now invite Colin Brown or John McKenzie to make a short opening statement.

Colin Brown (Fire Brigades Union): I thank the committee for inviting us in for this evidence session. I want to start by recognising the committee's pre-budget scrutiny work and subsequent report. It has been part of the lead-in to the draft budget that is delivering, in cash terms, the highest resource budget uplift that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has ever received. It sits at around—[*Interruption*.] I apologise, convener—I am trying to find my figures. The increase in the resource budget is about 21.5 per cent. However, that is still woefully short of what the chief asked the Scottish Government for and which he told the Government that he would require to progress strategic priorities such as the service delivery review, which we are going to discuss today.

As for the capital budget, which pays for the—woefully inadequate—fire stations that our members work from, the committee and the Parliament will be well aware of our position that there is guilty knowledge that firefighters in workplaces are being exposed to a higher risk of cancer and other diseases that could kill them earlier than the general population, and that the capital funding for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is woefully inadequate. The £1.4 million is not going to scrape the sides of the changes that are required to deliver safe workplaces for our members, and it is an issue that needs to be resolved.

I appreciate that the committee has done its work and presented the evidence, as we have done and as the chief fire officer has repeatedly done to this committee. However, it is not good enough for these matters to be debated in Parliament only for nothing to be done about providing funding. That is the equivalent of banging pots and pans for the national health service during Covid.

We need tangible outcomes and delivery of these things. The strategic priorities that the chief talked about in previous evidence are aimed at creating safe workplaces for our members. We might disagree over what some of those changes look like under the service delivery review, but it is for us to work with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service on resolving such issues. The fact is that, without the funding, the service cannot progress the priorities as it would like to, and that is having a negative impact on the health, wellbeing and workplaces of our members.

That is really significant, because it is political decisions that have led the service to cut 1,200 firefighters in the past 12 years. Moreover, because of political decisions that have been taken about the budget and the Scottish spending review, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has had to reduce its workforce by about 4 per cent in recent years, specifically in response to its budget. That is no longer managed decline—that is strangulation of the service. The 2.5 per cent additional head-count reductions that are being looked for over the period of the Scottish spending review will decimate the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

As I have said, this year's budget has a positive 21-plus per cent increase, but that will be eviscerated in year 1 of the Scottish spending review, going by the level 2 funding that is proposed. We are going to reduce that figure by about £34 million in year 1, and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is in no position, having lost 1,200 firefighters over recent years, to absorb even more cuts.

Such choices will have to be made at a political level; it is not good enough to say that this is the responsibility of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and that these are operational decisions. If the stranglehold on the budget continues, the front line will be cut. All the nice words about protecting the front line in the Scottish spending review are meaningless when the chief fire officer has to make real decisions about cutting head count.

I will leave it at that, convener.

The Convener: Thank you for your opening remarks. I know that members are keen to drill into some of the points that you have raised in your opening statement, but I will kick things off by referring to your submission, which helpfully flags not only the fact that an internal review is taking place on reform of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and its delivery, and the impact of the budget in that respect, but the implications of the public service reform strategy. There is quite a lot going on that you, as a union, and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service are having to grapple with.

Bearing all that context in mind, and given what you have just outlined, what do you want to see—or what would you like to see—in the next year or the next three years that would change the position that you are in? What do you need? You have talked about where we are with regard to the budget, but how will that need to change to bring things up to an acceptable and sustainable level?

Colin Brown: Fundamentally, the service proposed 23 change options. Yes, there were financial constraints; our view is that the service has had to respond to budget constraints by reducing head count and that it is now having to look at its ability to create capital to spend on replacing or upgrading fire stations.

We support the service in its desire to upgrade fire stations and build new ones. After all, as we have pointed out previously, a number of stations are being held up by internal scaffolding, because of issues with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete, and there are other stations that do not have dignified facilities. It is a legislative responsibility on employers to provide those things in the workplace and for their employees. That is the starting point—we would like to see funding that allows the service to accelerate progress on those matters. Of course, we are not going to fix 350-plus fire stations in year 1, but there needs to be a long-term commitment to doing that.

The dignified facilities issue is partly to do with broader cultural development in the service. The service needs to be able to train its managers and staff on what a culture of good behaviour is. That seems like something that we all should know, but we only need to look at what is happening across the whole public sector; indeed, the cultural review of fire and rescue services across the United Kingdom started because a young man killed himself after being bullied. That did not happen in Scotland, thankfully, but we do face those issues.

That requires investment and broader thinking on what we want our Fire and Rescue Service, which serves the people of Scotland, to look like in the long term. That requires training, which requires funding; it requires safe workplaces, which require funding; and it requires modern and fit-for-purpose equipment, which requires funding. You will be picking up a theme here, convener.

The Convener: That is helpful. We are as disappointed as you are—we have put that on the record—with the overall justice budget, and in particular with the budget settlement for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. There is no doubt about that.

We have limited time—around 60 minutes—and I am keen for members to come in, so I will hand over to Liam Kerr and then bring in Pauline McNeill.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I will come at the convener's question from another angle. Colin, you mentioned in your opening remarks the Scottish spending review, which was published last month. The spending review sets out the Government's portfolio plans up to 2028-29, with an additional year for capital. The proposed funding for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service in 2027-28 and 2028-29 is very similar to that for 2026-27. The SFRS has described it as "flat cash" and suggested that, if that is to be the case, choices will have to be made in order to

"balance risk and compliance … against workforce impacts."

I will throw you an open question. If what is set out in the spending review comes to pass and those figures are reflected in future budgets, what implications will that have for the service that you provide?

Colin Brown: We absolutely back the SFRS position that that is, in essence, flat cash. The previous chief, in evidence to the committee a couple of years back, said that flat cash would have meant the loss of around 780 whole-time-equivalent firefighters. That is decimating the service.

The difficult choices are no longer about whether we should close a fire station in a particular locality but about whether we should close fire stations in every locality, because to lose 780 firefighters is really significant. The service will present evidence as to what the impact of that would be. However, we have already, year on year, lost up to 1,200 firefighters up to this point. It is true that some of that was in the early days of the amalgamation of the eight services and the tackling of duplication, but that argument cannot be made in relation to recent years.

The reality is that these are the difficult choices that the service is talking about. Do you want us to continue to be able to turn up and have the right people in the right place at the right time, or do you want to pick up the phone for an emergency response and wait for 50 or 120 minutes to get a first appliance there?

That sounds alarmist, but it is the reality. We are already seeing an increase in response times, and that will only get worse the more whole-time appliances we lose and the greater the lack of investment in the service is.

Liam Kerr: To be clear, because we are facing an imminent election and there will be a new Government, you are saying that, if the funding that is set out in the Scottish spending review comes to pass, your service may need to lose 780 firefighters. Is that correct?

Colin Brown: I am referring to the 780 firefighters who were lost in previous years in which there was flat cash. I am not going to put a number on the amount of firefighters who could be lost under the settlement. Nevertheless, there is a correlation between the previous spending review and what is now being proposed. It is very similar, and that level of funding cut is huge for the service, given the inflationary pressures that keep being applied to the service, and all the additional costs.

The chief said what resource budget he would need for this year, but, from memory, the budget is around £12 million short of what his ask was. If we were talking about only maintaining the baseline with the budget that was asked for, we are going to have to start cutting that baseline if the budget is below that.

John McKenzie may have in his head some of the detail that I do not have.

John McKenzie (Fire Brigades Union): I will stitch a couple of things together from the convener's question and from Liam Kerr's question; I will be as quick as I possibly can.

Inevitably, this will mean further cuts to firefighter jobs. The number is likely to be in the hundreds; we can see that from what has happened historically. The budget that the service will have for the next financial year will be just under £74 million less in real terms, in-year, than the legacy services had in 2012-13. With inflation, if the resource budgets for those eight legacy services had kept pace, there would, in the final year, be another £74 million in resource budget on the table for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

What has that meant? It has meant that we have 720 fewer whole-time firefighters and almost 1,250 fewer firefighters across the board. That is without factoring in the cuts to support staff, which have been really significant.

10:15

As quickly as I can, I will tie that into two other things. There has been some debate about austerity in relation to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service—there certainly was during Maggie Chapman's debate in the chamber last month. The definition of austerity is difficult economic conditions, created by Government measures, to reduce public expenditure. There is £75 million less in the resource budget; in totality since 2012-13, almost £840 million of cumulative resource is out. That is why we have 1,250 fewer firefighters.

We have to find ways to generate public finances to pay for these people. There are no gaps in the Fire and Rescue Service to cut; there are no places to make cuts. Today, the service is poorer, despite the absolute best efforts of people

from the top and bottom of the service, because it is underresourced.

The issue goes wider than the Fire and Rescue Service. The convener touched on the public service reform strategy. When other public services look at the reform that the Fire and Rescue Service has been through during the past 13 or 14 years and see that this is the reward that it gets at the end of that, why would they enter into reform and not run away from it?

If we genuinely mean reform, that has to mean investment. It is appropriate for politicians to look for public sector organisations to change, but if we want them to change and we do not invest in them, that isnae reform—it is just making cuts. These are the difficult decisions that we have to address.

We are talking about the service delivery review today, and that is intrinsically linked to the budget. This could be considered too much of a generalisation but, if we do not like the service delivery review, we cannot support the budget allocations that go with it, because they are one and the same thing.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Good morning. I will focus on the substance of the issue, which is what the real-world impact will be on being able to respond to crisis incidents.

I am trying to understand the relationship between the 23 options in the service delivery review and the budget. In the 23 options, you talk about the retained duty system cover and replacing whole-time firefighters with retained firefighters. You also say that there are crew shortages at the moment. Does that mean that you are concerned that, because of the revenue implications, one of the options is that we will switch from whole-time firefighters to retained firefighters?

Colin Brown: A number of the options involved going from having whole-time cover 24 hours a day to having day-shift duty systems that would cover daylight hours and retained duty cover at night and at weekends. In certain locations, some of the options would create new retained duty systems that do not exist right now.

The societal changes that have happened since the retained duty system was developed mean that it is incredibly difficult to retain—excuse the double use of the word—retained firefighters. Up to 200 of the 340-odd retained pumps are off the run on any given day because of crew or skills shortages. People do not live and work in the same way as they used to a number of years ago. It would therefore be incredibly challenging to develop a new retained crew in a location that does not already have one.

That is not to say that it is impossible, but we already see vulnerabilities in the retained duty system. The retained firefighters—our members—who give 120 hours a week do incredible work to maintain their skills and respond to emergencies already. Asking even more of them, or asking a community to provide firefighters for the retained duty system, is already proving to be a challenge.

That is why a number of options involve closing long-term dormant stations that are on the retained and volunteer duty system. There is a huge intrinsic vulnerability in asking people to give up 120 hours a week to be able to respond to a fire within eight minutes.

Pauline McNeill: I will move on to talk about response times to emergency incidents. Your submission says that increasing response times to emergency incidents as a result of the 23 options is routinely described as a “tolerable risk”, but that the FBU does not accept that ever-increasing response times are tolerable. The submission goes on to talk about a date in 2025 when there were 1,069 non-fatal fire casualties—a 30 per cent increase—and says that there would have been more fatalities had there not been early intervention. What will the budget and the review of the service mean for response times? That is what the public will want to know.

Colin Brown: I will bring in John McKenzie in a moment. If you are going to close an existing fire station or move it down the road, there will always be an impact on response times to the nearest house or the nearest street. That is just common sense; it goes without saying that that would happen. If we are talking about adding on eight minutes to a night-time response because you have reverted to a retained duty system, that is significant.

We have consistently asked, “Tolerable to who?” It may be tolerable to those who are setting or are attempting to manage the budget, but is it tolerable to the person who picks up the phone to dial 999 because they are trapped in an emergency situation that they have to wait even longer?

We have already seen minutes being added to response times; they are increasing consistently. There have been really concerning situations in which people are phoning the fire service and waiting nearly an hour before the first pump arrives, because resources are deployed on other incidents. The more resources that are removed, the more likely it is that those situations will happen. John McKenzie may have some more detail on that.

John McKenzie: I think that it is only fair for us to acknowledge the principles of reviewing where fire stations are located and balancing risk to

response. It is appropriate that the service looks at that. It isnae a sustainable argument for a public sector body to just say, “It has aye been.” I do not think that we have made that argument, but the issue is about the context and how things are structured.

Pauline McNeill’s question was about the impact. The answer is similar to the answer to Liam Kerr’s question: it is about looking back. Between 2014 to 2024, response times increased by an average of a minute and a half. The timeframe has gone from about six minutes and 50 seconds to about eight minutes and 20 seconds, which is really significant.

It comes back to the same principle, which is the concept of doing things differently. “Reform” can be seen as a triggering word, but it is appropriate to balance risk and resources. However, if you are always doing that in the context of there being less money—and you are therefore are less able to do things—and that is the driving force behind the reforms, the fact that there will be fewer firefighters and less resource will have to be factored in. Ultimately, that means that overall response times will increase. I do not say this to overdramatise it but, in a variety of instances, increasing response times will mean the difference between life and death, or the difference between firefighters’ being able to make interventions and people becoming seriously hurt. That applies across the emergency services.

Pauline McNeill: I want to check that I have understood what you have said. Are you saying that budget constraints may be the driving force behind reducing the number of whole-time firefighters and having more firefighters who are on the retained duty system? You have said that you do not know the modelling and you are being told, “Well, we won’t know until we try.” Are you saying that the move to having fewer whole-time firefighters and more retained firefighters is a response to the implications of the budget?

Colin Brown: Throughout the service delivery review, the service has said in its presentations that replacing a fire station like for like with a station with overnight accommodation for firefighters who essentially live on site for the duration of their shifts would add significant expenditure. The service would be able to give you the exact numbers, but we are talking about tens of millions of pounds in comparison to half of that amount if you do not have to provide overnight accommodation. The only way not to have to provide overnight accommodation would be to revert to the retained duty system.

Pauline McNeill: In other words, both capital and revenue are driving a move towards a retained duty system. As we know, in some areas, that is needed, but you are saying that budget constraints are a driving force for more of that.

Colin Brown: That is our view.

John McKenzie: There is a bit of context to that, and there are two aspects. The first question is about what duty system is used.

A whole-time resource for a single-pump station will, on average, need 30 firefighters across the various duty systems, and paying those people a whole-time wage will cost more than having a retained resource, in which you might have 12 people who will ultimately be working part time. Therefore, the first, and key, question is this: what investment is required to have X resource?

Then it comes down to pressures. What are the pressures that are pushing on this? There are challenges with recruitment and retention across both duty systems, but what is pushing them? The challenge with a whole-time resource is that there is not enough money to employ the 725 firefighters that we had 13 years ago, and which we do not have now. The absolute primary reason that the majority of those people are missing is that there is not the money to pay their wages—that is the reality.

As Colin Brown has touched on—indeed, we could have a full evidence session on this individual point—the challenges with the retained duty system are more nuanced. Typically, the service has found it more of a struggle to recruit and retain those people. Some of that is absolutely about pay, but it would be wrong to ignore the fact that the service made significant efforts in that respect, and that there was a significant increase in the pay points for retained firefighters less than 13 months ago. It is just really challenging to recruit and retain those people now—we are in a different place from where we were in the 1960s and 1970s, when the duty system was designed.

There are different challenges with each system, but finance is absolutely linked to both of them. There might be challenges with experience, but things are absolutely weighted towards the finance aspect. It is almost the single and only reason why we are not recruiting the number of full-time firefighters that we previously had.

Pauline McNeill: Thank you very much.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): I want to follow on from one of Pauline McNeill’s lines of questioning. Obviously, the increase in response times is a big concern for all of us, but do you have any details about the reasons for that increase? Is it because of a lack of staff? Is it because we do not have the equipment? Is it because stations have closed? Is there anything that shows whether it is affecting rural communities or urban areas

more? Is there any detailed evidence or statistics that you can give us on that?

Colin Brown: I know that the deputy chief fire officer has previously said that the service was carrying out a review of what exactly was driving those response times. We have heard the minister say in the chamber that it is predominantly down to firefighters having to put their personal protective equipment on before they can get into an appliance. I have been doing that in the 17 years that I have been in this job, so I know that that is not what has been increasing response times since 2016.

We have heard that it is because of traffic calming measures. That will have an impact, but fire engines have blue lights and sirens for a reason—to be able to manage their way through busy streets safely.

We have also heard that it is to do with congestion. Again, fire engines have sirens and blue lights in order to manage their way through the traffic safely.

What has not been said either in the chamber or openly is that one factor has to be the reduction of 1,200 firefighters and the daily loss of up to 200 retained pumps from the retained system. Some of those pumps might have all but one crew member, but if that missing person is the driver, the pump is going nowhere.

It might also be that a specialist resource such as a rope rescue team or an urban search and rescue team does not have the adequate team type for that day, because of skills. Again, the service requires funding to be able to train the appropriate number of staff and maintain the skill level for really specialist responses. If you have to take a water rescue team from Perth to Fife, because the Fife team is unavailable as a result of crewing and skills shortages, that will increase response times. If you remove pumps—like the 10 pumps that were removed in 2023—it will take longer for other pumps to travel to the locations that the pumps that were removed would have been able to reach earlier. It is absolutely a factor.

The service will be doing its modelling and research on that, but the one thing that has not been talked about openly, other than by the FBU, is that the reduction in staff numbers, in headcount and in the number of appliances and specialist resources across Scotland has to be a factor in the increase in response times.

Sharon Dowey: When there is a fire, every second counts, but the response time is going up by minutes. If we were to ask for more information on why it is increasing by minutes, would we be able to get it, or is the answer just going to be that there is not enough staff?

Colin Brown: With respect, I think that the service would have to give you that detail.

Sharon Dowey: That is fine.

The budget provides for capital funding of £48.4 million in 2026-27, which is an increase of £1.4 million. To what extent do you expect that to allow for necessary improvements in the fire service estate?

Colin Brown: The new mobilising system for fire and rescue is coming from that capital budget, so that is £10 million straight off the bat. The fact is that £1.4 million is going to do very little to improve any of these situations. If you want to refurbish a station, you will be talking millions of pounds; if you want to rebuild it, you will be talking about £10 million. The breathing apparatus replacement contract, which is required urgently to maintain our members' safety, is going to be a multimillion-pound contract.

If we are talking about a capital budget to sustain more than 350 fire stations and the equipment that firefighters and the public rely on, that figure is a drop in the ocean. I am not an economist, but I do not believe that £1.4 million will meet the inflationary pressures on the service's capital budget, let alone make a start on investing in improving the conditions in which its members work.

10:30

John McKenzie: In some ways, all this stuff is reasonably uncomplicated, is it not? The detail itself is complicated, but, from a capital perspective, it is almost as simple as this: the service has been clear that it has a capital backlog of more than £800 million, which, for a service such as ours and with the budgets that we have, is an eye-watering figure; it has a capital budget allocation of under £50 million and has been given an increase of £1.4 million; and it sat before the committee to give evidence just weeks ago, saying that it needed a minimum of £60 million, which would not fix the issue quickly but would probably do so over a decade.

The other thing that we need to consider—and I have heard some really good contributions in parliamentary debates on this—is what that money actually means. We are talking about fire stations that do not have running water or appropriate welfare facilities. We are recognising the risks that firefighters are facing from being unable to decontaminate properly from the incidents that they respond to. The money is what pays for that stuff, and in far too many of our workplaces, it is no there now, and, in the ones where it is no there now, it has never been there. They are workplaces that were built 50 to 70 years ago based on a completely different assessment of risks.

What does it mean if we continue to have people responding out of those fire stations when we know that we are not giving them the right equipment, that we are not keeping them safe and that the service is saying that, in order to fix the issue in 10 years, it needs a minimum of £60 million and we have not managed to get close to that figure? It almost says to the organisation, "There's no appetite to fix this." What does that say to the workforce?

If we do not genuinely recognise the risk and make difficult decisions in order to allocate resources to address it, we will not be fully recognising, accepting or believing in that risk. That is the only alternative. To put it bluntly, the capital budget allocation to firefighters at the moment says that the Parliament does not believe that the risk is real. What does that say? That does not mean that these are not difficult decisions, but the reality is that the capital budget allocation says, "We do not think that the risk is real." The people sitting in those fire stations would disagree with that.

Sharon Dowey: What effect will this year's shortfall have on the long-term plan to improve the estate?

John McKenzie: Even if Colin is not an economist, he is certainly better placed than I am to have a stab at assessing that. I cannot answer the question on that level. However, I can say that the shortfall for the past 10 years has meant that firefighters are working in workplaces that are totally unacceptable, and if the allocation falls well short of what was required to address it over that length of time, it will not fix those issues for the overwhelming majority of our people.

At some point, we have to ask whether we are comfortable accepting the situation that those people are in in their working lives. Can we go to any number of those 350-odd fire stations that are littered across Scotland and say, "We are comfortable with the fabric of the building from which we respond to emergency incidents, and we are comfortable either with that being unsafe or with not having the resources required to keep us safe?" I do not think that we can—I do not think that it is acceptable. However, that is what the allocation ultimately points towards.

Colin Brown: Regardless of any campaign that the FBU has done around the 23 service delivery options, the reality is that all or many of the 23 options would be a real challenge for the service. Even if we were in full agreement that all of them, or a version of them, should be enacted, the service would struggle to think about whether it could close a station in location A to rebuild in location B in order to resolve the RAAC panel issue, which is a strategic priority for the service.

I do not want to steal the chief's thunder, as I am sure that he will make these points himself. Although the SFRS says, "We want to try to create stations that are dignified facilities, that are compliant and that allow a flow that minimises contamination to our people when they get back to the workplace," it will now decide that it cannot possibly afford to do so within the term of the Scottish spending review—certainly not within the term of this year's budget. The 23 options that have just been through an arduous public consultation will be a real challenge for the service to deliver, assuming that it gets to a point where it makes the decision to do so.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): I want to ask about the fire service's work on potential reforms. Do you feel reassured that the FBU's concerns are being listened to in the development of a final set of planned service changes?

Colin Brown: Broadly speaking, in our communications with the service, yes. The chief essentially instructed the board not to maintain the arbitrary timeline that it had set itself. That was challenging at the start, and that timeline would have been a drag anchor for progress anyway. The service paused that approach, and yesterday members would have received a letter from the chief saying that it is likely to be June before decisions are made on this stuff.

The concerns are being listened to, and it is fine to listen to our concerns, but the service's ability to respond to them is a different thing altogether. As we keep saying, the budget allocation will make it really challenging to do that.

Our difficulty with the public consultation—it is also clear from the freedom of information responses that we have had from the service—is that, overwhelmingly, the public do not want to see most of the changes enacted.

What is the weighting against the data? Without being flippant about it, until you shut the last fire station, there will always be a quietest fire station in Scotland. At what level should we weigh that against the proportional risk that people feel in their communities? We might consider the options around the nuclear submarine base, for example. The station in Helensburgh is a very quiet one, but if something did happen there the risk would be really significant. Where is the balancing point? The community certainly sees that issue, but the data to which the service is working probably does not identify that there is a sustained risk for it to respond to.

In broad terms, we are being listened to, but we do not know whether that is leading to tangible outcomes. We have been speaking about service reform in the sense of a broadened role for Scotland's firefighters. The option to pay for that

has been there for four years, and it is not being taken seriously. Are we being listened to? By the service: yes. By those who are making decisions on budgeting: probably not.

John McKenzie: You have to be even handed with such things, and we should be as even handed publicly as we are privately. We know what bad industrial relations look like. We had a really difficult time in the lead-up to the Covid pandemic and for a while before that. In my experience, industrial relations reached an all-time low then. That is not so now, and it has not been the case for a number of years. The service conducts itself very openly and transparently with us, and it would be absolutely incorrect not to acknowledge that. There will undoubtedly be differences of opinion—sometimes strong differences—between the union and the service on some of the changes that are being considered. To some extent, that comes with the territory. Current industrial relations are really good, however.

It is important to work upon the building blocks that were put in place for the service when it was originally set up, including the working together framework. However, if there is no resource to pay for the things that we have identified that our members critically need, and that has an impact on our members' safety and our ability to respond to emergency incidents, we are starting from a bad place. Our conversations on allocated resource are about asking which cuts are most palatable. How can we maintain good industrial relations during such a period, when that has been the backdrop for some time? It goes beyond the 13 years since merging—it probably goes back for a number of decades.

Katy Clark: You obviously want to keep up a good relationship with your employer, and that is a positive thing, but the obvious worry is that there has been a delay due to the forthcoming election. What is likely to be proposed might be very unpopular—and the money has not been allocated in this year's budget for the expanded role.

What impact do you expect this year's budget, which we are examining now, along with the 2026 spending review, to have on plans for service reform? Will the proposed budget that you have now seen have an impact?

Colin Brown: Unquestionably, it will—and it will be a negative impact. The proposal that the service has shared with us says that it wants to free up physical resource in the number of people to enable it to put resource into training departments. It will also have to shut fire stations, however, and potentially lose firefighters, while maintaining the front line. Those two things do not marry up, and the decisions on the budget are a huge driver of that situation.

Some of the positive proposals from the SDR will not be achievable on the current trajectory. Without wanting to rattle any sabres—John McKenzie has spoken about our positive industrial relations—one potential option would be to make some of our members redundant. The FBU's long-held position is that if our members are given compulsory redundancy notices, everyone should be on notice that we will be on strike. We will recall our conference with a recommendation for strike action. That is happening in other brigades down south right now, and it will happen in Scotland. People should be under no illusion: if we are looking at budgets that will bring the service to the point of forcing redundancies on our members, we will respond in kind.

Katy Clark: You are saying that you fear that both station closures and job losses are coming.

Colin Brown: Given the budget outlook from the Scottish spending review, I see no other option for the service to deliver on that.

John McKenzie: That is a really important point to get into. The bit that gets traction outwith the service is when people start talking about closing stations. Job losses have been happening for years. I could rattle through the number of jobs that we have lost every year, but, broadly, and without looking at the figures, in the first three years of the single service there were around 150 every year and then, fairly regularly, between 40 and 70 every year.

There is significant context to that. The FBU broadly welcomes the principle of looking at how the service provides the response model that it does. Why do we do that? There is not going to be a trap door if those stations are shut. If things are not going well now, and then you shut the fire stations, things would not suddenly stop going badly. Looking solely at whole-time positions, we have 300 too few firefighters today to cover the resources that we had in August 2023. Having that shortfall of people, with no budget or realistic prospect of being able to address it in the short to medium term, is what pushed the service into temporarily removing 10 appliances. For context, even now, and taking that reduction of 166 posts into account, we are around 130 people short beyond that.

The issues are so intrinsically linked to funding that, ultimately, aspects of the SDR represent the service responding to that situation. I reiterate that that does not mean that it is not appropriate for the service to look at station A and say, "The risk there 40 years ago was X and now it is Y." The risk level can go up and down, by the way. We see that in the risks of wildfire and other factors that we have touched on today.

The service is trying to address those evolving risks. Reaching an in-principle agreement on role expansion four years ago involved the service and the union looking at those risks and addressing them. The factor that pushes all those things along, or leads to their being seen in either a negative or a positive context, is, broadly, investment. If there is no investment, those things do not happen and we end up in a reactive position.

Given the need to be even-handed, it is appropriate to look at those issues overall, but we come back to the same question: when we talk about reform, what does that mean? Are we talking about reform with investment or about being reactive because the money is not there that was there a year ago and, by extension, decades before that?

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): I have questions based on the helpful written submission that you provided. I will also ask about your process, because I am interested in understanding it better.

You talked about holding public engagement events in areas that might be impacted by the review. I appreciate that you might not be able to answer this off the top of your head, so you might have to follow up in writing, but my question is: where were they? I presume that you did not mention them all. What was the rationale for choosing those specific locations? Were they areas of primary concern, for example, or was there another reason?

10:45

Colin Brown: That is a good question. Our union has always been member driven and member led, and it is our members who live and work in the communities that they serve who know best, as far as we are concerned. They know the risks that they respond to, the difficult efforts that they make and the level of community work that they do.

When the service came forward with the proposals that it was developing, we said to our officials, “You know your station; you know whether the resource that is there is worth campaigning for; and you know how your community will respond to this,” and then we left them, with support from our level, to run their own campaigns. We have seen the highest levels of activity, and the highest levels of response, where communities really see the value of their fire and rescue service.

I do not want to single out anywhere in particular, but I will say it is incredibly difficult to build a campaign around these matters in the centre of Glasgow, where the population is generally transient, with students who are less invested in the broader community aspects. On the other hand, Balmossie in Dundee is a very tight-knit community that understands the importance of having a fire and rescue service. Our campaigns have predominantly been built around areas where our members understand the risk.

John McKenzie: It is really important that we have public consultations and that the views of the public are sought, but it cannot come as a surprise to anybody that when we have said, “We have X public resource and the option is to reduce it,” it turns out not to be popular. There are three angles to the conversation, and yet there is only one angle in the room. We need to have in that room, and as part of that discussion, the people who are responsible for the funding that has directly led to that option being on the table. It is for the service to justify the main reason, from its point of view, for pushing some of the options that are coming up. It could be that there are stations where the activities have changed, and the service is reviewing that—by the way, I am not saying that those resources should be reduced—but, in many other stations and places, it is because the fabric of the building is no longer sustainable. The fabric of the building—

Jamie Hepburn: I am sorry, John—

John McKenzie: Just a minute.

Jamie Hepburn: I think that we are just straying a bit wider here. You have already covered a lot of that territory, and what you have said is understood. I am trying to understand where these events were. It might be an unfair question, given that you might not have the detail in front of you; in that case, can we get that detail on where the public engagement events were? I think that it would be useful for us to understand that.

Colin Brown: Yes, we can absolutely send that over to you. Off the top of my head, though, I can tell you that we had events in Lochgelly and other parts of Fife; in Balmossie in Dundee; in Maryhill in Glasgow; and outside the station in Cowcaddens. Broadly speaking, we had events everywhere that our members are active.

Jamie Hepburn: You were doing a good job of working your way through that list—we nearly got there. Having those details would be useful, though.

I have a follow-up question. Again, you have already touched on this, but in your submission you say that you welcome some of the benefits of the 23 change options. That might feed into John McKenzie’s point that we cannot just say, “It’s aye been, so we can’t change the service.”

Colin, you were quite specific when you gave the example of Kerrera as a station that you would

probably consider to be not sustainable and one that you would not retain—if you will pardon the pun. Can you say more about the stations that you would concede will probably not be kept over the longer term?

Colin Brown: I am not going to go through the list of stations and say whether we think they should be closed or not. Clearly, it is not our position that any station should be shut if that would, as we would see it, increase the risk to a community.

However, the service has looked at stations where there are no firefighters employed or which have been unable to respond with a crew at any time of the day or night for a considerable period of time—sometimes for five or 10 years. It has tried to recruit in those communities, but no one in the community has wanted to be a retained firefighter. We can talk about all the reasons for people not wanting to be retained firefighters, but we would still maintain that it is an attractive job to come into and that its value to society and to individuals is huge. That said, if you are unable to employ firefighters in a station in a retained capacity, or even as volunteers, why would you spend tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of pounds on maintaining a resource that is never going to do anything?

That is why in our written submission I talk about people being brought into the consultation process who, with the greatest respect, I think have zero understanding of how the system operates. If we are talking about developing a retained crew at a station that has zero in it at the moment, I would just point out that it would take a minimum of three years to get a qualified firefighter, another year to get a qualified crew commander and yet another year to get a qualified watch commander—and from a community of, say, 60 people. That is just not going to happen.

Jamie Hepburn: Yes—you have given the example of Kerrera. In your written submission, you made the point again that you are concerned that no information was forthcoming about how new retained firefighters would be recruited or new crews would be established.

I recognise that you are not going to be able to roll off a list of stations off the top of your head. As much as we have to consider the issue in the strategic sense, it also comes down to specifics. The reason I ask is so that we can have some understanding, if not of the specific set of stations then of the broad criteria—which you have alluded to before, in the case of Kerrera—for how you might tell that something might not be sustainable or might not be able to be kept. It would be useful to understand that. Are you able to follow up on that?

This is about context and understanding the issues better. In your written submission, you talk about the most recent incident statistics, which were published on 30 October last year, and you state:

> "non-fatal fire casualties for 2024/25 were 1,069, up 30.8%."

Obviously that is a concerning figure, but it is not placed in context. Is it up 30.8 per cent from the year before or is it a longer-term trend?

Colin Brown: That is the service's statistic, so, yes, it is year on year.

Jamie Hepburn: It is year on year. That is useful to understand—again, we can draw out the information, so that is something that I may speak to my committee colleagues about. I just want to see whether it is a longer-term trend as well, but I do not know whether you can speak to that just now.

Colin Brown: I will bring in John McKenzie in a moment. I think that the figure is indicative of the increased range of incidents that we go to. Alongside that, our members have been incredibly successful at driving down the incidence of what we call domestic dwelling fires—house fires—but there are still road traffic collisions and additional calls to support other services, such as opening doors for the ambulance service. That is where the joined-up working of emergency medical responses was considered under the proposals for a broadened role for the Scottish fire service. A number of casualties come under that list of things that, in a sense, are non-traditional fire and rescue service roles.

We are starting to speak about response times for casualties that are from fires and relate to traditional fire service work. As I highlighted, had it not been for an early intervention from the Fire and Rescue Service in an incident, what would the outcome have been? In many situations, it is impossible to quantify that, but if someone required rescue and the fire service was there early enough to rescue them, the likelihood is that that would be seen as a non-fatal casualty. If the service had not been there early enough, it would be seen as fatality.

John McKenzie: I will be quick—I think that this is the context of the whole debate. It is appropriate for the service to look at the changing risk and at balancing the resource that goes with that. We are seeing the overall numbers of some risks, or the overall incidence, decreasing; with some, however, the numbers are increasing. What is the best response to match that? Role expansion is one aspect of that.

I will cut back to the conversation regarding Kerrera. Colin covered one aspect of that well. It is

so difficult to have the conversation when it is driven by significantly reduced budgets. On the flip side of that, Marionville—we could also use Cowcaddens in Glasgow as an example, but, to keep it brief, I will use Marionville—is a whole-time station in the centre of Edinburgh with high activity. The primary reason that Marionville station is being considered is because the fire station is no longer physically fit for purpose. It is well past its time and the service does not have the resources to build a new fire station there. So, we are not thinking based on risk; we are thinking based on resource, in the sense that there is not the money to build a viable fire station there—the funding is not in place to do it. It is appropriate to look at examples such as Kerrera and we are happy to do so—we must have the conversation in the round about such things—but we must acknowledge the other aspect.

My final point is that the driving force behind the 23 options is that very few of them involve producing additional resource. Some stations may be getting minimal additional resource but, within the same option, there will be significant reduction in resource somewhere else. That context makes it really difficult to have the whole conversation about SDR because, ultimately, underlining everything is the fact that there is significant underfunding. That sets the context.

Jamie Hepburn: I appreciate that there has to be space for the union and the service to talk about those things. I should make clear that I am not advocating for Kerrera fire station to close—it is just that the example was proffered previously. It is not so much about understanding specific locations, but it would be helpful to understand the process and rationale from the union's perspective, even if we receive that later.

I have one final question. The written submission refers to the online scoring system that was used at the event in Stirling. It sets out that attendees were not able to see any of the final scores and, therefore, were unable to scrutinise the process. It might be an imponderable, because you did not necessarily see the final scores, but could you set out what practical difference it would have made had you had a better line of sight?

Colin Brown: Absolutely. I start by saying that I, too, do not want to see Kerrera fire station being closed. Please make sure that that is on the record.

There is no suggestion that there was any sleight of hand, but the purpose of taking the 23 options to the balanced room event was to whittle them down so that a compressed number could be taken forward. All 23 options that were tabled at the balanced room event went to public consultation. It may be because of the way that it was scored—who knows? Only the company that managed to get the data from the system was able to look at the results. There may have been a margin of one point or half a point—I have no idea, and I do not know what weighting was applied to the data. All 23 options have been put forward. There is no suggestion that there was any sleight of hand or mischief in that but, from the very start, the tech let the system down. That should have been a starting point for people to note that there was an issue.

Jamie Hepburn: I think that we would need to pick that up with the next panel.

The Convener: I will go to Rona Mackay before I come in with a couple of final points.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I will be brief. I want to clarify something that John McKenzie said earlier, which is that roughly 150 jobs would be lost per year. You set out your position on compulsory redundancies, John, which I appreciate. For the job losses that you are talking about, would that be through retirement, voluntary redundancies, or people leaving?

Colin Brown: Yeah, so—

Rona Mackay: They are not being replaced.

Colin Brown: Yes, ultimately.

Rona Mackay: I thought that that was what it was; I just wanted to clarify what you meant.

My other question follows on from my colleagues' questions. In the capital budget, you are £10 million short of the minimum that you asked for. Am I right in saying that you asked for £60 million but that you got £50 million?

John McKenzie: I have a tiny clarification: the service asked for £60 million and received under £50 million. It is probably not going to be a surprise to anyone in the room that unions would typically ask for a bit more money.

Rona Mackay: It is probably an obvious question, but do you have a list of priorities for what you would do with the £50 million? You have explained the position about upgrading stations and new stations, but do you have a target list of the worst to the least worst?

John McKenzie: Speaking on behalf of the Fire Brigades Union, I do not. The service has done some significant work and has scored every fire station in Scotland, which has taken a significant period of time. Without being flippant, the difficulty is that the examples range from a retained station in one of the isles that does not have running water—those examples are in the minority, but I think that they are significantly important, when we think of the workplace and what people do—to

Cowcaddens, which, at the time, had two appliances and was the second busiest station in Scotland, and where the fabric of the building is no longer fit for purpose. Obviously, both of those resources would need significant investment. I will make a complete guess—the service will have better information—but I would imagine that rebuilding the Cowcaddens station would require between 30 and 35 per cent of the capital budget, which does not leave a lot of room for the other 350 stations.

Rona Mackay: You have to weigh up what will be the most effective.

Finally, I will ask a predictable question. What is the morale of firefighters like when all this is going on?

John McKenzie: Saying that it is a managed decline of the service makes it sound as though the service is making a conscious effort; it is not. I have seen no evidence of that whatsoever. We see all the little rubs that wear the service down day by day and year by year.

11:00

As a human-level example—I do not want to be misty-eyed when I say this—when I joined the fire service 20 years ago, it was imprinted on my mind on the first day that I stepped into a fire station how important it was to keep that resource available and to get my head into the job. I needed to understand the importance of how my actions could impact my colleagues at an incident, and of the responsibility that I had to make sure that I did not do something that would compromise that appliance's being on the run. That was crystal clear in my head.

Today, when I step into a fire station on the first day, I could toss a coin as to whether that appliance is off the run because of staffing. How does an employer instil discipline and a person's recognition of their responsibility in the role that they have taken on in that environment? How does the employer culturally imprint that in a healthy and progressive way? It cannot. That is the type of decline. We do not truly realise how much we are chipping away at the foundations of this—we are not doing so intentionally; it is just a consequence.

Rona Mackay: It is happening gradually.

John McKenzie: Aye.

The Convener: We are right on time, but I wonder whether our next panel of witnesses will bear with us for five minutes or so, because I have a couple of final questions, one of which circles back to the reform process.

I am interested in the FBU's engagement with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service on potential reforms to the service since you provided evidence to us in December. Do you have any feedback on how those discussions went?

Colin Brown: The discussions have, in large part, stalled, not because of a breakdown in relations, but because the service has—as far as we are concerned, rightly—taken the time to do a proper assessment and analysis of the thousands of responses to the public consultation. We have highlighted our concerns about how the consultation responses are weighted against the data provided for any decisions. There is not a huge amount to talk about until the board comes forward to consider the consultation. The discussions remain very positive, in the sense that there is open and transparent engagement around the issue. However, the reality is that, until the board is in a place to review reports and look at decisions, there is not much for us to speak about in broader terms.

The Convener: The committee understands that, given the volume of feedback and the time that it is taking to work through it.

My second question is on firefighter safety. You stated that you know about the risks that your members face from the lack of decontamination facilities or reduced staff numbers. Do you see a risk of compensation claims from injured members in the future? What financial burden could that place on the service?

Colin Brown: Broadly speaking, there have been countless opportunities over a number of years to address that. In 2022, we brought the professor who did the research and published the data—Anna Stec—to the Scottish Parliament building for a round table. We took her into the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, and she met the strategic leadership team. To its absolute credit, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, of all United Kingdom fire and rescue services, has been very quick to pick up that research and look to enact elements of it that are within their budgetary and structural control, such as those related to training.

However, as far as compensation goes, there are still firefighters on stations who cannot decontaminate and who still have that exposure. The Scottish Employment Injuries Advisory Council Bill, which would have looked at disability benefit for firefighters affected by cancer, has not been passed. We still do not have legislation that recognises that firefighters catch certain diseases and cancers earlier and that they have a mortality rate from cancer that is around 1.6 times higher than that of the general population. We still do not have health screening in place for firefighters so that they can maintain their health throughout their entire career and their retirement. When—and I say when—we get to the position that we did with

asbestosis, we will absolutely see firefighters make claims.

The Convener: Thank you. Forgive my ignorance, but I presume that you are referring to UK legislation.

Colin Brown: The Industrial Injuries Advisory Council is a UK body. The whole principle behind the Scottish Employment Injuries Advisory Council Bill is that, when disability benefit transfers to Scotland this year, the system should recognise a modern workforce. The industrial injuries disablement benefit that is in effect across the UK is discriminatory towards women workers; does not recognise long Covid; does not recognise the industrial diseases or injuries that occur today; and certainly does not recognise firefighter cancers and diseases. The whole principle is that, if UK responsibility to administer the benefit and the rules around it is to be passed to the Scottish Government, the Scottish Government should look at what the Scottish industrial workforce sees and what injuries and illnesses they experience.

John McKenzie: Colin covered that well, but it would be wrong not to recognise the fact that many of my colleagues south of the border had fire and rescue services actively pushing against some of the concepts that were linked to the FBU's decon campaign, and that we did not have that up here. Here, the employer absolutely walked into that conversation, while recognising some of the challenges that it would undoubtedly bring.

We will almost inevitably be looking at compensation at some point down the line. There is a real public risk with that—these are public sector workers. What do we put in place for the service to mitigate that? Some fire stations have facilities that were not equipped to deal with the risk that firefighters were facing 20 years ago and are far less so now. Ultimately, if there isnae significant investment in many of those workplaces to mitigate that, the employer ultimately has one choice, which is not to send firefighters at all. What does that provide to the public? Once we move into a space where there is a broad acceptance—academically, politically and publicly—that there is a risk and that we do not have the ability to put measures in place to mitigate that risk, what does it mean when people inevitably become ill or worse?

The Convener: Thank you for that helpful clarification. That brings us to the end of the session. Thank you both very much indeed—it has been a very worthwhile session.

We will have a short suspension to allow our witnesses to change over.

11:07

Meeting suspended.

11:12

On resuming—

The Convener: We will move on to our second panel of witnesses, who are our colleagues from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. I welcome Mhairi Wylie, chair of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service board; Stuart Stevens, chief officer; Andy Watt, deputy chief officer; and Deborah Stanfield, interim director of finance and contractual services.

Thank you very much for your submission. I note the follow-up correspondence on progress on the review, which all MSPs received this morning.

You heard the evidence from our first panel, and there will be quite a lot to work through. I ask Mhairi or Stuart to make a short opening statement.

Mhairi Wylie (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service): I will start by acknowledging the committee's pre-budget work and highlighting the need for investment in the service, while also acknowledging the work on reform and the efficiencies that the service has already achieved.

It is obvious from recent debates that there is a keen awareness in the Parliament of the different challenges that the service faces, which include the diversification of risks that we are seeing; we have already touched on wildfire and flooding.

I know that you want to discuss the service delivery review, and that is where we want to keep the focus. I assure you that the board is briefed at each stage of the SDR process. However, as you would expect and are aware, we have not yet looked at the final set of options or reached any decision on them.

That said, we were fortunate enough to be able to go, in an observation capacity only, to the public events that were held towards the end of last year, which was very useful. It was really clear, as you will appreciate—there is no need for further evidence on this—that there is a strength of connection between communities and their local fire and rescue service. It is important to acknowledge that that is down to the work of our firefighters and the staff who work in communities, and I express my gratitude to them for the work that they undertake.

I also express my gratitude to every person who came forward to take part in the consultation process. We know the time, energy and effort that that involved. One of the underpinning reasons why we wanted to delay the decision in December was to make sure that every one of those consultation responses was appropriately

considered and that there was time to analyse and evaluate any new evidence or information.

11:15

That has meant that the context of the decisions around the SDR is shifting. I appreciate that there are varying views but, from our perspective, the SDR started out as an opportunity for us to consider how to use the existing resource as best we can. You will appreciate that we must take that responsibility. In a lot of ways, it is a modest request to be able to sit down and ask how we can use our existing resource better, and not necessarily to ask where we can get lots of additional investment.

As the budget continues to crystallise, I assure you—I know that Stuart Stevens and the team will confirm this—that we will continue to work closely with the Scottish Government in that process.

As you said earlier, convener, there are lots of aspects that we need to grapple with. I will highlight a couple of those. We are all passionate about wanting to maintain firefighter numbers at the absolute maximum that we can; we also need to acknowledge that all firefighters need to be properly equipped and trained and need to have appropriate management. They must have support, including wellbeing support, when they need it. They must be paid fairly and on time. The whole point of the review is that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is a whole system, and we must understand that whole system. Maintaining firefighter numbers needs to go hand in hand with maintaining firefighter safety.

The other aspect that I want to highlight is the incredible work on and legacy of preventative interventions in communities. The fire service is hailed throughout Scotland and much more widely for the impact that we make in communities through our preventative work. We are an exemplar—if we are not unique in the public sector, we must be pretty close to it. That is down to our firefighters' contributions in the legacy services inherited by the SFRS. It is something that we are very proud of and it is not always given the full recognition that it should have. There is a lesson for us about making sure that we shout about it from the rafters more.

We must ensure that that preventative work is protected to the fullest of our ability. We do not want to shift from preventative intervention to crisis intervention if that is unavoidable, because that would present an increased risk to the people of Scotland and to our firefighters who would have to use a much more intensive level of intervention.

The final point that I want to hold on to and grapple with is about the need to continue to evolve the service. That need is not going to go anywhere: we have seen recognition of that this morning and in the debates in Parliament. We have a responsibility to ensure that the service continues to meet risks as they change in relation to population, industry and climate, in the context of what we look to do.

The board is conscious of the budget gap. We will, of course, continue to work with the Scottish Government to close that gap. We are not wholly without concern about how that process will evolve, but we will continue to commit to doing that work.

As much as anything, this session is about hearing from the committee in relation to the service delivery review, and I look forward to hearing your thoughts, processes and questions. I hand back to you, convener.

The Convener: Thank you. That was helpful.

We will dive right in to questions. My first question, which you will probably be anticipating, is about the funding in the Scottish budget 2026-27. How will that impact on your plans for reform? In your submission, you described the potential need to revisit aspects of the reform process on the back of the budget and the spending review for 2026. How do you make the changes that you need to make to use resources better and evolve the service? I am interested in opening up that topic and hearing your response to the budget and the spending review process.

Mhairi Wylie: The budget shapes the context slightly differently from where it was in December. There is no doubt that the budget will make a difference to how decisions are evaluated and to the context that they are considered in.

I will bring in the chief officer.

Stuart Stevens (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service): Good morning. I echo Mhairi's point in thanking you for the committee's support in relation to the budget and for the Parliament's recognition of the challenges and the work that the Fire and Rescue Service does on a daily basis.

I will reaffirm points that I have made before about the SFRS absolutely being an exemplar of public service reform. We have delivered the objectives of reform, vastly exceeded the savings that were set out and improved the performance of the organisation across all parts of Scotland.

We absolutely acknowledge that there are financial challenges across the Scottish Government and there are clear pressures. However, I was disappointed in the outcome of the budget for the SFRS. The £18 million is a significant increase in the resource budget, which is absolutely welcome, but colleagues will remember that the last time that I appeared at the

committee, I sought at least £30 million to make critical improvements to the organisation. I believe that that was a reasonable amount for the significant improvements that we could make to the service in communities across Scotland. Mhairi Wylie talked about the whole-system approach in the service.

Part of the reason for the £30 million ask was that we wanted to ensure that we have systems in place. For example, we have a 10 per cent vacancy factor across our corporate services, which are absolutely part of our front-line service delivery processes. That is one of the challenges that we face.

There is a gap in the budget between the £18 million and the £30 million that we asked for. We are working incredibly hard to try to close that gap in conversations with the Government. We are also challenging ourselves internally on what we can do and what we could defer. Clearly, that comes with an element of risk; we are taking a risk-based approach to try to prioritise. Our budget gap will have a potential impact on the organisation's head count. However, we are at the early stages of the budget-setting process.

We are very disappointed with the capital budget, as you have heard from colleagues from the Fire Brigades Union, because there are well-known challenges across the organisation with our estate, fleet and equipment. We believed that the ask that we put forward was reasonable in order to make improvements across the organisation. As Mhairi Wylie said, the premise of the service delivery review was always to realign the resources that we currently have in order to improve performance and tackle some of our strategic challenges, particularly with prevention and training. It was not about removing head count from the organisation. If we are faced with a budget that might mean that we have to remove head count from the organisation, that would fundamentally change the narrative of the service delivery review. The impact of the capital budget is coupled with that, because some of the changes that we would like to make require capital investment.

The Convener: I will come in on the final point about the capital budget. I am picking up on some of the points that Ivan McKee, who is the minister with responsibility for planning, made a couple of weeks ago during a Finance and Public Administration Committee debate in the chamber on the budget. I know that you will be aware of it but, in response to the committee's contribution to the budget debate, he said that the Government is:

"working to allow the Scottish Police Authority and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to hold reserves and expand their borrowing powers."—[*Official Report*, 21 January 2026; c 23.]

Obviously, those rules sit with the UK Treasury. The Scottish Government has been clear that it would welcome reform in order to improve flexibility in that regard. If that came about, what difference would it potentially make? Would you welcome that option? I presume that the answer is yes.

Stuart Stevens: The answer is absolutely yes. As you will be aware, capital projects can be incredibly complex and multiyear, but if you are planning on the basis of a one-year budget and things slip into the next year, it is very difficult to try to manage the budget over a long period of time, particularly for build projects. We would absolutely welcome the ability to hold reserves year on year and not have to spend the money or hand it back at the end of a financial year. Equally, having borrowing powers would really help us to maximise our capital input and allow us to make progress at a much faster pace.

The Convener: There are a lot of questions to come from members. I will hand over to Liam Kerr before I bring in Katy Clark.

Liam Kerr: Good morning. Stuart Stevens, you were asked about the impact of the budget and the spending review on reform. I will take it back to the current position, as I did earlier. On resource funding, the 2026-27 budget offering is about £15 million less than you said that you were seeking when you provided evidence during the committee's pre-budget scrutiny. What will the impact of that shortfall be on current provision? Mhairi Wylie spoke about the whole system, the safety aspect for your firefighters and the community work. Will there be an impact on any of that?

Stuart Stevens: We are attempting to close the budget gap as much as possible using an approach based on assessment of risk. We have set clear principles around that process, but the priorities are our statutory duties, risk compliance and legal issues. We are attempting to close the gap, but a gap remains.

The impact of the gap, as things stand, equates to around £6 million. That is the minimum amount that we can progress against at this point in time. That does not mean that other items are not important; we just have to manage them through a very careful process of risk management.

To crystallise what that gap means in terms of its impact on the organisation, we would have to consider removing in the region of 128 firefighter posts in order to plug it. Extrapolating that across future years with regard to the spending review, if it were flat cash next year, that would be another 198 firefighters removed, and in year 3, another 191 firefighters would be removed. That would be a total of about 517 firefighters over the next three

years, on top of the 166 firefighters that we are currently consulting on in regard to the process. That is a significant impact on the organisation over the next three years.

I must be clear that the numbers in our modelling for year 2 and year 3 are very conservative, because there are a lot of variables that we cannot take into account. Those numbers are mainly based on pay and inflation at this point in time.

Community safety is paramount to the organisation. That level of reductions would have an impact on community safety in the future, both from a response perspective and from a prevention perspective.

If that happened, I would also be considerably concerned about firefighter safety, because our safe systems of work require a certain weight of response as well as a time of response. Fewer firefighters and fire engines would have an impact on our safe systems of work.

Mhairi Wylie talked about our prevention track record. We are incredibly proud of the work that the service has done on prevention. We are an exemplar of how prevention should work and is delivered, as can be seen in our performance. Those reductions would mean that around 700 fewer people were out there daily delivering preventative activity, because our firefighters currently provide both prevention and response. The impact of that would be to reverse the positive gains that we have made in delivering preventative activity, from home safety work to youth engagement, diversity activities and all the wider outcomes that the fire service delivers as part of our local community activity.

There would be an impact on our national resilience resources, which, at a time of increasing tension and risk, would be a real challenge. There would also be an impact on our ability to resource climate response activities, which are hugely resource demanding for a long period of time.

Liam Kerr: I am grateful for that clarity, as much as anything. What you say begs an equivalent question about capital funding. The budget provides capital funding of £48.4 million, which is nearly £13 million less than the £61 million that you told us was needed in pre-budget evidence. How will that shortfall impact on your capital spending?

Stuart Stevens: You are correct about what we are seeking for a capital budget, and that is a real source of concern for us. As you will be aware, we have some significant issues across our estate with the suitability and condition of the estate. There are significant technological developments that we need to put in place, particularly ones that are concerned with safety. We want to roll out new breathing apparatus sets this year, which is fundamental to firefighter safety but comes at an incredible cost. We need to provide dignified facilities. We need to provide fleet, equipment and information and communications technology.

All that must come from the capital budget, and that budget falls considerably short of what we requested. The impact of that is that we will have to temper our ambitions for the pace of change that we can deliver and for how many of those projects we can do. We will have to decide whether certain new-build projects are indeed still viable, or whether we have to maximise that money by refurbishing some stations instead of rebuilding other stations. We have some real challenges and difficult decisions to make on that basis.

We have a five-year capital plan, which we are reviewing on the basis of the capital investment that we have received so far and that which is projected. We still have the issue of RAAC panel stations to resolve, and we continue to prioritise that. Fundamentally, the budget means that we have to review where we are with our capital planning.

11:30

Liam Kerr: Presumably it is too early to know exactly what the implications of the £13 million shortfall are. Is that right?

Stuart Stevens: Yes. We are working through that at the moment.

Katy Clark: In your submission, on the potential reforms that are being considered, you say:

> "it is unlikely that we will be in a position to make a final decision before the pre-election period begins in March."

Can you give us more detail on the work that is being done on service reform and when you expect to make a final decision? Are you able to share any information on the timetable?

Stuart Stevens: I wonder whether it would be helpful for the committee if I gave a brief overview of the history of the process. The SFRS's service delivery model has not been reviewed since the legacy services came together in 2013. The process started around 2018-19, so it is not a new project—it has been built up over a number of years. It is part of our overarching service review programme, which includes our corporate services, our enabling infrastructure and the service delivery review. Its purpose is to recognise the challenges that we face and come up with a twin-track approach of strategic investment and change, alongside continuous investment from the Scottish Government.

It was also designed to recognise elements such as changes in society and in risk and demand. That is the background. Fundamentally, the

process was intended to ensure that we had the right resources in the right place at the right time, while also bolstering other parts of the organisation, such as training. To be clear, it was never about management of cuts or removing further head count from the organisation.

I will bring in Andy Watt to provide some specifics on the timeline and where we are with the work.

Andy Watt (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service): Thanks, chief.

As Stuart Stevens has touched on, the content and volume of the feedback that we got from the public consultation process was pretty significant. It has been well articulated that our head count in corporate services and uniformed staff is pretty lean. The volume of work has been pretty substantial for the team to work through, so it was not realistic to meet the 18 December deadline. We recognised that relatively quickly, while we were working towards it.

On top of that, to ensure that we are applying full and conscientious consideration to the feedback, which we set out at the start that we would do, we have sought external verification and assurance on different elements of the feedback. Again, we want to ensure that there is an independent view on the consultation feedback, prior to any options being taken to the board to make a decision. It is purely about workload and getting to the point of being able to make recommendations to the board. That is where we are at the moment.

Katy Clark: I will not touch on budget and resource issues, because one of my colleagues will ask about that later.

I understand that there are more than 3,700 submissions. Could you give us more detail on the main issues that you are looking at? What is the broad outline of what you are considering and what people are saying to you? Will you be publishing all the submissions, along with a summary of the issues that are raised? How are you going to communicate with everybody on the process that you are going through?

Andy Watt: I will make a note to ensure that I cover those questions. Without going into the individual elements, I will say that a number of themes have come up in the consultation. People have come back with alternative suggestions. They have also asked questions about our equality impact assessments, so we will get external verification on those to ensure that we get them right. The consultation was also to establish whether there is anything that we have not thought of or that people think that we have not necessarily got right. There is all that type of feedback.

We then have to go through the work that we did prior to the consultation to double-check that all the elements of the consultation and the options that we presented are accurate. If not, we need the evidence to decide whether to progress further work on alternative suggestions.

The main elements of work relate to alternative suggestions that have come through. For example, if we are asked whether we have thought about this or that, we record those options and look at them based on the criteria, which were applied at the start of the process, to see whether they are viable. If they are, we need to look at them. That is quite a significant piece of work.

Katy Clark: Will you be publishing submissions?

Andy Watt: Yes, that is something we will come on to in a couple of seconds.

Another area that came up as a theme was future risks in communities. We are doing a lot of work around that at the moment.

Katy Clark: Are some of those issues around climate?

Andy Watt: Yes, a wide range of things have come up through the public consultation. That information will be presented to our board in a case-for-change pack for each option, with supporting evidence, for it to make a decision. We have collated all the feedback from each option; that will be presented in a table format, and all of that will be made public. People who have raised questions, concerns or anything that we need to consider will see their comments reflected in that when it is made public.

Katy Clark: Will all the submissions be published?

Andy Watt: Yes, we will have collated them into a format that we will be able to show.

Katy Clark: I understand that you will be publishing your proposals and your thinking, but will all the raw data and submissions be published? Will that be available to the public?

Andy Watt: I would need to ask that question. I do not have that information at hand.

Katy Clark: There may be practical issues around it, so it would be very helpful if you could write to us about that.

I have a supplementary question that picks up on some of the points that were made at the end of the earlier evidence session, which you may have heard. I know that you are well aware of the risks to firefighters in relation to decontamination and no doubt are giving a great deal of consideration to how the service responds to that. You have already mentioned the requirement to

provide a safe system of work for firefighters. Legally, you have to provide a safe system of work and you should not be sending firefighters out unless there is a safe system of work in place. It is quite clear that, currently, there is often no safe system of work. How are you responding to that? What are you doing now to ensure that you meet your legal responsibilities as an employer?

Stuart Stevens: I will answer first, and then Andy Watt might want to add some detail, because he has been very close to the work around decontamination. I assure the committee that one of my main priorities for the organisation is firefighter safety. As Colin Brown rightly said, we have embraced the work around decontamination from the get-go and have been hugely committed to it, both financially and in relation to processes. A lot of the processes and control measures around decontamination emanate from culture, so a lot of things that can be done in relation to control measures are behavioural. We have to provide equipment and safe systems of work in the standard operating procedures, which we have done.

Katy Clark: I have visited a number of fire stations, and it is quite clear that in some of them it would be practically impossible for there to be safe systems of work due to a lack of showering facilities, for example. I appreciate that there may be cultural points, but perhaps you could address some of the resource issues, and then we can go on to the cultural issues.

Stuart Stevens: Yes, absolutely. The point that I was making is that such systems can start at the point of the incident. There are things that can happen on the incident ground with regard to the starting point of the control measures. We need to recognise that a lot of our buildings do not provide decontamination. What we mean by decontamination is things such as proper showering facilities and a means to dress cleanly. We recognise that as part of the pressures that we have on the capital side, but we have to put in other control measures and arrangements locally. We have done so in some of the areas where we can work with partners to ensure that we have access to facilities in order to decontaminate.

Before I bring in Andy Watt on the SOP elements, I will make a more strategic point to provide another level of assurance. We are working with Professor Stec, through the CivTech programme, to provide a technological solution to the decontamination element, through wearable equipment that can track the level of contamination, and enable biometric screening as part of that. That is how seriously we have taken the contamination issue, with that additional layer of monitoring and control measures. I will bring in Andy Watt on the specifics of some of the control measures.

Andy Watt: As the chief officer said, and as we discussed at our previous appearance before the committee, we have launched a standard operating procedure for the service's decontamination policy. On your question, there is probably a wider issue about capital funding and the ability to upgrade our facilities, but I will try to keep that separate—

Katy Clark: I am a little concerned that we are straying from the legal point. I understand that you have a long-term programme of work, and I have heard many people mention that wet wipes are being used at the scenes of incidents, but the point that I am making is that you are sending firefighters out when there is no safe system of work and you have legal liability. What is your response to that? It is clear that firefighters are regularly being contaminated when they attend scenes and that there is no safe system of work in that regard.

I appreciate everything that you have said—we have heard that evidence previously—but I need to put to you the point that the fire service is exposed. What is your response to that?

Andy Watt: Our standard operating procedure provides a safe system of work—

Katy Clark: Do you think that it provides a safe system of work now?

Andy Watt: It provides a safe system of work. We have worked closely with the Health and Safety Executive, which is looking into the issue at the moment and will, at some point in the future, consider what compliance looks like in relation to contamination in the fire service. We are working closely with the Health and Safety Executive and other colleagues across the UK on decon. Our standard operating procedure provides a safe system of work in which we can apply the highest possible level of control measures to eliminate or mitigate contamination among firefighters.

I do not want the importance of the decon wipes to be downplayed, because they are really important. That goes back to the point that Stuart Stevens made about culture. Firefighters need to realise that the use of such wipes is a really important step that should not be downplayed, because it is the first action that they can take to decontaminate after being at an incident. They should bag their kit and ensure that it goes through laundry procedures.

We have invested millions of pounds in decon over the past few years. I believe that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is one of the leading fire and rescue services in the UK in relation to decon. As Stuart Stevens said, we are leading the way

through the CivTech work that we are doing with Anna Stec on tracking decon.

I give the reassurance that, when it is followed, the standard operating procedure provides a safe system of work for firefighters at the moment. We acknowledge that, when the Health and Safety Executive does further work relating to decontamination, more guidance might be provided, and we would need to adhere to that.

The Convener: I do not want us to stray too far from the budget and reform, but if you feel that it would be helpful to provide any follow-up information on that issue, the committee would be very pleased to receive it.

Pauline McNeill: I am not sure that it is that easy to separate the implications of the budget from the delivery review. However, in its submission, the FBU says that the full implications of the option to replace some whole-time firefighters with retained firefighters are not widely understood by the people who took part in the consultation process. Stuart Stevens, does the budget make that move more likely?

Stuart Stevens: Will you clarify what you mean by "move", please, Ms McNeill?

Pauline McNeill: I understand that one of the options that you are considering would involve replacing some whole-time fire cover with retained cover. Does the budget make it more likely that there will be a push for that?

Stuart Stevens: The current options mean that there would be day-shift duty systems and retained duty systems at some stations. The budget implications need to be considered. If there was a reduction in head count, we would need to consider whether that option was still viable, but the budget itself does not drive the need to move to that system.

11:45

On RDS, it is important to understand that 80 per cent of Scotland is currently served by on-call firefighters, who do an incredible job. They are selfless—

Pauline McNeill: To be clear, I am not doubting that.

Stuart Stevens: I accept that, but—

Pauline McNeill: If we need so many whole-time firefighters, why is there an option is to replace them with retained firefighters? You can understand why I am asking the question. You should not be compelled to change the system because of the budget. That is the concern.

Stuart Stevens: Yes, of course. As the options currently stand, budget aside, that was never the intention. The intention was to bring in day-shift duty systems to those stations alongside RDS, which is commensurate with the level of risk and demand for those stations when you compare them with like-for-like stations elsewhere. For example, we have whole-time cover fire stations that deal with substantially fewer fire calls than on-call cover fire stations currently deal with. That is part of the model that we have inherited from the eight services, and part of the SDR is to examine that.

Pauline McNeill: I see the distinction. Do you think that the implications of the budget will lead to a reduction in the head count of firefighters?

Stuart Stevens: As things stand, I believe that that could be the case, particularly in years 2 and 3.

Pauline McNeill: Yes, I noted that. Will you provide estimates on that at some point?

Stuart Stevens: I provided them in response to Mr Kerr's question. I can reiterate them now or I can provide them in writing, if that would be easier.

Pauline McNeill: If you could do the latter, that would be great.

I am aware that, over many years, there have been discussions about the changing role of firefighters and work is under way on other jobs that firefighters could undertake. However, carrying out those other roles will be much more difficult under the proposed budget. Is it time to tell the Government that it is not possible to enter into any further discussions about changing the firefighter role if you are facing a reduction in firefighter numbers?

Stuart Stevens: For absolute clarity, I have always been clear in discussions that funding for a broadened role should not come at the expense of core funding for the service. The service needs to be in a good place to take on that additional work, and I stand by that point.

I am hugely committed to our having a broadened role for the fire service. The value that we could provide across all parts of the system would be significant, both in terms of medical response and the wider preventative activity that we do, such as ensuring that we are prepared for terrorism events. The service could provide that preventative response, particularly in these very challenging times in which risk is increasing. There is absolutely a role for the fire service in providing that preventative response and preparedness element, and I will continue to push for the investment to enable us to do that.

Pauline McNeill: Finally, the SFRS has sent us a letter on the service delivery review. We have had no indication at all of what the wide and varied

options are. The board is expected to make a decision on those by the end of June. What scope is there for elected members to question the options that are put before the board? Perhaps I have misunderstood.

Mhairi Wylie: As things stand, my understanding is that the board will need to make a decision on the framework for the processes first. I imagine that there would be an opportunity for the committee to scrutinise the decision. As things stand, the decision on the process to be undertaken is made at board level and you are entitled to scrutinise that.

Pauline McNeill: Can you not be more transparent? You say that a final decision will be made, but we have no idea right now what the analysis looks like. Many people have participated in the consultation, the options are wide and varied, and then you will make a final decision in June. Surely there should be an intermediate stage when we get an indication of the direction that you are heading in. We are talking about the potential closure of fire stations and changes to the service. A lot of things could happen.

I think that you know that it would be very hard for future elected MSPs to unpick a final decision when we do not even know, as we are sitting here in February, what direction you are heading in.

Mhairi Wylie: I cannot necessarily comment on the process of governance. That is the process as we understand it. It would probably be more appropriate for such questions to be answered by the Scottish Government and the minister.

Pauline McNeill: Is it for ministers to make the final decision?

Mhairi Wylie: The fire and rescue framework sets out the decision process for what we will do. It must be comparable to the process that would be used if an NHS health board proposed to close a hospital. My understanding is that we are following the governance process that has been laid out. Any deviation from that would probably have to be challenged within the parliamentary context.

Sharon Dowey: Good morning. I have a question on the gap between the funding that you sought and the funding that is provided in the budget. In your written submission, you say:

> "We are still reviewing the impact of this and are in discussions internally and with Scottish Government to determine if we can further reduce this gap."

Could you expand on that?

Stuart Stevens: On the internal element, the strategic leadership team and the board are scrutinising and discussing where the budget currently is and the options that we have in place as regards areas that we might defer or progress.

As far as conversations with the Scottish Government are concerned, I am in dialogue with our sponsor unit on what I see as the gap in the budget with a view to seeking further investment to bridge that gap. Those conversations are taking place at the moment.

Sharon Dowey: Do you have any confidence that your budget will be increased?

Stuart Stevens: I have not had a response so far. Our request is being considered. That is as much as I know at this stage.

Sharon Dowey: In its submission, the FBU mentioned that it is concerned about a potential increase in response times due to limited staffing and station closures. From your response to Pauline McNeill, it sounded as though, with the current budget, there could be another decrease in staff numbers. Do you share the FBU's concern that, if your budget is not increased, there could be a further increase in response times?

Stuart Stevens: As we have discussed previously with the committee, the issue of response times is a very complex one. I appreciate that the FBU has a clear view on what is driving elements of those response times.

There are a number of factors. Colin Brown listed some of them. As Andy Watt mentioned previously, we have commissioned academics to do some independent analysis so that we can understand all the variables and factors that impact on response times in Scotland. That work is under way. Once it has been completed, we will make it widely available so that people can understand the various factors that contribute to response times.

Again, as I said the last time that I appeared before the committee, we should not lose sight of the outcomes element. The outcomes for the service are continually positive. As I said, response times are a complex issue. One element of that is the preventative activity that we have done, which ensures that fires are discovered and the service is alerted to them much more quickly. We are seeing a benefit in that regard as a result of the work that we have done.

There are elements that we know it is within our gift to address when it comes to response times, and we are investing heavily in those. For example, we have invested £30 million in a new command and control system that will speed up call handling and mobilising times. We need to understand the other factors that it is within our gift to influence, such as the location of fire stations and fire appliances. That is part of the service delivery review.

Response times are a very complex issue, and we need to understand all the various factors.

If cuts in head count of the magnitude that have been mentioned were realised, it would be inevitable that fire stations would close and the response times in those areas would increase. That would be a fact. If 600 or 700 firefighters came out of the system, that would inevitably have an impact.

Sharon Dowey: In an ideal world, there would be no fires.

Stuart Stevens: We would be out of a job.

Sharon Dowey: You would not be, because when the public dial 999, they expect a response from the fire service. Regardless of how many fires there are in an area, they expect the response time to be met. You have already said that firefighters do lots of things other than fighting fires, but, nevertheless, we expect them to be there.

The impact of the budget could be that the risk is passed on to the public, because if a station closes, it will take longer for an appliance to get to a call. If a proposal is made to reduce the number of firefighters or to close a station, is a risk assessment done to make people aware of that risk?

Stuart Stevens: That is part of the modelling that we do when we consider any change in the operational footprint. We can model that.

To pick up on your first point, we respond to every single emergency call that we receive—there will always be a response.

You talked about the impact of station closures on communities. Responses to calls would be one element of that, but the other impact—I want to emphasise this point—would be on the preventative work that we do. We keep people safe long before they dial 999, so we would also lose an element of the broader preventative activity that we do.

Sharon Dowey: You are saying that it is not just fires that you respond to; there are a lot more incidents that you go to, including road traffic accidents.

Stuart Stevens: Absolutely. Our stats show that we respond to more of those different types of incidents than we ever have before. Colin Brown talked about some of the medical interventions that we make and the support that we provide to partners. Reducing the number of firefighters and fire appliances would have an impact on our ability to continue to support partners to the level that we do at the moment. The breadth of the input that the fire service has and the types of calls that we now respond to has fundamentally changed, hence why we have so many specialist resources.

The SDR is important to make sure that we have resources in the right places to respond to those different types of incidents, which include things such as wildfires, flooding or whatever it may be. Regarding the changes that we need to make, it all knits together once we recognise that there has been a change in the types of incidents that we respond to.

Sharon Dowey: Just to clarify, is it correct that you are doing work just now on statistics for response times?

Stuart Stevens: Yes, we have commissioned a university to do that work.

Sharon Dowey: Once you have done that work, will those statistics be made available to us?

Stuart Stevens: Yes, we will publish it once it is done.

Sharon Dowey: Okay, thank you.

The Convener: We are coming up to noon, which was our scheduled finishing time, but there are still a couple of members who would like to come in with questions. If you can bear with us, we will run over a bit.

Rona Mackay: I will be brief. I want to pick up on something that Mhairi Wylie said in her opening statement and that Stuart Stevens just referenced, which is the preventative work that is being done in fire stations. I visited Bishopbriggs fire station, in my constituency, last summer and I was amazed at the amount of work that is being done, including on water safety and community fundraising, nearly all of which is being done in firefighters' own time or voluntarily. I had no idea of the other things that firefighters and fire stations do, which are why they are at the heart of the community. I want to put that on the record, because I do not think that people are aware of how much is being done.

I understand the challenges that the budget situation is now posing to your review strategy, because you have set those out very clearly. Given that you now know what you will need to work with, are there any parts of the strategy that you envisage will be ruled out? Is there anything about which you are thinking, "We just can't do that now"? I do not know whether that is a question for Deborah Stanfield or Stuart Stevens.

Stuart Stevens: I am happy to pick that question up. It is too early for us to say that we will rule anything out, because we need to fully understand the impact of the budget. However, we have been clear—I think that this point was made in the correspondence that I sent to the committee—that, against the backdrop of the budget settlement, we will need to question the viability of some of the options. From the outset, we committed to the service delivery review being

about investment and reinvestment in the organisation. We also talked about feasibility and deliverability over a period of time. We now need to understand whether that would still be viable across all the options. There may be some options that are still viable, but there may be some that we need to reconsider.

This was always going to be just the first stage of the service delivery review programme, and there are several hundred other options that we could consider to change the organisation and manage risk as we move forward.

Rona Mackay: At the end of the day, you will need to have a priority list and say, "Okay, what can we actually implement here?" Is that the way that you will approach the budget?

Stuart Stevens: Absolutely. It will need to be about the benefit that will be derived for the organisation, and it will need to be aligned to the purpose of the SDR process, which will be the basis of how we prioritise.

Rona Mackay: Would those measures be mainly short term or about looking towards the future? Or would it be a mix of both?

Stuart Stevens: It would probably be a mix of both. Do you want to say anything about that, Andy?

Andy Watt: The issue is probably wider than just the SDR element that Stuart was talking about, because it may also touch on the strategic priorities that we have been talking about. As Stuart touched on earlier, those priorities are still important, even if we might not be able to get to them.

The service has a number of ageing systems that are coming to the end of their contract and need to be replaced. We need to find the money to fund that, as it is critical to the delivery of the front-line service.

12:00

Wider organisational leadership and management training is also critical to the service. We need to prepare future leaders of the service, to ensure that they have the skillset to handle issues related to safety, standards, performance and culture. We are also focused on that.

Those are all important strategic priorities, but we might not be able to do those things. The strategic leadership team is working through the priorities, based on the budget that we have, and it is moving to priority-based budgeting. That means that we are considering compliance and legislative requirements first and foremost; then we are considering what else we can do. It is challenging.

Rona Mackay: Is there anything that you want to add, Deborah, or has it all been covered?

Deborah Stanfield (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service): It has all been covered. The SFRS is continuing to work through that as part of its on-going governance processes.

Jamie Hepburn: I have a few questions—I am just making that clear at the outset.

The Convener: Are they short questions?

Jamie Hepburn: I will do my best, convener, but they are on important issues that impact my constituency, so I am intrigued and interested to know the answers.

The first follows up on Pauline McNeill's question. You will need to forgive me, but is your name pronounced "Mhairi" or "Vhairi"?

Mhairi Wylie: You can call me either. I am not too concerned.

Jamie Hepburn: I prefer to call someone what they want to be called, but let us just move on. [*Laughter.*]

You mentioned that the timescale for making a final decision is determined by the governance process, and you suggested that we might need to pick that up with the minister. I think that I am following what you said, but I want to clarify, because it is important.

Pauline McNeill made the reasonable point that the successor committee might want to ask further questions in advance of a decision. I accept that we are not part of the formal decision-making process, but we represent constituents who are impacted. Presumably, it would be in scope for the board to say that it might have a slightly longer process, which would enable that questioning—although I am not suggesting punting the matter into the long grass.

Mhairi Wylie: The timescale is determined as we progress. By June, we will be a year into the process, and we are conscious that that is a very long time. We are aware of our responsibility for good practice on that.

Jamie Hepburn: I am only asking whether there is scope. It is not that we have to rely on the Government to direct the board; the board could make the decision on its own.

Mhairi Wylie: It is not about Government directing it, but it is good practice as part of the consultation process.

Jamie Hepburn: But could the board make a decision?

Mhairi Wylie: A decision on coming back here for further scrutiny?

Jamie Hepburn: I am asking whether the process could be slightly longer, yes.

Mhairi Wylie: I suppose that, theoretically—

Jamie Hepburn: I am only trying to understand the process.

Mhairi Wylie: We would need to take advice on what is appropriate and what is not.

Jamie Hepburn: Okay. I have a question on the process that you have followed thus far. There have been 18 public meetings—I went along to one of them. Has there been an assessment of the feedback on those meetings?

I will be candid: I did not find the experience very satisfactory, and I do not think the attendees did either. That is not a criticism of those who came along to present, but there were breakout groups and I do not think that that was what the attendees expected. Has there been an assessment of how the members of the public who came along found the public meetings?

Mhairi Wylie: I will have to hand over to Andy Watt, who can tell you what work has been done on that.

Andy Watt: We have gathered feedback from the events, but we have not collated that into a report.

I take on board the issue of how the meetings were set up. However, before we started, we took advice from an external consultation adviser on how we should present. We found that there were mixed views, to be honest.

I have been at some of the public consultations and I have led the presentations. Some people held the view that the breakout sessions at the tables suited quieter individuals who were not as loud as others in the room. We wanted to hear everybody's voice, and not necessarily only the people who were the loudest in the room, if I can put it that way. It was important for us to give everybody a voice, and we felt that that was the best way to do it, given the consultation advice that we received prior to setting the meetings up.

Jamie Hepburn: I accept that perspective. It would be useful for us to understand what people's experience was, but that is a legitimate perspective.

Stuart Stevens: May I respond to your first question?

Jamie Hepburn: Of course.

Stuart Stevens: I am not sure whether I am following correctly, so I want to clarify, for my own understanding. It is my understanding that there is not a role for Parliament in that at this stage. However, we will continue to engage with elected members, particularly those who are directly impacted by the options, throughout that process.

Jamie Hepburn: I accept that and I recognise that there is no formal decision-making process. I concede that. The point was—and I am sympathetic to it—that the committee might want to ask questions in advance of a final decision. However, I recognise that it is for the board to decide that. I was really just trying to understand the process.

Looking at the process that you have undertaken—I have made this point directly in response to the consultation and I have raised it in debate in Parliament—I would be intrigued to understand the rationale that has been pursued. I recognise that it is no easy undertaking when you are looking across the country and considering the extent to which you are going to have to regionalise it. However, you are a national service. It is difficult to remove my own constituency experiences entirely from this, but this point will be true everywhere, I suppose. When you were presenting on a regional basis, the changes were not always clear. Changes in Glasgow, for example, could impact my constituency, but they were not presented together, which I found a little unsatisfactory. Can you reassure me that, despite it being presented that way, there is some form of cross-border assessment, for want of a better term, given that, strictly speaking, there is no border or boundary in terms of the service?

Stuart Stevens: That is a really interesting point. Throughout the process, we saw that tension between local and national and how local changes would impact benefits on a national basis. We are sympathetic to and aware of that. For assurance, the modelling and the process take into account the interdependency and the network of stations and appliances that we have across Scotland. It would be very complex to try to provide that as part of those sessions and those case-for-change packs. However, we will try to articulate that through any final decision making and set out how that works. That has been done, and overall resilience was one of the factors that we considered in the modelling.

Jamie Hepburn: It is reassuring to know that it has been done, because that has not always been clear when trying to explore that aspect. If we can have some line of sight on that, that would be really helpful.

I have two more very quick questions. One picks up on Pauline McNeill's point about retained firefighters. As a service, you have recognised the difficulties in recruiting retained firefighters, and the FBU has made that point as well. A lot of these changes are, as you have set out, predicated on the recruitment of additional retained firefighters.

Supposing that that is not possible or successful, is there any guarantee—again, I recognise that it might be on a localised basis—that changes that are predicated on that recruitment would not go ahead because you had not been able to recruit?

Stuart Stevens: In any decision-making feasibility study, I would absolutely be looking for assurances that, if an appliance was to become on-call, we would be able to provide an on-call appliance before that option moved into implementation. That is a part of the work that we need to really understand. There is no point in saying that it is going to be retained if we cannot crew it as retained.

Jamie Hepburn: I suppose the other side of that is that, if you could not recruit, you would not be doing it.

Stuart Stevens: Yes, we would not push ahead with it. That would make no sense, because we would be losing the appliance as opposed to making it retained, for example.

Jamie Hepburn: It is useful to understand that.

I have one other question. I indicated to the FBU that I would ask it, so I should. Again, the FBU does not think that it is sleight of hand or anything, but it said that it would have been helpful to understand in more detail the scoring exercise for the options that were presented at an event at Stirling. Is it possible to get a greater line of sight on that?

Stuart Stevens: Absolutely. The scoring is all published online, on our website, and as part of the packs for each option that went to the board following the consultation process. All of that information is open source. It has been collected by an independent party—ASV Research—which is a consultation expert. It collated the scores and managed the system, so we had no direct influence or impact on that. That information is all freely available. The scoring was 50 per cent or above for the options that were taken forward.

Jamie Hepburn: I might need to try to understand why we were told that the scoring was not available, although I might have misunderstood the point.

Andy Watt: I will provide some clarity, I hope. The live online scoring on the day was working and displaying, but there was a technical issue. The bit that was not working was the consolidation of all the scores that were coming up on the screen. The system worked and recorded the scores as individuals in the balanced room put those scores in, and the scores showed on the screen. The only bit that did not work was the consolidated list.

We were going through all the options, and, as the chief officer has touched on, that was done through an independent external facilitator. Again, we followed best practice guidance in the consultation and we got external verification and assurance on that. The facilitators provided a report and guaranteed that, although there was a glitch—the screen did not display the consolidated scores—the system had worked, in that it had recorded the scores throughout the process. It was a slight technical issue, but, as Colin Brown touched on, there was nothing to suggest in any way, shape or form that there was anything underhand in how we recorded the scores.

Jamie Hepburn: The previous panel members said the same, and I am not suggesting otherwise. The chief officer is saying that the scoring is available, so we should be able to see that.

Andy Watt: It will be available, as part of the packs.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Good afternoon. I have a brief question, because I am conscious of the time. This follows on from the previous session, with the FBU. What more can you do to ensure that the union and workers throughout the service are involved and on board with how you are taking forward any reforms? I am asking that because I have a really good relationship with my local fire station in Coatbridge. Fire officers come to me regularly about a number of issues, and I have a good relationship with the folk who run that station—I have always been made welcome. However, when decisions come up, such as the reforms, there seems to be a bit of a disconnect between what firefighters on the ground tell us will be the consequences and what we hear in the committee or from the Government. It seems that relationships are generally good, but, at times like this, is there anything more that you can do to ensure that the folk who work in the service are fully on board?

Stuart Stevens: The line of communication to front-line staff has always been a challenge, particularly for large organisations. We have endeavoured to communicate as much as possible. Our communications and engagement team have done significant work to ensure that everybody is well briefed on where we are, and we will continue to push on that. However, I recognise that messages might not always land in the same way, so it is up to us to continue to work on communication. Me and my colleagues are regularly out visiting stations. As you pointed out, we have a very good relationship with the Fire Brigades Union, and we are trying to keep everybody as informed as possible, but there will always be points at which people might not see the full detail. We will continue to endeavour to improve that.

The Convener: Apologies for running over, but I think that it was worth while. Thank you very much to our panel members for coming along today. It has given us a really helpful insight, and we look forward to receiving the follow-up detail from you.

12:13

Meeting continued in private until 12:55.

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