



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

## Official Report

### JUSTICE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 28 April 2015



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**Tuesday 28 April 2015**

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**JUSTICE COMMITTEE**  
**13<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2015, Session 4**

**CONVENER**

\*Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)

**DEPUTY CONVENER**

\*Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

\*Christian Allard (North East Scotland) (SNP)

Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

\*Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP)

\*John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)

\*Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD)

\*Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con)

\*Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)

\*attended

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

Alasdair Hay (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service)

Stephen Thomson (Fire Brigades Union Scotland)

Steven Torrie (HM Chief Inspector of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service)

Pat Watters (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service Board)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Tracey White

**LOCATION**

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)



## Scottish Parliament

### Justice Committee

*Tuesday 28 April 2015*

*[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]*

### Decision on Taking Business in Private

**The Convener (Christine Grahame):** Good morning. I welcome everyone to the Justice Committee's 13th meeting in 2015. I ask everyone, including those in the public gallery, to switch off mobile phones and other electronic devices, as they interfere with the broadcasting system, even when they are switched to silent. Apologies have been received from Jayne Baxter.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on taking business in private. The committee is invited to agree to consider in private our work programme under agenda item 3. Do members agree to do so?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## Fire and Rescue Service Reform

10:00

**The Convener:** Item 2 is our latest evidence session on fire and rescue service reform. We hold these sessions regularly to allow us to keep an eye on how fire and rescue service reform is working in practice.

I welcome to the meeting Pat Watters, chair of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service Board; Alasdair Hay, chief officer of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service; Steven Torrie, HM chief inspector of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service; and Stephen Thomson, Scottish secretary of the Fire Brigades Union Scotland.

Thank you all for your written submissions. I will go straight to questions from members.

**Christian Allard (North East Scotland) (SNP):** Good morning. I want to go straight to the most important part of the reform programme, which is funding and how much of a challenge it will be to provide the funding that will be needed in the next few years.

I read details in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's submission of the reduction in funding of £31.5 million—or 11 per cent—in cash terms since 2012-13. The submission says that that is

"primarily due to VAT and pay inflation".

I think that we all agree that pay inflation is not a bad thing these days. However, we do not have the details on how much VAT has affected the funding position. If the decision on VAT were to be reversed by the next Westminster Government, would that sort out the funding problem and the challenges that we will have in the next few years?

**Pat Watters (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service Board):** I will cover the VAT point initially and then hand on to the chief officer, who will cover the other points.

VAT has been a burden on the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service; indeed, I think that we are the only fire and rescue service in the whole of the United Kingdom that is burdened by having to pay VAT. Every other fire and rescue service in the UK has its VAT returned to it or does not pay it as part of the service that it provides.

People will say—indeed, people have said this to me—"But you knew that when you started." I did, but there have certainly been subtle changes in the two years in which we have had a single fire and rescue service. For instance, the transport agency that was formed down south very recently as a national agency and whose formation was very similar to that of the national Fire and Rescue Service in Scotland is exempt from VAT. There

was a change in the regulations to allow that organisation to be exempt. Other national organisations that have recently formed are also exempt. The Government has therefore made exemptions.

It is very much a matter for the Westminster Government. Last year, VAT cost us £10 million. That is £10 million that we would not have had to look for in savings in the service, and which would have protected part of the service on an on-going basis. It is therefore important to our on-going financial situation. The money would not cover the whole gap, but it would certainly go a long way towards helping us.

**Christian Allard:** Did you ask for a modification to section 33 of the Value Added Tax Act 1994 to add the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to the list in it? I noted that the BBC and the Metropolitan Police are on that list. Have you asked specifically for that modification to be made?

**Pat Watters:** I wrote to the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and every Scottish MP, with a copy to my colleagues in the Scottish Parliament for their information. The reply that I got was that there are regulations and exempt organisations, but that we are not one of the exempt organisations.

**Christian Allard:** Was no reason given?

**Pat Watters:** No.

**The Convener:** Have we seen the response that you received?

**Pat Watters:** Probably not, but I am quite happy to supply it.

**The Convener:** Thank you.

Christian Allard mentioned the BBC and the Met, and you mentioned other recently formed organisations, but you did not elaborate. Do you know what they are?

**Pat Watters:** Yes. The London legacy organisation—

**The Convener:** Sorry?

**Pat Watters:** The Olympics legacy organisation was formed into a national organisation to spread the benefits of the Olympics. It was a local body but was turned into a national body, and it was made VAT exempt.

**The Convener:** That is very useful. Have you finished, Christian?

**Christian Allard:** I think that Alasdair Hay wanted to come in.

**Alasdair Hay (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service):** First and foremost, what I and the SFRS are concerned about is ensuring the safety of the

people of Scotland and improving safety outcomes.

On the funding gap, we have reduced the organisation's cost base by £48.2 million in the service's first three years, including this financial year. We anticipated a reduction when we formed the SFRS, and we have been able to deliver against that. However, it has been made difficult, because we have had not just the cash cut to the organisation but an increase in the cost base, which has been exacerbated by the fact that we are not VAT exempt.

As the chair of the SFRS Board just said, we are the only fire and rescue service in the UK that pays VAT on goods and services. VAT exemption certainly would have helped us over the past three years. As we look to the future, we do not anticipate any significant increase in our funding, so exemption would be a very useful and powerful thing and would help improve safety outcomes for the people of Scotland.

The Scottish Government has set us six key targets, and I will highlight two of them. One is on reducing the number of casualties, including fatalities, in fires. Another is on reducing the number of casualties, including fatalities, in relation to special services. We have met both those key targets despite the fact that we have successfully reduced the cost base by £48.2 million. The safety of our communities is our absolute focus.

**Christian Allard:** The written submission mixed VAT and pay inflation together. Can you quantify what difference VAT exemption would make to the figures?

**Alasdair Hay:** We pay circa £10 million per annum on VAT for goods and services procured by the SFRS.

**Christian Allard:** What saving do you need to make in each year to come?

**Alasdair Hay:** We do not know what our budget will be beyond this year. Over the first three years of the service, we have had to reduce the cost base by £48.2 million. If you took that £10 million off, we would have saved £38.2 million and freed up £10 million to invest in what is a vital public service.

**Christian Allard:** So it would make a difference.

**Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP):** When Chief Constable House was before us in November, he said that the failure to recover £23 million was the equivalent of, I think, 680 police officers. How many fire officers is that £10 million equivalent to?

**Alasdair Hay:** It is roughly 350 firefighter posts. A firefighter, with on-costs, earns around £30,000 per annum.

**Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** I have a simple question. I hear what Pat Watters is saying about writing to the Government. However, I have just looked up the registration criteria, which say that an organisation must register if it has a turnover of more than £82,000 per annum. Have you tried to register? My understanding is that, by law, HM Revenue and Customs might have to take a different view. This might sound like a silly-laddie question, but have you tried to register, rather than ask the questions?

**Pat Watters:** The short answer is no. We were told that we would not be covered.

**The Convener:** Who was that response from? Was it from the Treasury?

**Pat Watters:** Yes.

**The Convener:** We would be happy to see that.

**Pat Watters:** I will make sure that it is forwarded.

**Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con):** Both the joint submission from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and the chair of the board and the submission from the chief inspector of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service state that there has been a reduction in emergency response demand for the SFRS and in traditional fire-fighting intervention roles—legally, those include fire prevention, saving people from fires and dealing with road accidents. Is the new unitary fire service able to cover incidents such as the tragic case of Alison Hume, whose rescue from a mine shaft was delayed for six hours for health and safety reasons? Moreover, is it clear that the fire brigade would have a role in dealing with, say, the collapse of a building or a mineshaft or flood prevention, as well as tragic scenarios such as the one that I just referred to?

**Alasdair Hay:** The Fire (Scotland) Act 2005, which replaced the Fire Services Act 1947, recognised that we no longer simply fight fires and put more of an emphasis on preventative work. Indeed, I commend the preventative work that the Fire and Rescue Service has undertaken, which has played a significant part in the 40 per cent reduction in the number of emergency incidents that we attend.

The 2005 act also recognises that the fire service had developed certain expertise and skills and had procured much of the equipment to enable it to respond to other types of emergency incidents, including those that you mentioned involving collapsed buildings, which we would call urban search and rescue. Six members of the

SFRS who have the very skills that I have mentioned are supporting the United Kingdom's response to the terrible tragedy that is unfolding in Nepal. The service has those skills; they are enshrined in the 2005 act, and we are equipping and upskilling our people to ensure that they are able to respond to such incidents.

We have recently reviewed all our specialist capabilities, because one of the benefits of reform was ensuring that across Scotland and on the basis of risk people had more equitable access to specialist skills so that there would be no undue delays. That work was approved by our board in January, and we are working through an implementation plan to ensure that, on the basis of risk, people have equitable access to all those skills.

The same will apply to many other incidents, but I should point out that incidents involving collapsed mineshafts rely not on a single response from the SFRS but on a multiagency response. We have other people with complementary skill sets who would form an effective team to undertake a rescue in such circumstances, such as the Mines Rescue Service, which is based in Crossgates in Fife. We have colleagues in other emergency services who will form teams with us, but we as the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service act as the champion of specialist rescue and keep registers in our control rooms of all the people who have additional complementary skills and can work alongside us in unique and unusual circumstances to deliver as effective a response as possible.

I should also highlight another significant change that we have made in our control rooms. Traditionally, an incident commander at an emergency incident would get from control the pre-determined attendance for the type of incident, and if they needed any additional resources, they would ask for them from the incident ground. That can still happen, but to support the incident commander, the control rooms now say, "Are you aware that 30 minutes away there is this or that resource that might help you?" We are trying to ensure that not only by working with others but by acting as a co-ordinator and changing some of our operational practices we can provide as effective a response as possible to people who are trapped in whatever circumstances.

10:15

**Margaret Mitchell:** You mentioned working in a team. I suppose that the key issue arises when it is not quite your job to do a specific aspect of a rescue and there will be a delay, which was key to the case that I mentioned. Are you confident that you can respond appropriately and in a commonsense manner in such cases? It seems

that the delay in that case eventually led to a tragic death.

**Alasdair Hay:** We have been doing lots of work with our Fire Brigades Union and Health and Safety Executive colleagues. There has been a major review of incident command procedures and the operational doctrine that operates not only in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, but right across the UK to ensure that, when we have unusual and challenging operational incidents, we are able to respect absolutely the health and safety requirements that emergency service workers deserve. Although they work in an inherently dangerous environment, they need a system of work that is as safe we can possibly create for them. However, we must strike the right balance, because we are an emergency service. When people are in difficulty or their life is threatened, we have a responsibility to respond as safely as we can for our workers. Equally, we must place ourselves into an inherently dangerous environment to effect a rescue where it is practicable to do so.

There is no absolute; it is one of the judgment calls that an incident commander must make. We are trying to create the correct environment, the correct operational doctrine and the right guidance to ensure that our firefighters and our incident commanders understand that making risky decisions is part of their job. We have been working very hard on that.

**Stephen Thomson (Fire Brigades Union Scotland):** I reiterate that we are working with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service as best we can to ensure that such an incident does not happen again.

I will provide a bit more clarity on the reduction in the intervention figures that were mentioned. The chief officer mentioned a 40 per cent reduction in fire attendance over the past 10 years. Intervention activity has only ever sat at around 5 per cent of fire station and firefighter activity. Therefore, to put it into context, it is a 40 per cent reduction of the 5 per cent intervention activity.

**The Convener:** When you say “intervention activity”, do you mean going to fires?

**Stephen Thomson:** Yes.

**The Convener:** I know that you all know the language, but make it easy for me.

**Stephen Thomson:** I will try.

Over the past few years, we have carried out an awful lot more intervention activity on flooding and special rescues, such as line and water rescues. That means an increase in fire station activity, because dealing with those incidents requires

specialist skills for which people have to train intensely.

I hope that that puts the 40 per cent intervention reduction into context.

**The Convener:** That is fine. Margaret, are you finished?

**Margaret Mitchell:** I am not altogether sure that I have received a categorical yes. Of course there must be a risk assessment. The risk assessment in the case that I mentioned was less than adequate. We are talking about a small number of cases but the effects can be cataclysmic. Perhaps the witnesses could reflect on that.

On a more positive note, there is an opportunity to do other work. Will you comment on the work to progress the “Out-of-Hospital Cardiac Arrest: A Strategy for Scotland”?

**Steven Torrie (HM Chief Inspector of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service):** Just to be clear on the inspectorate’s comment in the submission about reduced operational activity, we are presenting the idea that the service has new capacity and new opportunities to do different things. Therefore, what is going on is much more than your pertinent and specific question. The bigger picture is about what the Fire and Rescue Service can do in the future. The chief painted a very good picture of the specialist rescue and other services that the Fire and Rescue Service provides.

On top of that, we know that the Scottish Government is very keen for the public sector to break down traditional barriers between organisations and for people to do different things. We are highlighting to the committee today the idea of co-responding to out-of-hospital cardiac arrest. We think that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service could make a very big difference with that. That is not the only thing—I expect that the Fire and Rescue Service will evolve and change over the years—but it is currently on the agenda. The inspectorate has been focused on it, and we are trying to promote it strongly.

**The Convener:** Could you explain that to me in simple terms? I am sorry to repeat the point, but you mention the out-of-hospital cardiac arrest strategy in your submission. Does that mean that somebody phones the Fire and Rescue Service rather than phoning for an ambulance? What happens? Give me a wee example of what you mean by that change in service or flexibility or whatever.

**Steven Torrie:** That refers to instances where a member of the public walking along the street, say, suffers a cardiac arrest and falls down. The Scottish Government has recently announced a strategy to improve the outcomes in such



situations. We are told that Scotland is one of the worst places in Europe for someone to survive that. It is dramatically different in most other places.

I will briefly take you through all that is required to deal with that. To make an improvement, three or four steps are required. First, someone has to recognise that a person has suffered a cardiac arrest. Then, someone needs to know how to do good-quality cardiopulmonary resuscitation or CPR—chest compressions. Then, a quick call needs to be made to specialists such as paramedics. Finally, there is a need for transport to a centre of excellence.

Thinking about that and about the geography of Scotland—thinking about someone falling down in the street anywhere—we can appreciate that ambulances are highly unlikely to be around. It is much more likely that a member of the public will spot someone. Also, many thousands of firefighters are around. They are trained and they can be trained further. They have hundreds of defibrillator devices between them and they could contribute in a big way. The process is straightforward but it could make a big difference to Scotland's health.

**The Convener:** If somebody phones 999 now, having seen an incident in the street in a remote location and not knowing how to handle it, how will that call be directed? Will it be directed to the Scottish Ambulance Service rather than to someone in the Fire and Rescue Service, even if they were nearby? Is that the situation now?

**Steven Torrie:** That is right, yes. The ambulance control room has the expertise to understand the incident, to assess what is going on and to provide advice. The Fire and Rescue Service could provide an additional resource, however, which the Scottish Ambulance Service could call on.

**The Convener:** That is part of what you discuss in your submission.

**Steven Torrie:** Yes.

**The Convener:** Does anyone else on the panel wish to comment on that arrangement? It seems a very sensible thing to do.

**Pat Watters:** It is absolutely sensible. In the discussions that we have had and during the presentations that have been made, it has been very clear that more than one or two people are needed to respond to such incidents. Steven Torrie's main point is that people have to recognise what has happened. For people to recognise cardiac arrest, we need to enhance awareness. There are training opportunities, using our facilities and our staff to make the public

aware of exactly what cardiac arrest is and how to deal with it when it happens.

I do not think that the suggestion is that people should phone the fire station as soon as something like that happens, but if an ambulance cannot get there, the Ambulance Service staff will phone us. Nine times out of 10, we will get there first.

**Stephen Thomson:** There are some challenges around that in the fire service when it comes to FBU members getting involved. The first challenge is that there is currently a conference policy—a national policy—that we do not get involved in co-responding schemes. However, that will be discussed at our conference, which is just over two weeks away, in May. It will be discussed in the broader context of emergency medical response and, in the event that Fire and Rescue Services across the UK and FBU members get involved in such schemes, a national joint council working group has been set up for all things related to that. One of our assistant chief officers sits on that working group, as do FBU members at a national level. We have been speaking to the service about the matter. All that we have asked is for it to take cognisance of the current challenge, and we will have to wait and see if there is a change in policy next month.

Out-of-hospital cardiac arrest is only one small part of emergency medical response as a whole. Along with service managers, Fire Brigades Union members attended the symposium that was held in Edinburgh a couple of months ago, which was sponsored by the Scottish Government. A presentation was given by a captain from the Seattle fire department, which has taken the issue on board, and whose calls have increased dramatically. The firefighters there take great pride in being involved. Pat Watters is absolutely right: it seems very sensible for them to get involved.

However, one of the things that struck me about what Captain Larsen said was that training for the control operators—he calls them “dispatchers”—was paramount. That touches on the point that the convener made, which is how the fire service would be mobilised, and it is a key point for us.

Another key point is that proper training must be given to our firefighters. Occasionally—in fact, more than occasionally—we are being turned out to assist the Ambulance Service when it is sometimes 30 or 40 minutes away, but firefighters are not paramedics, although they have some basic skills in that area. I was given the anecdotal example of a crew that was turned out for a call that they eventually realised was not for a cardiac arrest but for a diabetic coma. Firefighters are not trained for that and do not have the expertise to deal with it, and the crew that I am talking about was left with having to deal with a casualty while

being surrounded by their family. Moreover, the firefighters had just come away from a car fire, so they were all stinking of smoke and noxious chemicals.

Those issues need to be looked at. We are prepared to speak, and are speaking, to the fire service about looking at all the issues properly before we roll out the cardiac arrest service. One of the big issues is how such a service will be resourced. If it is rolled out across the whole fire service, particularly under the retained duty system, it will have a cost implication for the fire service when budgets are already stretched. Every time a retained fire appliance turns out with four, five or six firefighters on it, I guess that it costs the service between £150 and £200. If the cardiac arrest service is going to be rolled out across country, it will have a significant impact on budgets. Again, it is clear that the resourcing issue needs to be looked at.

We have touched on training, the control room issues and resourcing, which need to be looked at. We will continue to hold a dialogue with the fire service on that. We are not being obstructive but are asking the service to take cognisance of—

**The Convener:** No, I take your point.

**Stephen Thomson:** The issues are quite serious and they need to be looked at appropriately.

**The Convener:** Yes. It is a very interesting but complex matter, and I take the point that you are making on behalf of your members.

Alison, is the question that you want to ask on this point?

**Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD):** It is on a different point.

**The Convener:** Christian Allard has a brief question on this point.

**Christian Allard:** It is important to know how the witnesses define the role of firefighters in the 21st century and what they will be used for and involved in. Chief Inspector Torrie, I have a question about what you said about examples in Europe. A lot has been said about the creativity of the Scottish Government on that subject. There are good examples in Europe, where fire services respond first to a lot of health emergencies.

**The Convener:** I feel that France is about to be a focus here. Is it? Is France coming in, Christian?

**Christian Allard:** I just want to check whether Chief Inspector Torrie was thinking of such examples in Europe when he said that the fire service performs additional activities. Are there models in Europe that we can look at, particularly on responding to health emergencies?

**Steven Torrie:** Yes. It is correct to say that there are such models, but I have a caveat.

**The Convener:** Please tell him that there is a model in France.

**Steven Torrie:** France has a good model but there are good examples across Europe. My argument is that the Fire and Rescue Service can play a big role but that the whole issue of healthcare and improved outcomes is much bigger than the fire service: it is about having a national system.

**Christian Allard:** Is the fire service involved in the integration of health and social care services?

**Steven Torrie:** No, not in Scotland at the moment.

**Christian Allard:** Not just now.

**Steven Torrie:** No. The fire service is in conversation with the Scottish Ambulance Service and the Scottish Government about doing the work in question.

**Alasdair Hay:** On the point about out-of-hospital cardiac arrest, the ambition is to save 1,000 lives by 2020, which will mean 1,000 people returning to their families and being active citizens. Strong evidence from Europe and around the world suggests that we need a team approach and a co-respondent model, and to work with professionals in the Scottish Ambulance Service and use our firefighters' team ethic, skills and equipment. We have 400 defibrillators located across Scotland. If we join all that together, we will save 1,000 lives a year.

I accept all the points about making sure that the control room staff have proper training and that our front-line staff who respond to health emergencies have not just technical skills but the soft skills to deal with families in distressing circumstances. We have to get all those things right. To date, we have had a very constructive dialogue with our colleagues in the FBU. I have visited more than 200 work locations and spoken to firefighters, and I know that they understand that they can make a significant difference in the health area. We will pick up best practice from wherever it exists in Europe and across the world.

In Scotland, we have a 4 per cent survival rate at the moment. The best countries in Europe for survival rates at the moment are the Scandinavian countries. I recently visited Finland, whose rate is about 34 per cent. That is an enormous difference. The world leader is Seattle, which is saving 40 per cent. That is the ambition if we join our working up. As the chief inspector said, we cannot do it alone. It will absolutely require us to work as a public service and to incorporate the third sector. Lots of volunteers are doing great work. If we join that up and do it in a co-ordinated way, I see no reason

why we cannot be up there among the best in the world. That is something that we need to commit to.

10:30

**Alison McInnes:** Good morning. This time last year, John Duffy of the FBU told us that the retained service was “on its knees”. Mr Torrie, I think that you were a wee bit more circumspect and you said that it was “fragile”. What has the service done over the past year to tackle that problem?

**Pat Watters:** At that meeting, there was no disagreement from me as the chair of the service or from the chief officer that our retained firefighter unit is a very vulnerable part of the service. It is a large and important part of the service that we deliver.

Since our meeting last year, one of our senior officers has done a piece of work in conjunction with the retained service and our representative unions. As I think we said at that meeting, there have been many attempts to repair the service but we believe that we need a new approach to how we deliver it, and we are putting effort into that. We have looked at how services are delivered in other countries. For the detail, I hand over to the chief officer.

**Alasdair Hay:** To recap, I note that 40 per cent of the operational firefighters in Scotland work on the retained duty system and 90 per cent of the land mass of Scotland is protected by retained duty firefighters. They are an integral part of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and they have been magnificent in protecting their local communities, but the system was designed for the 1950s, when lifestyles were significantly different and we need to refresh it.

Because we have technology that tells us the availability of every appliance in Scotland, we know that between 60 and 100 retained pumps can be off the run—that is, not available—at some point during the day, and predominantly during Monday to Friday from 9 to 5. That is a huge challenge for us and we need to address it.

The chair of the SFRS board said that this situation has been growing for, probably, many decades. It is not unique to Scotland but is a challenge that the whole of the UK is facing. Each of the antecedent services tried in different ways to address it, but the problem remains. I stress that it is not in any way down to a lack of commitment from local retained firefighters. They are doing an incredible job, but circumstances make it difficult for them.

We have done two things. We have tried to eradicate any bad practice within the existing

system. We have heard some horror stories—for example, we heard that, when people wanted to join the retained service in their local community, it could take more than 12 months from the point of contact to the point when they joined a local crew. As you will understand, many people will fall away during that journey. One thing that we have done is to ensure that it is now 16 weeks from the point of initial contact to the point when the person commences their training with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. You will understand that, because of the nature of the role, we have to do background checks on people, so there are some delays, but we have streamlined that. We have also increased the involvement of the local managers, and they involve the local crews in the recruitment process.

I will give another example of something that we are doing. Only last week, we were up in Shetland and Orkney—I was not, but some of my managers were there running a campaign—because we are going to train all the firefighters on the islands rather than taking them on to the mainland.

We have been listening and trying to streamline processes to make it much easier for people who show their willingness to join the service. We are trying to be understanding of the difficulties that they have in, perhaps, detaching themselves from their local community, their family and their main form of employment, so we have streamlined that, and we are seeing some improvement there. However, it is really a sticking plaster. We think that the work that is going on to redefine what the retained duty system will look like in the 21st century is more important.

Peter Murray, who is one of the assistant chief officers, is leading that project, as the committee heard previously. We are about to kick off a couple of pilots in Scotland in which we will look at the role of a retained firefighter and what other value-adding activity they can bring to their local communities that might encourage them to be part of the public service and specifically the Fire and Rescue Service in Scotland. They are only pilots; they are options for the future. If they are successful, we will try to learn from them and roll them out across other parts of Scotland where that may be pertinent.

The retained duty system—if we continue to call it that—will be extremely significant in the future, but I think that it will not be homogeneous because it will have to fit into the different parts of Scotland. The core will be the same, but we need to make it fit the needs of local communities and the demands that are placed on the people in them. That is the stuff that we are currently working on for the future.

**Alison McInnes:** It seems to me that you are a long way away from a solution. Can you put a timescale on it?

**Alasdair Hay:** We have streamlined the existing processes. That first stage is now complete and we are seeing improvements. We hope to kick off the pilots—

**The Convener:** Excuse me, but where will you hold your pilots?

**Alasdair Hay:** We hope to run them in East Lothian, the Scottish Borders and Aberdeenshire.

**The Convener:** When do you expect to assess their effectiveness?

**Alasdair Hay:** We expect to kick off the pilots in October, but we are still having conversations with the chief executives and leaders of the local authorities. We are speaking to our colleagues in the Scottish Ambulance Service, Police Scotland and NHS Scotland in those areas about how we will gather everything together. We hope that we will get some of the pilots going in October. They probably need to run for around 12 months before we can get any meaningful feedback.

We are attempting to redress the long-term strategic problem that we have, but we are also attempting to ensure that the existing system works as effectively as it can.

**Alison McInnes:** Convener, if I may just—

**The Convener:** I was just going to ask Mr Torrie whether he wants to come in first.

**Steven Torrie:** I would like to add two brief comments, if I may.

First, the inspectorate obviously has a strong interest in this area. The chief officer has described how heavily reliant Scotland is on retained and volunteer firefighters, so we know that this is a fundamentally important issue. We have reported on it, and we will continue to take an interest in it by being supportive of the service and trying to drive change and bring about a difference.

Secondly, I deliberately chose the word “fragile” last year to describe the service because, although there is long-term pressure and there are changes in the way in which the service operates, it is not broken. I could go around Scotland and interview many members of staff who would describe the pressure that they are under, but they are delivering a quality service in their local communities. That is very important. It is important to the service’s staff that the retained and volunteer system is not painted as a failing part of the organisation, because it most certainly is not.

**Alison McInnes:** It was never my intention to suggest that those people are failing. It is precisely

because I value what they do that I am keen for them to be given the support that they need in order to operate.

There has been a cluster of recent fatalities in rural areas—in Dumfries, the Highlands and the north-east. Are you confident that you have adequate cover across the whole country?

**Alasdair Hay:** The emergency response side is extremely important in ensuring the safety of Scotland’s communities. Every time we have a fatality, we look at the entire circumstances around the incident. In the last but one financial year, we had the lowest ever number of fire fatalities. That is testament to the work that is being done not only on the emergency response but on prevention.

When we look at rural communities and the circumstances in which people have unfortunately died, we see two things. First, we see an ageing population. It is fantastic that people are living independent lives longer, but that comes with a greater vulnerability. How should we work with colleagues with in relation to the health and social care reforms to ensure that we recognise such vulnerabilities and stop people getting into circumstances where they may tragically lose their lives due to fire? That prevention element is extremely important.

The other issue that we are also looking into is suicides. Around a quarter of last year’s fire deaths were suicides. We have never experienced that level previously. We are asking questions about mental health and how we can play a part in understanding what is behind all that. That work is in its early stages.

The emergency response plays a part in rural areas, but it is clear that the most important part is preventing a fire from happening in the first place. That is about understanding why fires happen and preventing those circumstances from arising.

**The Convener:** I think that we are all quite taken aback by people using fires as a means to commit suicide. That is not something that one would think about.

**Alasdair Hay:** Sadly, people can be in such a distressed state that they decide to end their lives. There are many ways in which they do that. Unfortunately, we have always had a few people set themselves on fire—self-immolation is the term.

**The Convener:** My goodness.

**Alasdair Hay:** Last year, we saw a significant increase in self-immolation. That may just be one of those anomalies that occasionally occur, but we are having conversations with colleagues in health and social care and Police Scotland to see whether there is a pattern in who is committing

suicide in that way. Is it a specific group in society? We must understand that, so that we can collectively improve the safety outcomes of the people of Scotland.

Those are the two issues that we have noticed: the number of suicides has increased, and there is an increased profile of elderly people living alone. There are many benefits to that, but we must recognise the vulnerabilities that can arise and work within the system in that regard.

**John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind):** Morning, panel. I thank you all for your submissions, which were very helpful.

My question is for Mr Hay. You say that you no longer just fight fires but do a broader range of work on prevention. I am particularly interested in the tackling inequalities bit. You say that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is

“leading on phase two of the Scottish Government’s Building Safer Communities Programme”

and is taking a Christie commission approach, which I commend—that is positive.

I absolutely understand Mr Thomson’s representations on behalf of his members about expanding roles and, perhaps, the expectation that is being built up in the mind of the public.

Will you comment on that preventative work? The bit that jumped out at me was when you talked in your submission about

“ensuring that robust intelligence and data sharing protocols are implemented.”

Your preventative work perhaps identifies people who are vulnerable. Who do you share that information with and how?

**Alasdair Hay:** I will give you an example from our colleagues south of the border. The Chief Fire Officers Association has just agreed a protocol with the whole of the NHS in England under which fire services will be sharing—appropriately—some of the data held by general practitioners. That is called the Exeter data, although that name is not used in Scotland. The data helps people to identify people who have various vulnerabilities. The approach was piloted in Cheshire, where 30,000 safety home visits were made. The visits were intelligence based, predominately from information from the NHS.

We have done a huge amount of work on home fire safety visits across Scotland. We have targeted not only those who are vulnerable but anyone who wanted such a visit. There is evidence that we have increased the number of people who will evangelise for safety, because they share it with everyone they know.

10:45

We are getting to a plateau, though. Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service used a mass approach and has now gone to a targeted approach. Using data that it gets from the health service, it is targeting people who are vulnerable in the way that I described. The fire and rescue service has a footprint everywhere, so we are ensuring that we get into people’s homes and, because we are trusted, we are able to engage with people very effectively. However, we are trying to engage with the people who are the most vulnerable, which is an intelligence-led approach that has been supported by our colleagues in the NHS.

As we speak, there are conversations going on with the chief medical officer in Scotland. I understand that a new chief medical officer is about to come into post, who will finalise this approach. With the right protections and protocols in place, we will get comprehensive sharing of the right data by colleagues in the NHS to enable us to focus on those vulnerable people.

**John Finnie:** When you say intelligence led, are your officers recommended to visit places? If so, who by? In turn, if you are taking a blanket approach to an area and you encounter someone who is vulnerable, who do you share that information with?

**Alasdair Hay:** We are working with colleagues on the exact protocols about sharing. We absolutely need to get those right. People have a right to privacy and so on and we have to respect that. We are still at the stage of learning lessons from our colleagues south of the border.

**John Finnie:** Is that information that you would retain in the meantime?

**Alasdair Hay:** We will get those protocols right. We are working with the people who are leading at a local level in health and social care integration—there are all the existing systems in place—so that we get the right levels. If, through our visits, we pick up people who are vulnerable, we would not only have conversations with that individual but contact our colleagues in health and social care about them. For example, someone who is very frail might tell us in the home fire safety visit that they have tripped over several times; if they have a gas cooker in their house, an induction might be helpful. The technology is there now so that, using an app on your mobile phone, you can get an alert to say that somebody’s cooker is overheating and it can be switched off remotely. We have such conversations within the wider team that supports people who are vulnerable—

**The Convener:** I am astounded that somebody could switch off my cooker.

**Alasdair Hay:** Yeah, they could do that. It is about having the right conversations with the local social and health care providers. It has to be a team approach.

**The Convener:** Your aims are worthy but I wondered whether John Finnie was going to ask how much consent people have given to the sharing of that data. You talk about protocols, but where is the individual in all of this?

**John Finnie:** I am sorry, Mr Hay—maybe I was not being clear. If this is something that is being developed, that is fine—I appreciate that a lot of initiatives are just kicking off in health and social care. However, you used the word “trust”. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service enjoys—quite appropriately—a high level of trust. There are a number of vulnerable people in our communities with challenging mental health conditions. I wonder what impact your approach might have. I am trying to understand whether there is a system in place now. Is it formal or relatively informal? Are there data sharing protocol challenges? We are all aware of those.

**The Convener:** Before we even get to data sharing protocols, what consent has to be given by the individual? It is very specific; it is not just the protocols. For instance, could you share my information? Who in the NHS can it be shared with? I think that we would like to know that.

**Alasdair Hay:** You clearly have protections under the law to protect your privacy. We understand the power of intelligence in driving down risk but, equally, we understand that, when we are designing services, they have to be designed from the bottom up. One of the challenges of Christie is that, rather than being done unto people, public services need to be developed with people in a co-production model, so when we are developing the protocols, one of the key questions that will absolutely need to be addressed and answered is how we can get people’s consent and support and not impose things on them.

As I said, we are developing the protocols, and I absolutely accept that we have to do that with the individual at the heart. We have to get their support and their permission, and it is understanding how that happens that will make this a success and not destroy the absolute trust that our communities have in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. That is important because that is one of our key strengths.

**John Finnie:** I am sorry to labour the point, but there is a challenge within that, because some people will not be in a position to give informed consent, so there will be a requirement at some time, when there is a superseding issue of public safety—

**Alasdair Hay:** Again, we have to ensure that we understand the legislation that gives people protections as individuals and the legislation that gives people wider protections as a community and a society, and we need to ensure that the protocols and practices that we have in place address both of those things. There is no simple answer but, as I said, we have examples to draw on from other parts of the United Kingdom that will assist us in developing this work. If we can get that balance right, it will be another significant step forward in ensuring the safety of communities across Scotland.

**John Finnie:** I certainly applaud the collaborative work with health and social care and the other agencies. Perhaps you could keep the committee advised of progress with that, Mr Hay.

**Alasdair Hay:** Absolutely.

**The Convener:** I like the word “permissions” being in there as well as “protocols” and “practices”.

**Alasdair Hay:** I will note that.

**The Convener:** I do not want my cooker switched off by some app or other unless it is necessary. *[Laughter.]*

**Pat Watters:** We will get your name taken off the list.

**The Convener:** You would upset the cat. He would wonder what was happening.

**Steven Torrie:** I want to help the committee to understand that this is not a theoretical discussion. It is really significant. The example that I have comes from just prior to reform, at a time when Mr Hay still worked with Tayside Fire and Rescue. In that year, a series of five fatalities happened quite quickly, and Tayside Fire and Rescue explained that each of those five people was classified as vulnerable by health and social care—some had just been released from hospital and others were in the system—but none of them was known to Tayside Fire and Rescue.

If protocols had been in place—with all the controls that you are understandably concerned about—there would at least have been an opportunity for Tayside Fire and Rescue to go along and visit and try to prevent fatalities from happening.

**Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab):** The FBU Scotland submission draws attention to the fact that

“The total number of paid firefighting staff decreased by four per cent in the year to 31 March 2014, around 290 staff members.”

The number of support staff also decreased by 12 per cent in that period. You state:

"the reduction in the number of frontline posts is now having an impact on frontline delivery, with either appliances being put 'off the run' due to insufficient personnel being on duty or a reliance on overtime to crew appliances, which has a knock on effect on other areas of SFRS budget."

We know that Police Scotland has a minimum of 17,234 police officers. Is there a case for a specified minimum number of firefighting staff or does the service benefit from having flexibility around that?

**Stephen Thomson:** You are absolutely correct. That is one of the major differences. The fire service, unlike the police, does not have a fixed establishment number.

There were different models for delivering the service—different crewing arrangements—across the eight areas. We have done some work, which I alluded to in my submission, on resource-based crewing arrangements. That was quite a difficult piece of work for us to get involved in, because we wanted to see an increase in the number of posts and the adoption of the best standards from across Scotland. However, we were pragmatic and realistic in recognising that we probably would not achieve that. Only about three of the legacy services had dedicated crewing; most had some form of dual crewing or jump crewing—there is various nomenclature for it.

The resource-based crewing model was an attempt to standardise across Scotland the crewing arrangements for specialist appliances. We took that pragmatic approach, but we believe that rescue appliances should still have dedicated crewing—that is our stated aim, which the service is well aware of.

However, we believe that, even if we fully implement this reduced, resource-based crewing model, in which specialist appliances and rescue appliances with the exception of height appliances are no longer crewed 24/7—other arrangements are put in place to do that—there are still insufficient firefighter numbers to crew to the preferred delivery options. I think that only one former service area—Lothian and Borders—would have an overprovision with that model adopted. Every other former service has less than what it needs, even with that reduced crewing model. That is why we wanted to highlight the reduction in numbers.

I believe that one of the Scottish Government's aims was to protect front-line delivery outcomes. We believe that, on any given day, there will be appliances unavailable—whole-time appliances—because there is insufficient personnel and overtime budgets are way over budget.

We are trying to work with the service to mitigate the overtime situation, because we realise

that if the overtime budget is overspent, that means a cut somewhere else, because of the fixed budget arrangements. We believe that that money would be better spent on employing and recruiting more firefighters.

**Alasdair Hay:** At the moment there are 3,890 whole-time firefighters in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. That obviously moves as people retire, transfer to other parts of the country or move into other jobs. The target operating model that we have is moving towards 3,709 whole-time firefighters in Scotland. That is what we are working towards.

As Stephen Thomson has just said, we have worked closely with the FBU to agree this resource-based crewing model. What it really means is that our whole-time standard pumping appliances—the fire engines that the public would understand—are crewed all the time. However, at stations we have a number of specialist appliances and specialist resources that are needed infrequently, but when they are needed, they are needed. The model that we have means that if they are required, the crews who are crewing the pumping appliances would take the special appliance to the incident, alongside the pumping appliance. The crew would then be able to use all the specialist equipment.

We have agreed that model with the union, but I want to give the reassurance that it has been in place throughout Scotland, in many different parts of the country, for many decades. We have agreed nothing that does not have a proven record of being effective and providing a safe system of work.

There are challenges in getting the crews we require for our target operating model into the right places. You will remember from previous evidence that staff have mobility protections. We cannot move them from one part of the country where we might have a surplus to other parts of the country.

We are working through our uniform supporting structures—how many uniformed staff have to do training and how many have to provide our specialist fire safety advice. At the moment, we have 3,890 firefighters, taking all that into account. We need 3,709. We will work towards putting that model in place. How we are working towards that, respecting our staff, is through a judicious use of overtime.

We have also undertaken some recruitment, specifically in the north-east. Prior to doing some local recruitment, we assured ourselves that we had specific shortages and that overtime was not a sustainable option. Our projections for workforce planning are that we will not get to the target operating model until the financial year 2016-17.

That is what we are trying to do at the moment. I can give the reassurance that all the practices that we have put in place have been used in Scotland somewhere, and we have agreed with the FBU that we have a safe system of work.

11:00

**Elaine Murray:** That is a further reduction of 181. We are seeing pressures because of the staff loss that has already occurred. Is the figure of 3,709 driven by the budget rather than by the needs of the service?

**Alasdair Hay:** We have looked at what would be a safe and effective crewing model across Scotland. It would be disingenuous of me not to say that we have to live within our budget. The opening question was around budgets; we have reduced our cost base by £48.2 million. Nearly 80 per cent of our budget goes on staff, so we needed to do what we have done on that. However, I, as an individual, am absolutely focused on the safety of my communities across Scotland and of my staff. The model that we have is effective and efficient.

I made a point earlier about our key targets for reducing casualties. We are hitting those targets, so we are being more effective and more efficient, because we are doing that for less money. One of the key targets—quite rightly—is to reduce the number of firefighter injuries in what is an inherently dangerous occupation. Again, we are hitting that target.

Yes, we keep an eye on the budget, but we also keep an eye on the fact that we are here to deliver a service for communities. I am confident that the model that we have put in place will do that and will respect the staff, who are fundamental to delivering it.

**The Convener:** I take it from what you said originally that if you had the £10 million from VAT you could have another 350 firefighters, if you wished.

**Alasdair Hay:** I am always an advocate for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, which is a wonderful public service that does incredible stuff for communities. We do much and we could always do more, because we add value not just to the emergency response but to many other things. However, if you want to give me £10 million—

**The Convener:** The VAT issue is a huge one for you.

**Alasdair Hay:** It is massive.

**The Convener:** For the life of me, I cannot understand why the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and Police Scotland are still having that VAT levied, given the examples that you have

provided. Irrespective of everyone's politics, that just seems to be unjust.

**Elaine Murray:** If the VAT situation was resolved, would you recruit more firefighters? Would there be an increase in the minimum number? Would the model and the numbers change if you had more money?

**Alasdair Hay:** The model that I set out for the committee is a safe model. I do not know what the budget will be for the next financial year or for the financial years beyond that, so I cannot answer the question about whether we would use the £10 million to recruit additional firefighters to go beyond the existing model. I do not know what the total budget will be.

**Stephen Thomson:** Who is to say that the safe model is the best model? I believe that, if there were to be more resources, there should be more firefighters to produce the best practice, rather than just the minimum practice to ensure safety. That is where we are right now and why we have been involved so closely with the service in trying to mitigate—that is all that we are doing—some of the effects. It is not necessarily best practice that has been put in place.

I take Alasdair Hay's point and I believe that he wants a safe system that works for every firefighter, but that is not to say that it is the best system that could be in place.

**The Convener:** Alasdair Hay is nodding in agreement. It is nice to see you agreeing a bit.

**Pat Watters:** We always agree: we work in partnership.

**Elaine Murray:** There were a lot of issues a couple of years ago around firefighters' pensions, which caused quite a lot of concern in both the newly formed Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and the FBU. Has that been resolved or is it still causing concern?

**Stephen Thomson:** We are still in dispute with the Scottish and Westminster Governments. However, the Scottish Government put in place a set of proposals that—as I am sure you are all aware—averted strike action in Scotland, while south of the border there was strike action as a result of the Westminster Government's intransigence. I am sure that you are aware of the emergency early day motion that was tabled at Westminster and the debate on it; we believe that the fire service minister there misled the house—to put it politely—in saying that the same safeguards for firefighters were in place south of the border. In other words, they would not be left at 55 without a job and without a pension. That is one of the improvements that the Scottish Government made; I am pleased to say that the move averted strike action, but it did not answer all



aspects of the dispute. In short, the situation has not been resolved as yet in Scotland, but we are close.

**The Convener:** The situation is better.

**Stephen Thomson:** Indeed.

**Pat Watters:** I absolutely agree with Stephen Thomson on this and many other matters. This is still a major issue for firefighters, and we have worked with the Government and our trade union colleagues to mitigate the impact, but Stephen is absolutely right to point out that there is still a dispute between the union and the employers. It is recognised that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service cannot solve the problem and that the Scottish Government has done everything in its power to alleviate the worst effects, but there are problems that the Scottish Government cannot solve that need to be discussed at Westminster. We are still pursuing the issue at national level through the national council. As I said, it is still a major issue for our firefighters.

**Alison McInnes:** Chief Officer Hay mentioned mobility restrictions—by which, I presume, you meant that you cannot move officers permanently. Are you having to rely on moving officers around piecemeal in order to cover shortages?

**Alasdair Hay:** At the moment, we are actively involved in a discussion with the FBU on amending the mobility protection that staff have.

I will give a little example. If a firefighter had been employed by the former Lothian and Borders Fire and Rescue Service, I could have moved them to any station in Lothian and the Borders. However, a firefighter based in Lothian and Borders might live in Dunfermline, Kirkcaldy or somewhere else in Fife, but if I am short of a firefighter in those areas, I am not able to post that firefighter to those stations, because of mobility protection. As everyone will see, such a move would be common sense—after all, the individual would not be caused any difficulties, their employer would be the same and we would be asking them to do the same job. That is the type of sensible discussion that we are having with the FBU in order to improve people's mobility situation. I would not want to post someone who lives in Edinburgh to Inverness or vice versa—I understand that that would be unfair. However, I want to be able to post people to stations that are closer to their homes. It makes sense for the organisation, and I do not think that it will cause the individuals too much disruption.

**The Convener:** Do you want to comment, Mr Thomson?

**Stephen Thomson:** Yes—although I do not want to go much further than what the chief has said, because I do not want to compromise or

prejudice any of the discussions that are going on just now.

However, I will say that the bigger piece of work that needs to happen is harmonisation of terms and conditions. You might think that that would be an easy fix, given that we have a national set of conditions, but it is actually quite a big piece of work, because there were eight local arrangements for just about everything. Harmonisation of terms and conditions and local agreements would make it an awful lot easier to discuss a mobility clause. At the moment, we are looking at protection arrangements if an interim mobility clause is put in. I would rather not go any further than that.

**The Convener:** I do not want you to start negotiating: you are all getting on so well. I do not want anything to disrupt that.

**Roderick Campbell:** There are 32 local plans, including the one from Fife. Can you give the committee a bit more detail about local input to the plans? Are the local areas making meaningful contributions?

**Pat Watters:** I think that they are. The plans are developed by our local senior officers, who are in constant touch with local authorities in drawing them up. As you know, the plans must be individually agreed by the local authorities; to date, 31 out of 32 authorities have agreed theirs: one authority—Dumfries and Galloway Council—has not. The problem there probably concerns closure of the control room: people felt aggrieved that it was closing, and the local authority did not agree the local plan, so that issue is still outstanding. Discussions will continue between the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and Dumfries and Galloway Council to ensure that the next iteration of the local plan is agreed.

There is involvement and input at local level, which is done through the local senior officer. Alasdair Hay might like to comment further.

**The Convener:** Mr Torrie wants to come in. Who wants to go first?

**Steven Torrie:** The inspectorate has local plans very much on its agenda. You might have seen from our submission that we have embarked on a series of local area council-based inspections; we were up in Aberdeen last month, for example.

There are two reference documents that we are fundamentally interested in. One is the "Fire and Rescue Framework for Scotland 2013", which is the Scottish Government's way of describing its expectations of the service. The other is the local plan.

Over the next few weeks, you will see from the inspectorate a publication on the Aberdeen City Council area, making explicit comment on the

local plan there. We will be assessing plans as we go around the country this year. Towards the end of the year, we will compile a national overview report, which we are likely to comment on, and which we hope to discuss with the committee.

**Alasdair Hay:** The local senior officer is a statutory appointment—we have to appoint a local senior officer. Their role is to work in partnership predominantly with the local authority, but also with other local partners, in order to produce an agreed local plan that is focused on driving down risk in an appropriate way for the local community. That is the whole purpose behind local plans.

Being a large national service, we have the advantage of being able to draw great economies of scale and scope, given the resources that we have available. However, we must remember that we operate at the fire station level day in, day out, and it is the difference that we make at local level on which we will be judged.

The documents that have been mentioned are extremely important for us. We support the local senior officers, who have resources in their areas, but if there are specific things that they need to address or get involved in, we can flex the organisation and resources can move in and out. Our local senior officers understand that. We are coming to the end of the first three years of the service, so we will be looking to revise those documents at this time. All the feedback that we have had to date is that they have been valued and useful.

However, we will not rest on our laurels, and we need to ensure that the documents are meaningful at local level. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has agreed an engagement framework for how we will engage at all levels. As part of that effective engagement, I will focus absolutely on ensuring that local plans are meaningful and make a difference. They have to connect us to the community planning partnership and to the wider single outcome agreement.

If we get all those bits right, the plans will be extremely valuable local guides to how we will deliver services. However, each plan needs to be informed by local need and by what local people want from their fire and rescue services.

**Roderick Campbell:** I will move on to a more general question. Two years after the institution of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, how would you briefly sum up where we are now?

**The Convener:** That is a good round-up question for the very end, so I will leave that one—we will park that question and come back to it. I will let Gil Paterson come in and ask a different one.

**Gil Paterson:** I declare an interest, as I am going to talk about my business, albeit not in any detail. I have 30 years of experience in garages of seeing the aftermath of accidents. Unfortunately, we live off other people's misery, as we supply the accident damage industry. We supply materials to repair cars—mainly paint.

My question is on training. I know how skilled the rescue service is; it is miracles that we see. We never come into contact with fatalities; we see just the cars after people have been rescued. I return to the impact of reform. Has it had any benefits for the training of the highly skilled people involved or had any negative impact?

11:15

**Pat Watters:** I will open up the discussion then invite the chief officer to come in. Nine services were brought together, including the training college, and one of the benefits was that we inherited a state-of-the-art, world-class training facility in Cambuslang, which the predecessor service at Strathclyde had just opened. If it is not too cheeky, convener, I would like to make the offer—

**The Convener:** You are never cheeky, Mr Watters.

**Pat Watters:** If the committee wanted to visit our training facility, it would not fail to be impressed by the equipment, the level of training and the quality of the facility that we have on offer for not only the fire and rescue services but many other emergency services, such as police and ambulance services, with which we work in partnership. After that advertisement I will pass you over to the chief officer.

**The Convener:** I would be delighted to take up your offer, but we have so much legislation that we would have to squeeze in the visit on a weekend or something.

**Pat Watters:** We will arrange it.

**The Convener:** We will certainly consider it.

**Alasdair Hay:** There is no doubt that the quality of their training is a key element in ensuring that firefighters deliver effectively to the public.

I will step back slightly. It has been assessed that firefighters attend 46 generic types of incident. We have in place in Scotland a comprehensive training programme, which we share with colleagues in other parts of the UK and which many of those colleagues envy. It ensures that firefighters are trained to a national occupational standard to deal effectively with those 46 generic types of risk.

Not all those risks are present in every station's area; there would be no point in training

firefighters in some of the more remote and rural parts of the country in how to deal with stuff such as trains, high-rise buildings and tunnels. We focus on the firefighters' needs in their station areas and on the types of incident that they are likely to attend. Our comprehensive programme ensures that everybody gets that training.

On top of that, we are developing training in four key areas. Large parts of the country already have that in place, but we will roll it out across the country, so that is a benefit of reform. The key areas are road traffic collision training, breathing apparatus training, fire behaviour training and first aid training for the first person on the scene. If a firefighter does not have the right level of training on those four key areas and if their refresher training is not up to date, they should not be crewing a front-line fire appliance. We are working hard to put that in place. The comprehensive programme on the 46 generic risk assessments and the key areas—those ticket-to-ride things—are extremely important in ensuring our firefighters' effectiveness.

Another advantage of being a national service is that we have mapped all the training facilities against the generic risks. We provide facilities to firefighters, within an hour's travel, where they can train safely and in a realistic way against each of the generic risks. On top of that, as Pat Watters mentioned, we have a world-class facility in Cambuslang, which is a centre of excellence. Firefighters can access it and use it on various courses but, more important, the staff who support them—the instructors and trainers—can go to the facility and be trained to a level of excellence that they can cascade to the local facilities around the country.

**Stephen Thomson:** First, I thank Gil Paterson for his comments about our firefighters. My members are all professional and highly motivated. They like to be professional—they want to do a good job and take great pride in doing so.

A challenge that we face as a single service is that there were eight different training delivery models. That challenge is still being addressed, particularly in more rural areas, such as the Highlands and Islands. The more rural the setting, the more difficult it is to train staff, particularly RDS staff.

We are working with the service to address the challenge. However, I am duty bound to let the committee know that there are still challenges, despite people's best efforts. Some of the challenges are budget driven.

I was involved in work on the training department's structure. That work will be kept under review. How well the challenges are met will inform the review process.

I wanted to keep you sighted on that challenge, despite the good work that is being done, which I take on board.

**Gil Paterson:** I can bear witness to your members' expertise over 30 years of seeing them in action.

I am interested that we are driving training down into local areas. I understand what you are saying: money is money and resources are resources.

**Alasdair Hay:** I will give you a recent practical example of that. We are working in partnership with Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd and we have built a realistic factory and facility. You may have seen in films that, if a firefighter opens a door, the air rushes in and there is an explosion. How fire behaves in a compartment and understanding that behaviour are two of the most risk-critical parts of a firefighter's job.

We have opened a new facility in Dundee. In this financial year, we will open new facilities in Kirkwall, Stornoway and Inverness. We are focusing on firefighters' ability to access facilities that they have never had before.

That goes back to the question of retained firefighters. Firefighters from areas such as Kirkwall and Stornoway would previously have had to go to the mainland—to Inverness and Invergordon—to do some of the training. Now they can do it at a local facility, so we are not taking them off the island, which reduces costs, and the training improves firefighter safety. That makes the whole proposition more attractive.

**Gil Paterson:** Perhaps my question is a wee bit subjective, but would that have happened without the reform?

**Alasdair Hay:** The reform has enabled us to take a more strategic view across Scotland. There are no boundaries, so we have firefighters using facilities that would have been in another service's area before. There was no reason why they could not have used those facilities previously, but they did not. Now they do. That is a distinct advantage of the reform.

**The Convener:** I want to move on, because time is pressing.

**Margaret Mitchell:** The panel will be aware that there was a lot of anxiety and concern about the closure of some control rooms. Has there ever been an occasion when a control room has been left without 24-hour cover?

**Pat Watters:** Not that I am aware of. The only closure that has happened so far—we have more closures planned for later this year—was in Dumfries and Galloway. That closure was absolutely seamless. We spoke not only to the personnel there, but to the personnel in

Johnstone, where the control room was being transferred to. The chief, trade union colleagues and I went down to speak to every staff member in the lead-up to the closure. We told them what was on offer and, if they wanted to remain in the service, how we could achieve that. We did that in every case. Some people took the opportunity to take early retirement or voluntary severance. We ran the two control rooms in conjunction for a period, so that we were sure that the new arrangements would work.

The process was looked at by Dumfries and Galloway Council—probably four years before reform, it looked at marrying the two control rooms. Because of the service's needs, we have done that. There will be other closures and amalgamations later in the year. The reason for the delay is that we need to upskill and update some of the other control rooms to allow that to happen. That will not happen until after the summer. We want then to have a period of testing to destruction before we make the transfer.

**Margaret Mitchell:** So no one in the panel is aware of the Johnstone control room being without 24-hour cover for seven days. That was never the case.

**Alasdair Hay:** No.

**Pat Watters:** No.

**The Convener:** That is it, so I thank the witnesses for their evidence.

**Roderick Campbell:** Convener—

**The Convener:** I beg your pardon. I am so sorry. The grand finale—your question.

**Roderick Campbell:** The witnesses can all remember my question.

**The Convener:** Well, I cannot. Just say it again, please.

**Roderick Campbell:** Two years down the line, how would you sum up briefly where we are with the national fire service?

**The Convener:** We will start with Mr Thomson, please.

**Stephen Thomson:** Cheers.

**The Convener:** All right, then, I will start with Mr Hay. I do not want to break the harmony.

**Stephen Thomson:** No, it is fine—honest.

It goes without saying that there have been teething troubles. The process has been challenging for us, especially when we were talking about closing control rooms, as that involves our members' jobs. Despite the voluntary severance and early retirement schemes, that has

probably been one of the biggest challenges for us.

Another big challenge is the restructuring of officers and the flexi duty system. That has been problematic for our officers, as it has involved changing and increasing workloads. That has been another pinchpoint and challenge for us.

I will give you the bad news, and the chief can give you the good news. Actually, I will give you some good news—there are benefits to come, although some are still some way off. However, I will finish on the note that I started on and which I mentioned in my submission, which is that we are extremely concerned about the cut to the fire service budget. We believe that, if that continues, there will be a reduction in the front line, not only in numbers but in outcomes, as I described. In my submission, I said:

“The first aim of reform is to ... ‘protect and improve local services, despite financial cuts, by stopping duplication and not cutting frontline outcomes’”.

The duplication has stopped, yet the cuts keep coming. That means that, at some point, there will be a reduction in front-line outcomes. I will leave it on that sour note. It is important for the committee to hear that—it would be remiss of me not to say it.

**The Convener:** It is not a sour note. You are speaking for your members, which is absolutely appropriate.

**Steven Torrie:** I had a conversation with a colleague this morning that got to the heart of that question, so I will refer to that. We were reflecting on the past two years of reform and the reduction in money that is available to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service—Mr Hay said that around £48 million has been taken out of the system. Of course, as the committee knows, that situation is the reality for the public sector in general—the reduced budgets that the service has been experiencing are in line with the reductions in the whole Scottish public service.

The conversation that I had this morning was about what the position would have been if reform had not happened. If eight fire and rescue services and a college had been trying to find nearly £50 million of savings over the past two years, what would the situation have been? My judgment is that we would have been in a far worse position than we are in. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has done a pretty remarkable job of bringing in the reform, maintaining business as usual and making progress.

**Pat Watters:** I echo some of the points that the inspector made. The opportunity to look at the service as a whole throughout Scotland has been a valuable lesson for us in how to take things forward. Even with the caveats that have been laid

down, our partnership working with our colleagues in the trade union to deliver an improvement in the outcomes for the people of Scotland is an example of how things can be done. We can learn from that.

The short answer to the question is that we still have work to do and there are still challenges but, right now, we are in a good place.

**Alasdair Hay:** The challenge that the Scottish Government set for us in the reform process was, first and foremost, to protect the front line and to continue to improve front-line outcomes. There were 356 fire stations prior to reform, there are still 356 fire stations and there will be 356 at the end of this financial year, which is the end of the reform period. On improving outcomes, we are either hitting or moving in a positive direction towards every target that the Government has set us.

The second thing that the Government asked us to do was to ensure that, across Scotland, we gave people more equitable access to some of the specialist resources that we have been asked about today. We have delivered a plan to do that and we have already started implementing it. That is one of the benefits of reform that we are delivering.

The final thing concerned the connection with communities. As a national service, we have to deliver economies of scale and scope, but we also need to be meaningful at local level. Through the network of fire stations, and through what is articulated in the local plans, we have strong evidence that we are doing that. We are being more effective and more efficient and we have reduced our cost base by nearly £50 million. There are challenges ahead, and our staff are the key to meeting them, but I would certainly say that the reform has been a success.

**The Convener:** Do you have a supplementary question, Mr Campbell?

**Roderick Campbell:** No.

**The Convener:** I do not want to upset you.

I thank the witnesses for their evidence. They have reminded us and the public of the diversity of the rescue part of the Fire and Rescue Service. I echo the comments of Gil Paterson and others: we very much recognise the work of front-line fire and rescue services throughout Scotland, including at road traffic incidents.

11:31

*Meeting continued in private until 11:54.*



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