



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Issues around Emergency Exiting Plans, including their Impact on Stadium Capacity, for the Redeveloped Casement Park Stadium: Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and Dr Denis McMahon

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Nelson McCausland (Chairperson)
Mr Gordon Dunne (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr Leslie Cree
Mr David Hilditch
Mr William Humphrey
Ms Rosaleen McCorley
Mr Basil McCrea
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

Witnesses:

Ms Ní Chuilín	Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure
Dr Denis McMahon	Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): We are now going to be briefed by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín, and the permanent secretary, Mr Denis McMahon. You are very welcome to the meeting. I refer members to the letter and to the project assessment review report, which was received from the Department last week. I invite the Minister and the permanent secretary to make opening statements. We acknowledge the request to finish by 11.30 am. We will hold members to about eight minutes each for questions. Please proceed.

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Good morning, Chair and members, and thank you very much for inviting me to attend the Committee today. I welcome the opportunity to brief the Committee on the outcome of the project assessment review (PAR) of the regional stadia programme. The regional stadia programme remains a key Programme for Government priority, and I am fully committed to delivering it.

As the Committee will be aware, in line with good programme and project management practice, I instigated a full review of the stadia programme, following evidence given by the chair of the safety technical group (STG) on the regional stadia programme to this Committee on 30 April this year. This review, in the form of a project assessment review by the Major Projects Authority, was commissioned through DFP Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) and was undertaken by independent experts. A range of concerns have been raised about the stadia programme over recent months, particular in relation to Casement Park. I believe that the review provides important answers to those concerns.

This review was commissioned as soon as those concerns were raised. The review was taken forward independently by leading experts in the Major Projects Authority, part of the British Cabinet Office, and the review had specialist technical input from a very wide range of experts, including the Sports Grounds Safety Authority.

This review is a clear demonstration of the openness and transparency of DCAL and me as Minister. The PAR team conducted a peer review of the programme to assess how well it is being run and how confident DCAL should be that it would deliver against the objectives set out in the business case. The review team was also asked to examine the effectiveness of the approach the programme has taken to comply with health and safety requirements at the three stadia, with specific reference, given the concerns that have been raised, to Casement Park. The review took place between 15 and 19 June this year. The review team had full access to all relevant documentation and discussed the programme with the full range of stakeholders.

The independent programme project assessment review report was received by the Department in final form on Wednesday 5 August and was sent to me on the same day. It was published on Friday 7 August. I wanted to read the report and to ensure that the STG and the GAA had early sight of it. I also wanted to ensure that there would be no delay in the publication of the report. The review, which was technically focused, examined all three stadia in the regional programme and was headed up by David Blackall, an experienced review team leader from the Cabinet Office Major Projects Authority.

This thorough and comprehensive PAR report presents us with a successful road map to progress the remainder of the regional stadia programme. I have no doubt that people will clearly pick the elements of the recommendations that support their positions. I will not do that. The truth is that this report is neither a full endorsement of the stadia programme nor is it critical of all the work that has been done to date. It is a comprehensive and factual review of the programme, identifying all the key learning points. The report makes 20 recommendations, most of which clearly relate directly to the Casement Park project.

The review team found that many aspects of the programme have gone very well. The Ravenhill/Kingspan Stadium is complete, and Windsor Park is also making good progress and is on track for successful delivery, which is a major achievement for the programme. The report clearly states that the completed Kingspan Stadium shows every sign of being highly successful. It also recognises that good progress has been made on Windsor Park, which has been able to continue to host major international football fixtures during the construction stage and also progress, despite the unrelated separate incident relating to the west stand.

Some general weaknesses in the programme have, however, been highlighted, which can be attributed to the unique challenges the Casement Park project has been working through. Skills, capability and experience are insufficient in some areas of the programme, and improvements are required to ensure that the entire programme is successfully delivered.

The report highlights the unique challenges that have been faced by the Casement Park project. Firstly, planning permission granted by DOE was overturned in December 2014 following a judicial review brought by a local residents' group, and, secondly, serious concerns have been raised about how emergency exiting will work in a new stadia design. Despite the challenges, the review team believes that meeting the goal of successfully constructing and operating a strategic regional stadium at Casement Park is still achievable. Delivery of the stadium and associated benefits will be late, but the overall programme business case remains sound. The review team acknowledged that, on any project, those issues would be difficult to resolve. On the Casement Park project, the problems are exacerbated by the fact that relationships between the key stakeholders are broken. There is insufficient trust to support progress without additional interventions to reset working relationships.

The challenges for the programme overall are significant enough that the review team recommended that it needs to be led by a full-time and dedicated senior responsible owner (SRO) who will work solely on the stadia programme for the next 12 to 18 months. The review team acknowledged that the safety technical group (STG) clearly has a vital role to play in each of the stadia projects. However, the STG does not appear to have been initially designed or operated with the characteristics normally expected of a body that is integral to delivering a project. Putting the operation of the STG on a more formal setting is essential and should include agreeing terms of reference for the STG and the appointment of an independent person to chair it. While those are process points, they are critical and crucial as we move forward, because if the review has identified one thing, it is that expert reviews vary on technical issues. Our processes need to be robust enough going forward to deal with those differences of opinion. This is one issue that I will come back to in a moment.

While acknowledging the immense contribution of the GAA staff and volunteers in guiding the project thus far, the report recognises that, at this stage in the project's life cycle, the demand for skilled resources will escalate rapidly. The review team believes that tangible benefits would be derived from the appointment of a project leader who is experienced in the delivery of major construction projects and who would robustly manage the GAA's consultants and contractors and act as the key point of contact between the project, the DCAL programme and other stakeholders.

Safe exiting in an emergency was a central issue in the review. While all stakeholders place great emphasis on their commitment to ensure spectator safety, there were important differences in how stakeholders believed the safe operation of emergency exiting could be achieved. It is important to note that, at this point, the differences in expert opinion that I referred to earlier certainly apply in the interpretation of guidance. I am not a technical expert. I have never pretended to be, and that is not my role. Therefore, I must accept the advice of professionals, and the PAR report provides clarity on the differing opinions regarding the red and green guides. I expect that this will continue to be debated. However, I emphasise that the experts who undertook the review have impeccable credentials.

The review, however, found that the red guide does not specifically link the exiting arrangements or exiting time under contingency plans to the calculation of emergency exit times. There is no specific design guidance on what constitutes a reasonable time. The review team could not find support in the red guide for Sport NI's view, which was presented to the CAL Committee, that, even in a contingency plan scenario, evacuation from viewing areas to a place of comparative safety has to take place within eight minutes. There was disagreement about the use of the pitch as part of a management plan contingency scenario. The GAA's design team argued that the use of the pitch in the context of contingency planning is sensible, as it provides an obvious and readily accessible safe holding area within the grounds. Both the GAA design team and the PAR team's independent technical advisers confirmed that phased evacuation is planned and used for stadia in Britain. The Sport NI view was that, although the pitch could be used, that was only part of a free-flowing exiting system operating at the appropriate red guide or green guide flow rates. The review team could not find support for this view in the red guide. I do, however, also accept the technical view that the GAA should plan for all of the exits on the Andersonstown Road to be closed.

The main point is that the review team believes that, based on its independent technical advice, acceptable solutions can be found that will support the strategic regional stadium at Casement Park. I do not believe that we have definitive answers on every technical question. Some issues can only be resolved through further work involving all key stakeholders, but the report gives us an independent and informed view as to how these issues can be resolved.

I think that it is important to stress that the PAR report, published last Friday, was carried out entirely independently of me and my Department. I have no control or influence over its content or its findings. I welcome the conclusion of the PAR report that the goal of constructing and operating a strategic regional stadium for the GAA in Ulster is achievable on the Casement Park site.

I also welcome the fact that there is recognition of how well many aspects of the programme have been delivered to date. While people have criticised the stadium programme and me over recent weeks and months, this report by leading independent professionals demonstrates beyond any shadow of a doubt the open, transparent and professional approach that I have taken in relation to the Casement Park project.

I accept this report in full, both the recognition of the good work thus far and, indeed, the recommendations for change. I urge others to do likewise. This project can and should be completed, and I believe that we are now in a better position than ever before to move ahead with it. There are challenges ahead for all of the stakeholders, and, while it is disappointing that the stadium may not be completed as soon as we would have liked, the report sets out the direction of travel. I will work tirelessly to ensure that all necessary steps are taken to ensure that it can be progressed as soon as possible.

The report refers to the fact that relationships between key stakeholders are broken and that there is insufficient trust between the stakeholders to support progress without additional interventions to reset those relationships. I realise that relationships need to be reset, but there is a common goal amongst all of the stakeholders that Casement Park should be redeveloped, and that should serve as an incentive for all sides to work together to ensure that this happens. There are aspects of the report that may make uncomfortable reading for particular individuals, groups and organisations. There is no

doubt about the commitment of people involved in the programme and the contributions that they have made to date, but there are learning points for everyone, and the findings should be seen as an opportunity to develop skill sets and address any shortcomings that have been identified. While I or my Department can contribute directly to this process, we will not be found wanting.

The use of the playing pitch as part of an emergency evacuation contingency scenario has been the subject of much discussion, with key stakeholders expressing very different views on this issue. This, as the Committee will be aware, has been a thorny issue, which could impact severely on the proposed project. The review team has made a clear judgement on this issue, and this will be very helpful as we move forward. The review team has stated that, for the new stadium at Casement Park, which will be built to modern standards of fire resistance, all stakeholders who we spoke to accepted that an eight-minute emergency exit time was appropriate. The review team went on to say:

"we believe it is common ground among stakeholders that emergency exit times of eight minutes can be achieved for capacity crowds when all exits are available."

The report makes 20 recommendations, and it is my intention to fully implement all recommendations contained in the PAR report as soon as possible. I encourage others to do likewise to ensure the successful delivery of the regional stadia programme and the redevelopment of Casement Park. Go raibh míle maith agat.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Thank you very much indeed for the introductory statement. I think that it would be appropriate to say at the start that a number of members of the Committee did express concern about the fact that the report was released late on a Friday afternoon, that it was released to the media at 1.00 pm and that members of the Committee, including the Chair and the Deputy Chair, only received that at 4.00 pm when it went out to the general public on the departmental website. There was an expression of opinion by a number of members of the Committee. I do not know how many, but a number did express concern that that was disrespectful to the Committee. I make that point at the start.

Can I pick up on a couple of points? There will be observations, conclusions, and recommendations in the report, but I want to look at one of the core issues with the report, and that is in relation to the technical side of it. Some of the recommendations are about the architecture, the structure of how a stadium might be delivered and how you get the best structure — it is very critical of the structure that the Department set up originally — but when we come to that issue of the technical side, I noticed that you said that the:

"team has made a clear judgement"

in relation to those technical issues about 8 minutes, the pitch and the phased evacuation. They had no expertise or experience themselves in those areas. They admit that on page 6 of the report, when they say that:

"The review team needed access to specialist and independent advice on stadium safety as part of this review."

Then you are directed to annex A, which is on page 39, where they say:

"With the prior agreement of the review team CPD commissioned a team from KSS Design Group Ltd to act as independent technical advisers to the review team. KSS were selected on the basis of their expertise ... knowledge of the Green Book regime in Great Britain and because there were no conflicts of interest that would prevent them advising the review team on the three Stadia projects."

I was quite astounded when I read that. The point has already been made by a member of Mr Cree's party in a statement in regard to the fact that the company that was brought in to work on it — which was simply a commercial company, KSS — was brought in as an independent expert. It was pointed out that, in fact, there is already a commercial connection between KSS and the people building the stadium, Heron Buckingham JV, because they both worked together on the ground for Brighton and Hove Albion.

I had never heard of KSS until then, but as soon as I got the report I went to its website. It is immediately clear that not only do they have a past connection with Heron Buckingham going back

some years but, at this very point in time, the two are locked together inextricably in a collaboration on a multi-million pound contract in Dublin. Their website states specifically that, back in February this year, before they were appointed, the National Sports Campus Development Authority in Dublin signed a construction contract for the National Indoor Arena in Dublin, awarded to Heron Buckingham JV and KSS. How does that constitute independence in any way, when the two companies are working together as collaborators on a project with a value, I am sure, of many millions of pounds? That removes any credibility, I would have thought, from any claim that they are independent. I ask the Minister and Mr McMahon, were you aware of the fact that there is currently that close commercial connection between Heron Buckingham JV and KSS?

Ms Ní Chuilín: First of all, there was quite a lot in what you have just said, so if there is anything that I do not cover, feel at liberty to come back to me. CPD appointed —

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Yes, but that —

Ms Ní Chuilín: If you would let me finish, CPD made the appointment on the basis that it felt that there was not the perceived conflict of interest that the Chair has just outlined and that the pool of technical experts in that field is quite small. From a pool of eight originally, it was whittled down to four and then three. One of the companies that put themselves forward ruled themselves out simply because they would not be available, not because of any conflict of interest, which brought it down to three. On the basis of that, CPD was happy to appoint KSS. That answers that.

You mentioned original design at the start. I assume that it is the original design from 2011, not from when you were in the Department. If you could clarify that, perhaps I could clarify —

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Sorry, could you make that point again?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am making the point that, when you talked about the original design that was brought forward, do you mean the original design from your tenure or mine? You said it in the first part of your opening statement and questions.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Just for clarity, I am saying that, in February of this year, KSS —

Ms Ní Chuilín: It was before that. It was before you got on to February of this year. Perhaps we could come back to it.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Sorry, if we are going to go back over things, Minister, could you actually answer the question? Were you aware that there was a close commercial connection?

Ms Ní Chuilín: No.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): You were not.

Ms Ní Chuilín: No, and I do not believe that there is.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Sorry. With all respect, Minister, nobody in the whole of Northern Ireland is going to accept the point that there is no commercial connection when you have KSS and Heron Buckingham JV collaborating today and since February of this year on a multimillion-pound project that they are working together to deliver. That is a commercial connection.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes, but there is a difference between commercial connections. As I said before, there was a small pool that had no overt conflict of interest. CPD felt that there was no conflict of interest.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): And you were not aware. Mr McMahon, were you aware?

Dr Denis McMahon (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure): The simple answer is no. The reason that I was not aware is because I am not directly involved and have not been directly involved in the procurement of the support for the independent review team. Indeed, the Minister has not been directly involved in that. In fact, it would not have been appropriate had we been.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Absolutely not.

Dr McMahon: As the Minister has said, CPD initially pulled together a list of eight companies on the basis of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) database. On the basis of that, as the Minister has said, four were ruled out immediately on the basis that they were involved in Casement Park or the regional stadia programme. Another one was unavailable. That left three. Absolutely, as the Minister says, CPD is there to ensure that the procurement process is followed correctly. It asked for advice from the programme team, of course, about whether there were obvious conflicts of interest. The programme team based that advice on the fact that they had not been involved in the Casement Park or regional stadia programme. As the Minister says, the view was that there was a small pool when you get into large programmes and projects of this scale. A view was taken that, so long as there was not a direct conflict of interest between this company and the regional stadia programme, that was not a conflict of interest and that we had to go on the basis of the best company that was available. That is the process that was followed. I think that it is important to say up front that, from the very beginning, KSS was very open about who it worked with and came forward and declared that to CPD as part of the process of selecting the company. That is the process that was followed and that is how it came to that conclusion.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): First of all, I am sure that we will want to speak to those who carried out the procurement —

Dr McMahon: Absolutely.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): — because they were represented on the project team. Some people may want to speak to the project team in due course to find out exactly who knew what. We have, at least, made clear that you did not know that there was a close and current commercial connection to the value of many millions of pounds between KSS and Heron Buckingham. I think that most people will look at that and say simply that there is no independence whatsoever when you have a connection that is worth millions of pounds. Those are millions of reasons why KSS should not have been the company that carried out this work. Is it really independent if there is such a close commercial connection?

Dr McMahon: I have no reason to believe that it is not and that it did not provide an independent view, but I am happy to look at evidence if people feel that a contrary view applies. Our view is that we have to have confidence in Central Procurement Directorate in ensuring that we maintain adherence to the processes. We have to have confidence that we have got an independent review team that is led by the Major Projects Authority. Again, the process was what the process was, and people made a judgement on the basis of the level of connection with the regional stadia programme and the size of the pool of consultants. As I say, it is what it is. Our judgement at this stage is that this was an independent review that was carried out by independent experts. We are just taking it at face value. As the Minister said, I did not get the impression from the review that there are a lot of positive points for everybody who has been involved in the programme. There are an awful lot of issues that, frankly, we all, including DCAL, have to address. In reading it, I do not get a sense of a report that in any way gives DCAL or any other stakeholder an easy time. That is where I am with it at the moment. However, again, I am very happy to look at any other information that anybody wants to bring forward.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Could I direct you to the KSS website, where it states that clearly?

Dr McMahon: Sure.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): You talked about the level of connection. We know the level of connection: it is millions of pounds.

Mr Humphrey: Thank you both very much for coming along. In this review that you have had, is this the response that was outlined in the letter of 12 May from the Minister to Members? Is this piece of work now the response to that?

Dr McMahon: Yes, it is one of the pieces of work.

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is one of the processes.

Mr Humphrey: OK. Can I just go back to that letter? I remember clearly asking you both that day about Mr Scott's position. It says clearly in this letter that:

"Any future changes in the membership or roles of the STG will be a matter for the Group to consider and agree."

Minister and permanent secretary, why do you now think that it is appropriate for your Department to go back on what you said on 12 May in this letter?

Ms Ní Chuilín: First of all, that was pre the outcome of the PAR report, which was last week. The report, as I am sure the member has read, indicated very clearly that there needs to be an independent chairperson of the STG. It does not say anything at all about Paul Scott being removed from the STG.

Mr Humphrey: Good. I welcome that, because Mr Scott, in the evidence that he gave to this Committee, made it very clear that he was appointed by your Department. Mr Scott is independent. Mr Scott is an expert in this field and is recognised nationally and internationally as an expert in this field. I think that it is important that that is on the record, despite there being those who would seek to demean him, smear his character and question his professionalism.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sorry, Mr Scott is not independent. Mr Scott is an employee of Sport NI.

Mr Humphrey: I am going to come to that. During your presentation, Minister, you talked about the "Sport NI view" on emergency exiting. I take it that that means Paul Scott or Laura Strong's view. That is an independent view. He is an independent expert. Does the Department not accept that?

Dr McMahon: From the point of view of this process, I think that there are two questions there. The first thing that you are asking is this: why go back on it? Honestly, I did not actually expect to see recommendations. I did not know what recommendations would come out of it on the STG. This has now changed things. The PAR came in and identified a situation where relationships had broken down. I did not read any criticism in there of any individual or, for that matter, any organisation. There were areas where the report agreed with some experts. Remember that there are design teams who would consider themselves experts as well. There was some agreement with some of the views. There was some agreement with some of the views of the STG, which is a key point, and with Sport NI's views. What we end up with is a report that recommends that there are a set of governance processes that need to be put in place to ensure that all those expert views are brought together and brought together properly.

Mr Humphrey: With respect, Mr McMahon, I did not say that the report made those criticisms, but there are people out there who have. I did not make reference to the report in that regard. You are taking that; I did not say that.

Dr McMahon: Apologies. What I can say quite clearly is that I met Mr Scott and the STG on 23 June, and we had a very positive meeting.

Mr Humphrey: In this letter, the Minister also said:

"I have also asked the Permanent Secretary of my Department to convene a meeting of the STG to hear their concerns at first hand."

I distinctly remember raising that issue that day and basically saying, "You are stating to this Committee that you are not removing the man as chairman, yet you, as permanent secretary, are going to convene a meeting." I have to say that, when I read this, the question that I asked that day about what potentially might flow remains relevant, although I welcome the Minister's reassurance that it is not necessarily the case that Mr Scott is going to be removed. With some people, there is a predetermined outcome to remove that man from that job.

Dr McMahon: I absolutely refute that, and I think —

Mr Humphrey: That is good.

It talks here about commissioning a full review of the project, to include specialist advice, as appropriate, from independent experts. The Chair made reference to the experts and whether they are truly independent at all. Mr McMahon, as the permanent secretary of the Department, why did your Department decide not to engage the recognised experts on safety at sports grounds, the Sports Grounds Safety Authority, which is the UK's expert authority on safety at sports grounds?

Dr McMahon: The answer to that is that we did. We wrote to it on 5 June 2015 to seek professional input into the independent review team, and it input into the review team.

Mr Humphrey: My question is this: why did you not appoint it to do this? Is it not the natural choice? It is independent and part of government.

Dr McMahon: The normal process when programmes and projects are experiencing problems, and clearly we have a programme and a project that was experiencing problems, is to commission either a special gateway review or, if there are particular issues, as in this case, a project assessment review. There are many different stakeholders with expert views on particular areas, and, absolutely, the Sports Grounds Safety Authority is one of those.

Mr Humphrey: Sorry: it is the UK Sports Grounds Safety Authority. It is not one of them: it is the authority.

Dr McMahon: And it input directly into this report.

Mr Humphrey: It fully supports this report.

Dr McMahon: I did not say that. I said that it input directly into this report. This is not a new process. The Major Projects Authority does this kind of work for major programmes and projects, and we have followed standard processes. We went through Central Procurement Directorate, and we got its advice on the most appropriate form of review to take forward. Its advice was that, under the circumstances, a project assessment review was the way to take this forward, and that was exactly what we did.

Mr Humphrey: We will have the sports authority in front of this Committee in September, and we will then ascertain if it is fully in support of this document. Are the PAR team and KSS, which produced this document, experts solely in safety at sports grounds?

Dr McMahon: No. They are experts in a very wide range of large scale capital programmes.

Mr Humphrey: Such as building airports, train stations, roads —

Ms Ní Chuilín: — Olympic stadia. The full range.

Mr Humphrey: But they are not experts solely on safety at sports grounds.

Dr McMahon: No.

Ms Ní Chuilín: That is why the Sports Grounds Safety Authority was contacted as part of this review.

Dr McMahon: Safety is a central aspect of this, but this was actually about whether the programme or the project was working and what needed to be done to get it back on track. They were exactly the people we needed to involve to get that review.

Mr Humphrey: Can I, then, ask —

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Sorry —

Mr Humphrey: Is my time up?

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Yes.

Mr Humphrey: Very quickly, then, are you sure, as Minister and permanent secretary of the Department, that the Sports Grounds Safety Authority will support the recommendations and all that is contained in this report?

Dr McMahon: I am not at all sure of that. Nor am I sure that any other stakeholder will support absolutely every recommendation in this report. In fact, the most important thing coming out of this report is not that everyone agrees that every word is right or wrong but that we have a process that allows us to bring together the expert views needed to bring this project and programme to successful completion.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Mr Humphrey asked about the input from the Sports Grounds Safety Authority. What was the level of its input? KSS, a commercial company, was there throughout the process.

Dr McMahon: It was asked to provide suitably qualified specialist technical experts to assist the PAR team. They were interviewed —

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Was this a half-hour interview or a full day?

Dr McMahon: I was not there, so I cannot answer that.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirigh, agus go raibh maith agat, a Aire agus Denis, as teacht anseo ar maidin. Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister and Denis, for coming to the Committee this morning.

First, I welcome the report and the outcomes, because I feel it clarifies an issue that has been of great concern for about four months. The independent experts have brought clarity to the issue of emergency evacuation, and I see that as positive. Obviously, the report will not be easy reading for some of the stakeholders. In that context, Minister, what commitment can you give us that you will implement the PAR report in its entirety? Will you ensure full implementation?

Ms Ní Chuilín: From DCAL's point of view, I can ensure that it is implemented in its entirety. We have already begun the process of looking for a new senior responsible officer (SRO) to work solely on the stadia programme. In relation to the other stakeholders, we will very quickly look at how we can get an independent chair of the STG and, at the same time, will meet all the stakeholders to work out how they will respond in their input into implementing the PAR report recommendations. It is still a work in progress. I am sure that the member has seen the summary of the recommendations on page 7 of the report. It goes through what the recommendations are, what the team feels the priority of those recommendations should be and the timescale.

I work on this to ensure that, for my part, confidence is restored, particularly in relation to the findings of the report, but one of the other challenges is that we clearly all need to reset and repair relationships that have been damaged up until now. I have watched a lot of witnesses giving evidence in this Committee and have read most, if not all, of the Hansard reports. I have not heard anybody say that they do not want to see the redevelopment of Casement Park. They certainly have concerns about how that happens. Let us put our best foot forward and ensure that we get the redevelopment of Casement Park. The report says that it can be done and, what is more, can be done with safety being paramount and at its core. I have always wanted to achieve that throughout. As I said in my opening statement, I will certainly not be found wanting in ensuring that, from DCAL's point of view, we will implement the recommendations in full.

Ms McCorley: OK. Go raibh maith agat. I, too, have not really heard anybody say that they do not want the stadium at Casement Park. So, I think that this is good news for everybody, and it is important that a way forward is found. Let us see where it goes. The report also finds that a new planning application for Casement could take up to 12 months to prepare. That would represent a huge delay in the delivery of the project. Are you content with that timescale?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I regret that the redevelopment of Casement Park has experienced another delay. Some of the delays were not of the team's making but were a result of the overturning of a planning application as a result of a judicial review. The PAR team has set out that it can take up to a year and has allowed up to a year for that process to happen. It is a very significant and complex programme and project. It has also laid out what it would like to happen in parallel to the consultation process in

preparation for submission of a planning application. For example, it needs to see an emergency exit strategy and a robust traffic management strategy, both of which can happen in parallel to the consultation. It has recommended that there is at least 20 weeks in order to go beyond the minimum statutory requirements. The team wants to ensure that, as much as possible, the lessons — not as a result of this — that need to be learned in terms of bringing forward a comprehensive application to planning for the redevelopment of Casement are learned. So, it seems like a realistic guideline on how we go forward. Despite some people here questioning their credentials, those people are experts. I am accepting their expertise and their independence and am asking others who have been mentioned in the report to do likewise.

Ms McCorley: Is it your view that there will be thorough consultation with the residents in advance of submission of a planning application?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Absolutely. Residents are a key stakeholder, as are businesspeople and users and potential users of Casement Park. Indeed, all the amenities and surrounding areas are. It is not just about the consultation around the Casement Park site. The consultation should be open for everybody's input. The Ulster Council of the GAA and everybody else need to ensure that that consultation process is as robust, open, transparent and inclusive as possible. I believe that the guideline of 20 weeks will ensure that that happens, and I also know that the Ulster Council will ensure that that happens.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Cree: Good morning.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Good morning, Leslie.

Mr Cree: The Chairman has already made some comments on some of the concerns that I have, but it has not been mentioned that Heron Buckingham is actually the contractor appointed for Casement Park. Is that not another clear question mark over independence?

Dr McMahon: KSS was not involved and is not involved —

Mr Cree: No, I am not saying KSS; I am saying that Heron Buckingham is the contractor. True or false?

Dr McMahon: That is correct, yes. Indeed, as you pointed out, there are projects that it has worked on with KSS. That is absolutely clear.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): And are working on.

Dr McMahon: Yes.

Mr Cree: I think that it is particularly important that they are working on this contract. I will move on to why the Sports Grounds Safety Authority (SGSA) was not used. I have done some research on this, and it appears that the extent of its involvement was two interviews. Is that right? Only two interviews?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Leslie, with respect, we have been asked that question by the Chair. Indeed, he asked for the exact amount of time spent from the PAR team with the SGSA. We will try to ascertain that. You are saying that there were two interviews.

Mr Cree: If you could clarify that, I would appreciate it.

Ms Ní Chuilín: You clearly have an opinion that that is the case, so we need to clarify it one way or the other.

Dr McMahon: I think that it is also important to say that, as the report says, the review took place over a four-day period, so, obviously, that is a very tight schedule to get many interviews in. That is the nature of these budget assessment reviews; they go through a very intense process of speaking to the stakeholders. As I said, it is what it is, but if it had two interviews, that would not be insignificant either.

Mr Cree: Bearing in mind that the Sports Grounds Safety Authority is the author of the green guide, I would have thought that it would have had a paramount position. I have read the report twice, and the big question about emergency exiting is still unresolved.

Dr McMahon: I think that it is important to say that the purpose of the report is not to resolve all of the technical issues.

Mr Cree: No, it does not do that.

Dr McMahon: It is meant to be a strategic view to say, "These are the problems that the project and programme are experiencing, and here is how you need to move ahead to go through them." Some of those issues will need to be definitively resolved. I think that it is simply making the point that we could not do it under the existing structures.

Mr Cree: No, but these are the core issues that remain to be resolved. Again, we have ventilated another concern that I have. As I understand it, tenders have to be in for the 2023 Rugby World Cup by June of next year. Obviously, Casement Park was one of the venues that we all hoped would be used. Does this mean that that will be simply dropped now?

Ms Ní Chuilín: No, it certainly does not. Even for the deadline of June next year for the bid, you would not have had a completed redeveloped Casement Park.

Mr Cree: Will you be making a bid then?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Absolutely, we will be making a bid.

Mr Cree: That is encouraging. The 38,000 capacity stadium is still on the cards, but the timescale is what it is. What about the finance, Minister? Can you update us on where we are now on costs and the likely safety, bearing in mind that we are going into a new mandate, of this money?

Ms Ní Chuilín: We certainly are going to go into a new mandate with this money within a very short time. It has been a Programme for Government commitment. There are certain aspects of regional stadia that were going into the next mandate anyway, particularly around the subregional stadiums for soccer. Soon after, we will be meeting colleagues in DFP to work out the implications for the budget going into the next CSR. I am content that we are certainly on the right track. We have not overspent. The programme and the budget are still on time.

Mr Cree: Can you update us on that, Minister? What is the current spend?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The current spend is almost £6 million.

Dr McMahon: It is £5.6 million.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes, it is just over £5.5 million, and that is in keeping with professional fees and technical fees. It is all within the budget that was set out originally.

Mr Cree: OK. Thank you.

Mr Hilditch: You are very welcome this morning. Unfortunately, like the STG, I am further down the line in getting to some of the areas that have already been covered here. Certainly, the relationship that is emerging between the Heron Buckingham group and KSS is very worrying.

On the more technical side, in relation to the eight-minute evacuation and some of the content of the report, a lot of the commentary reflects much of the evidence that we received here from Heron Buckingham. I am surprised to see that in the report. On the detail of the eight-minute issue and the other matters around that, people keep saying that there are projects in other places, potentially within the UK, where that happens, but nobody ever seems to come up with the locations of those stadia. Have you, in any of your conversations with the interested parties, learned of any of those stadia?

Ms Ní Chuilín: First, the PAR report — I am not saying that the member has this view — questions how they come up with the eight-minute rule, but they are the experts. What is quite clear to me is that they are saying that the process, particularly around the green and red guides, of the redevelopment of the Casement Park programme and the emergency evacuation, is achievable. What we need to do, and I imagine that the STG and certainly the GAA, if they have not already done so, will do, is to visit some of those other programmes and developments. They have already done so under Paul Scott, which I am sure that you know already. For clarity, and in order to have information to come back to the Committee on, I will certainly try to get examples of where that has happened.

Mr Hilditch: If you could, Minister, because those stadiums cannot be found, and the report dilutes the green and red guides to a certain degree. It uses terms such as guidance and good practice, but the red and green guides formulate the safety certificate and the potential determining of capacities. I say that with the very limited expertise of being a safety officer last night for the Carrick/Linfield game. You have to go through all of that methodically, and the report itself just does not, in my mind, link to the importance of the red and green guides.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I disagree with you, in that I believe that it does. I am not a technical expert. I am not someone who stands at a soccer game trying to prepare and ensure that the safety procedures are there and that people understand them. These people are experts and have examined in detail, albeit in a short period, exactly what is achievable. You will know that it is Belfast City Council that issues a safety certificate; not an STG. In my opinion, the report is silent on the role —

Mr Hilditch: Their evidence to us was very clear.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Exactly, and I saw that as well. That evidence was clear on the role and authority of Belfast City Council: it is the only statutory authority that issues safety certificates.

Mr Hilditch: There is reference to the experts on the PAR. There is no expertise in technical matters among the four people on the PAR in relation to safe sports grounds.

Ms Ní Chuilín: That is your opinion.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): They admit that in the paper themselves.

Dr McMahon: I think that the key issue is that, as I said earlier, this was never intended as a process to identify in the report answers to all of the technical issues. What it does highlight is that, even among the people with a lot of expertise, there are different interpretations of the green and red guides. It refers consistently to the green and red guides, but, just to provide a bit of reassurance in moving forward, the green and red guides are the green and red guides. That is what we use and what we will work with. The report does not recommend doing anything other than that. I think it important to say that the process is the important point.

Mr Hilditch: The commentary in the report does not give me confidence in what you are saying to me today. That is the problem.

Dr McMahon: I think that it is the point —

Mr Hilditch: It leaves the door wide open to various interpretations.

Dr McMahon: That is a fair point. It is highlighting the fact that there are differences of interpretation, and I think it right that it does that. Nevertheless, it does not suggest that we should in any way deviate from the guidance. It suggests a process. The bottom line in this is that it is recommending that the STG is going to have to be involved in the development of this in an absolutely appropriate way to make sure that its views are fully taken on board. In a sense, the chair issue is about the management of that process. Ultimately, the professional views will have to be based on the green and red guides and brought into the process to get the project to a successful completion.

Mr Hilditch: Yes. The commentary in this report reflects the views of KSS and Buckingham. It gives me a more commercial sense of what they want to achieve, rather than a sense of what we should be doing with the red and green guides and why an independent group, person or body should have been brought in to do this.

Dr McMahon: That is a view. The only issue for me is that there are other views in there that very clearly do not necessarily accord with the views of the design team around Casement. There are some views that it agrees with, and there are some views that it does not.

Mr Hilditch: Yes. There are quite a few in it that everybody agrees with; there is no doubt about that. I do not want to use the word "controversial", but on the ones that have caused us problems, there is a slant towards those who have a commercial interest.

Dr McMahon: To be fair, there are some others that would cause everybody problems, and they have taken a different view on them. Again, I am not a technical expert, but my reading of it is that you can see arguments for and against particular issues that have come up, including at this Committee. It certainly does not come down on the side of any one group, I thought. That was my reading of it.

Mr Hilditch: Is time up?

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Yes.

Mr McMullan: Thank you for your presentation this morning, Minister. I, too, welcome this report, for I believe that it brings clarity and reassurance to the public. Of course, it could have weighed heavily in one way or another, but I do not think that it does. It answers a lot of the questions that the Committee was asking prior to it. Those can be interpreted by people in their own way, but I think that it goes a long way to answering those questions.

There was recent speculation in the media suggesting that the STG disputed the findings of the PAR report. Can we ensure that that speculation can be managed? In what way will it be managed?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Thanks for your questions. I have seen other aspects of speculation in the media. To be fair, a lot of it has been about what people feel others may interpret it to be. However, we have received from the interim chief executive of Sport NI correspondence outlining some of the concerns around the implementation of the PAR report and, in fact, some of the maybe contrary views that the STG may have regarding some aspects of it. I believe that that is very open and transparent. That is the way in which I would prefer to deal with issues, rather than have people speculating about speculation about speculation.

As part of what we do next and how we take this forward, we will be engaging with the interim chief executive of Sport NI about how we go forward on the PAR, what the next steps are, what we can all do collectively on not only aspects that relate particularly to the STG but on how the STG can impact on aspects that relate to others. I believe that that is the healthiest and most appropriate way in which to deal with it. There is a lot of speculation out there. You could spend your time trying to catch smoke in a bucket. However, to be honest with you, I would much prefer that people dealt with issues in this manner.

Mr McMullan: Thank you for that. I think that Leslie asked the other question that I was going to ask. Going into the next comprehensive spending review, can you make a commitment that the stadium will go ahead? I think that you answered that.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Absolutely. I will just give reassurance again that, as part of the regional stadia programme and the start of the consultation on the subregional stadia programme, we have and will continue to have strong engagement with our colleagues in DFP. This is a key Programme for Government priority and commitment. We will do that to ensure not only that people are kept up to date but that any budgetary challenges, not only for now but certainly going into the next CSR, are reflected in that next CSR.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirleach, agus tá fáilte romhaibh, a Aire agus Denis, chuig an Choiste. You are very welcome to the Committee. Further to Mr Hilditch's questions about the PAR report, which I welcome because of the clarity that it has provided, what is your view of the assertion that both the STG and indeed Sport NI were actually wrong in their assessment of the interpretation of the red and green guides?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Again, even in this Committee, you can see that people are taking different interpretations of it. What is very clear is that PAR has actually stood over the recommendation that,

for example, the pitch can be used in the process of emergency evacuation. It also made recommendations on exiting and which exits can be used. I think that they are helpful recommendations. They certainly clarify a lot of the disputes that arose, particularly since their appearance at this Committee on 30 April. As I said to other members previously, the role of STG and all stakeholders, not only in the implementation of this report but in bringing the programme forward, is crucial. I believe that even working through the PAR report will be a work in progress. I was actually relieved to see that its recommendations supported what many others, particularly at this end of the table, had said.

Mr Ó hOisín: I think that perhaps that central aspect of the pitch being used as a holding place of relative safety is critical to that.

With regard to Sport NI, there is a reference in the report to greater capacity. Given what else is going on at the minute, is Sport NI —

Ms Ní Chuilín: It talks about the need for skill sets and increased capacity, not just for Sport NI but for us all, to be frank. Again, in working out the relationships with Sport NI, STG and GAA going forward, we will be looking for and going through a process of trying to get a new SRO, and we are going through a process of trying to get a new independent chair as part of all this working through it. It does lay out very clearly the things that need to be done and gives them different priority as to how they are done. Irrespective of how the PAR report prioritises them as critical, essential or recommended, I will ensure, as best as I possibly can, that we all try to get the redevelopment of Casement Park and all agree the way forward on how we get that done. If there is a need for additional resources for us all, particularly the ones that PAR has pointed out, I will ask how individual stakeholders will try to meet that recommendation. I will work with them to give them support in doing so.

Mr Ó hOisín: Is Sport NI, in its current form, fit for purpose as an arm's-length body?

Ms Ní Chuilín: There continue to be issues around Sport NI, particularly in relation to the climate that people felt when they came forward. I do not particularly like the term, but when people came forward as part of the whistle-blowing protocol that was initiated, there were certainly confidence issues around various things in Sport NI, including, as some have identified, working in a culture of fear and bullying. What is clear for me with regard to the accusation that was made at this Committee, particularly about safety and gagging and bullying, is that I personally ordered and instigated two separate processes. They are well under way. We have a very competent team there, albeit in an interim form, trying to work through those issues and, at the same time, trying to deal with this as well. I am content at this stage that we have put as much support in as we possibly can. The detail will be the outcome of how we implement these recommendations and, indeed, how we meet challenges in the future.

Mr D Bradley: Maidin mhaith.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Gurb amhlaidh duit.

Mr D Bradley: I think that probably everybody around the table, maybe yourself included, agrees that this report does not paint a pretty picture. There were a lot of shortcomings on various sides, your Department's side and so on and so forth. Where were you, as Minister, in the middle of all this?

Ms Ní Chuilín: In the middle of all this, I was trying to be as open, transparent and accountable as I possibly could. In its recommendations for DCAL, the report has said clearly that we need a dedicated SRO. There are many parts of this process that I believe have been very challenging and difficult, but where I am now is that Ravenhill/Kingspan has opened and good progress is being made on Windsor Park. I am going to ensure that I do everything I possibly can to see the redevelopment of Casement Park. That is where I am. When accusations were made in this Committee, I did not wait for anybody to tell me what to do. I instigated two of the three processes. I am looking at the report, and I have already started processes to implement the recommendations. I will ensure, as long as I am here, that that is done.

Mr D Bradley: You said that you were unaware of some of these issues until, I think, 29 May —

Ms Ní Chuilín: It was 30 April, in relation to the allegations that Paul Scott made.

Mr D Bradley: Sorry, yes. But it sounds to me as if you were very much in the dark about what was going on around Casement Park.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am absolutely not.

Mr D Bradley: Yes, but were you until that point?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I was not aware of the accusations that Paul Scott made until 30 April. I do not think that anybody was.

Mr D Bradley: Apart from those specific accusations, the report looks beyond safety issues. There were shortcomings in the communication of information between the various stakeholders and so on. Were you in the dark about those shortcomings?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I believe that those relationships and the need to repair them are post 30 April 2015. It is quite clear from my point of view that the evidence given by various stakeholders at this Committee completely refuted the allegations that were made in relation to emergency evacuation. It is also worth saying that, as soon as challenges like that were brought, rather than trying to pass the responsibility on to someone else, I initiated these processes, and I stand over that. Not only do I stand over that, but I want to say, first of all, that, although it is clear even from this meeting that there are different interpretations of this report, I am not responsible for what people say in this room. What I am responsible for is my Department, and I have already actioned those challenges to DCAL.

Mr D Bradley: I agree that there are different interpretations, but I said at the outset that I think most people agree it is not a pretty picture in some places. Having read this report and experienced the situation between 30 April and the publication of the report, how will you behave as Minister in future?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I believe that, from 30 April, I have acted in a very professional and transparent way. I believe that I have been very consistent in my approach to ensure that the redevelopment of Casement Park happens. I also believe that I have made myself and my Department as open as possible, and that will remain the case. I believe that I have given respect and due regard to the other two developments and, indeed, started the process for subregional in soccer, and that will continue. I hope that whoever comes behind me will have the same respect for equality in dealing with the three governing bodies and ensure that this Programme for Government commitment is met.

Mr D Bradley: Really what I am saying is that, when we look back, it very much appears as if you were either in the dark or not in control of this project until 30 April.

Ms Ní Chuilín: With respect, I refute that, Dominic. I read the evidence given to this Committee by Mr Jim Shaw, Sir Nigel Hamilton, Patrick Nelson and others who were on the sponsor board programmes. It was never said that any safety concerns were elevated to us, or even that the accusation made in this Committee on 30 April was elevated to us. They believe that everything —

Mr D Bradley: Yes, but I am talking about the general culture that pervaded all of this.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The general culture was that there were structures in place to ensure that the redevelopment of the three stadia happened. Only when it came to Casement Park were there disputes because of difficulties about how that redevelopment would happen. We are where we are. I was a Minister who was at my desk. I was a Minister who was accountable. I was a Minister who was not only implementing the Programme for Government target but going above and beyond that. I will continue to do that.

Mr D Bradley: How, specifically, can you reassure us that you will be on top of it in the future?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have been on top of it. With respect, Dominic, I refute the implication of saying, "in the future", that I was not. I will ensure that we not only have a senior responsible officer working solely on the redevelopment of Casement Park and the other two stadia but that we have the consultation on subregional soccer. I will ensure that that is done, and I will implement this report and deal with any other challenges as well as I possibly can.

Mr D Bradley: Do I have some time left?

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): No, I am afraid that that is it.

Mr D Bradley: OK. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Fáilte romhat.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): I have to say, though, that I think that part of your question was not answered.

Mr B McCrea: Minister, do you agree that the more substantial issues that remain to be resolved with Casement Park involve the contingency planning scenarios that apply when one or more exits are unavailable?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Even this morning, there has been variation in the interpretation of what happens. As I said in my opening statement, the PAR report recommended that all exits need to be considered, and I believe that we need to take that forward as part of the report's implementation.

Mr B McCrea: Do you agree that it is the more substantial issues that remain to be resolved?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I believe that it is part of the consultation and the preparation for a new planning application. It is a substantial component of emergency evacuation, as was a robust traffic management strategy to be submitted as part of a planning application for the redevelopment of Casement Park.

Mr B McCrea: I am reading directly from page 30 of the report, which states:

"The more substantial issues that remain to be resolved for Casement Park involve the contingency plan scenarios that apply when one or more exits are unavailable."

Do you agree with that statement?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have already said that in my opening statement.

Mr B McCrea: When did you first become aware that there was a problem with the emergency exiting schemes that this refers to?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I said before, since 30 April, there has been a fundamental disagreement with the allegations and assertions that Paul Scott made.

Mr B McCrea: There is a statement about the "more substantial issues". When did you first become aware that they were substantial issues that needed to be resolved?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The substantial issue that needs to be resolved, as it says in the report, has always been the need for a proper emergency evacuation strategy.

Mr B McCrea: I am asking when you first became aware of that as an issue.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I first became aware that it was an issue for some after 30 April.

Mr B McCrea: Do you regret not being more fully informed about the issue beforehand?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have no regrets about the information that I received. I have no regrets and no complaints about the way in which the structures that were working with my Department were adhered to. The only regret is that, if anybody had concerns, they decided to ignore them or not to elevate them so that they were brought to my attention.

Mr B McCrea: Do you regret that you were not more fully informed? I think that the report suggests that, going forward, the project sponsor board would be a good place for people to bring concerns that should be elevated. Do you regret that you were not more informed?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I regret that people who claim that they had substantial and serious concerns did not elevate those to my level or, indeed, even through their representatives who sit on the sponsor board. That is what the report acknowledges.

Mr B McCrea: Will you take a more hands-on approach as we go forward with this project?

Ms Ní Chuilín: No, I will be consistent and take the same approach as I have done.

Mr B McCrea: Do you not think that you need to get more involved in the process, given that there were deficiencies in risk escalation?

Ms Ní Chuilín: No. Basil, let me be clear. If I am right, in saying that, you are making an implication — Dominic tried to make the same implication, which I also disagree with. Now that we have the report, it will be central not only to any meetings with officials but a central component of the sponsor board and, indeed, the individual programme and project boards of the three governing bodies of the three stadiums. Will more attention be paid to how some of the issues raised are actioned and how people understand them in terms of taking them forward? Absolutely.

Mr B McCrea: Do you believe that a regional stadium will be built at Casement Park?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do. I believe that it can be achieved. The report says that, and I hope that it will be achieved.

Mr B McCrea: Given that you have read the report, which people have put some store by, will you tell me what you understand by red/amber?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Red/amber means that the programme is at a critical stage, that it is vulnerable and that certain actions need to be taken for it to go from red/amber to amber to amber/green and then to green.

Mr B McCrea: The report says that red/amber means:

"Successful delivery of the project/programme is in doubt with major risks or issues apparent in a number of key areas."

You expressed to me just now some confidence that it will be built. Why are you so confident?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Let me finish off the part you did not read. It also says:

"Urgent action is needed to ensure these are addressed, and whether resolution is feasible".

I believe that these issues can be addressed and that resolution is feasible. For me, that is quite important.

Mr B McCrea: Will you agree that one of the key issues in addressing the key risks is, and it is central to these discussions, the need to get agreement on what will be a reasonable management plan for scenarios in which all exits to the Andersonstown Road are unavailable?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I believe that that is essential, and that is part of any emergency evacuation plan.

Mr B McCrea: Will you also agree that the report does not state anything about the contingency planning? It merely says:

" including what would be an acceptable time to evacuate the stadium."

Ms Ní Chuilín: I accept that.

Mr B McCrea: No confidence can be drawn yet because we have not resolved the issue of whether eight minutes or a longer period is appropriate. That has to be developed.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes, it says that the report will form part of the ongoing programme for the redevelopment of Casement Park. It also says that there are aspects of this report that need to be considered as part of the consultation on a planning application and that these are vital things for DCAL, the STG and the sporting and governing bodies to bring forward.

Mr B McCrea: I will conclude, because I think that you have made it quite clear that there is no agreement on the eight minutes. There is no agreement yet. There is a discussion, and I think that the report is weak in this area. Personally, I will take some convincing that anything other than eight minutes is appropriate, but we will have a discussion. How do you think that relationships are going?

Ms Ní Chuilín: From 30 April, particularly given some of the accusations made, relationships have been damaged. I believe that relationships need to be reset, and the PAR report was very clear on this. I believe that they can be reset.

Mr B McCrea: Would you like to be involved in that?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will be involved in it.

Mr B McCrea: How is the relationship with this Committee?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not understand what you mean.

Mr B McCrea: The Chair mentioned this at the start, and I can tell you that I was one of the members concerned. I was appalled and insulted that this report, which had come about because of evidence to this Committee, was issued at 4.00 pm on a Friday afternoon and that the press were briefed on it, the GAA was briefed on it, all other stakeholders were briefed on it and I got to read about it on the news. Do you not think that if you wanted to try to involve us, as key stakeholders who have a statutory responsibility, it might have been better to take us through this report, even in closed session, so that we understood your thinking before it was out in the press?

Ms Ní Chuilín: First of all, I did not deliberately set out to offend or insult anyone. The GAA, Paul Scott and Sport NI are stakeholders who were specifically mentioned in the report. They saw it first. The media were briefed. The report in its entirety was given to all of you after 4.00 pm when it was published.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): When did the GAA get a copy of it?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The GAA got a copy of it earlier that day. I am not too sure what time it was.

Dr McMahon: 10.00 am.

Ms Ní Chuilín: And Paul Scott —

Dr McMahon: 10.00 am.

Mr Dunne: Thanks for coming in today, Minister. Do you accept that Paul Scott was a genuine employee who had genuine concerns about how his group, the STG, was treated in the project?

Ms Ní Chuilín: No, I do not accept that. I accept that Paul Scott has made complaints. Those are the subject of an investigation as we speak. I think it would be inappropriate for me to come down on the side of one view or another while that process has not been completed. So I cannot accept your assertion.

Mr Dunne: Can you, as Minister, give us an assurance that Paul Scott, having gone through the whistle-blowing process, will be treated properly throughout the whole procedure and that that will continue?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I absolutely give that assurance, as I would for any employee in the DCAL family.

Mr Dunne: Is there not a real risk that the public will see that this report is in some way as cover and a rebuff of what Paul Scott has genuinely put forward to us on at least two occasions and made very public? I think that he, as a public servant, has been very courageous and forthright in what he has said. I had never met or spoken to the man until he came into this room. To me, he is a straightforward Northern Ireland individual who had genuine concerns about what was proposed at the stadium, and he seemed to feel that no one was listening. Would you accept that?

Ms Ní Chuilín: No, I would not accept that at all, and I think that it is in keeping with the proposition that you put forward in your first question. I regret that someone felt that they had to come to the Committee in a very public way and voice those concerns. We all need to learn lessons from that. Because Mr Scott has initiated complaints and grievances that are currently in process, it would be completely inappropriate for me to come down on one side or the other, other than to confirm that one of the procedures that I initiated and instigated ensures that Paul Scott or any other employee who has brought grievances forward will be treated in a confidential manner, which is completely appropriate.

Mr Dunne: Minister, do you not feel now that there is a real risk about what people will say about the fact that there is a recommendation here that an independent person should be appointed to the STG and that the skill set needed by this individual is mediation and facilitation rather than technical knowledge? To me, as an MLA, that implies that Paul Scott does not meet those requirements, but that remains to be seen. I believe that people will come to the assumption that you did not like Paul Scott's message, so you decided to shoot the messenger. That is basically what has happened with this report, and, to be honest, I find it unacceptable.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I actually find your remarks quite disgraceful, to be honest, but —

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): It is a difference of opinion.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I would prefer that you did not interrupt me, Chair. With respect, I did not interrupt you.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): I was just making an observation.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I know that you were making an observation.

It is not as though Mr Scott made accusations in this Committee, which he did, and the Department did not come in to support him. I did. Two processes were initiated straightaway on 30 April. One was to look at the redevelopment of Casement Park, particularly on safety. Another that I did independent of the Department and myself went to CPD, the auditors and others. It was about trying to get support for Mr Scott and anybody else who came forward. I have done that, and I will do that all day long, because that is the right thing to do. What is not the right thing to do is to use this room, sit behind privilege and make unsubstantiated accusations.

Mr Dunne: With all due respect, the evidence that we got — we have had loads of evidence —

Ms Ní Chuilín: You are not finished yet.

Mr Dunne: That is true, but it all went in support of what Mr Scott has said.

Ms Ní Chuilín: That is not the case.

Mr Dunne: The only contrary evidence — it is light on evidence — is the report. Belfast City Council, as I understand, is the licensing authority. The girl who came in was so clear on the criteria. As I understand it, she is an expert. We all rely on the expertise of Belfast City Council to license public places for sport, leisure and suchlike. We rely on that. She was adamant. Is she wrong too? Is she

also misleading people? I do not think so. I honestly cannot see that this whitewash of a report — that is what it is; a whitewash of a report — will try to get over a problem that needs to be resolved.

Ms Ní Chuilín: First of all, I think it is really down to PAR. I do not believe it is a whitewash of a report. I believe that those remarks are inflammatory, frankly. I also believe, as Denis said, that not everybody is going to agree on the outcome, but I have to be honest and say that I have used the British Cabinet Office and CPD, through DFP, to bring forward procedures. I do that because that is the most transparent way of doing it.

Mr Dunne: OK.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Excuse me, Mr Dunne; I did not sit in a room with potential developers or contractors scheming up a grubby scheme of millions of pounds. I did it in an open and transparent way. I have not been obstructive or evasive ever. You have not even completed your inquiry, and you are already coming to conclusions, and you are trying to tell me that you are objective.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Sorry; you are here to answer questions, not to attack members of the Committee.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I did not attack; I just responded, Chair.

Mr Dunne: One other question.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I would certainly not be guilty of attacking anybody.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): I am glad to hear that.

Mr Dunne: As Minister, were you concerned that the plans went to the DOE Planning Service? Was it May or June of 2014? It seemed to be rushed. Those plans went to the planning service without sign-off by the STG. How does that sit with you?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Again, those are all things that were not even cited but that we need to work through. I think that the relationships around the STG and its relationship to plans, planning and future process will be worked through. To be frank, even in terms of the assertion that you made on the role of Belfast City Council, that conclusion was silent in the report. Do we need to make sure that we do everything that we can to ensure that there is a robust, open and transparent process around planning of a new application to DOE? Absolutely, and that is why the PAR recommendation is to go beyond the statutory timescale and to go to 20 weeks.

Mr Dunne: OK. Can I just make one final point? Will you just give us an assurance, Minister — a number of the residents are here — that the residents of that area, who your party represents quite a number of, will be involved in an open, transparent process? To me, as someone from an outside constituency — I will be honest and frank about it — I find it totally alarming that there is a proposal for a 38,000-capacity building to be built there, in a residential area, with all of the issues of traffic management and the impact of possible lockdown on the local residents. How can those issues be addressed?

I want an assurance from you and your party that you are going to be open and transparent in relation to it. I think that is a major issue. I have studied it, and I understand that the like of the Odyssey has about 10,000 people going to it. Living on the far side of Belfast, we all live with the implications of traffic from that. The other two stadiums that have been built and are doing well have a capacity, I understand, of about 18,000. To move from 18,000 to 38,000 in a residential area has major implications for traffic management, local residents, the local community and the environment. I plead, as an MLA from outside the constituency, that you give genuine recognition to and have genuine concern for these people, because these are real issues to real people. I have nothing to gain electorally from saying that. I am saying that because I believe in doing what is right and saying what is right. It is not right to cram a stadium with a 38,000 capacity into the area. In recent times, the existing stadium was used for the event for Michaela Harte. That attracted 18,000 people, and there was, I believe, traffic chaos in the west Belfast area. Can you give me a brief assurance that those issues will be looked at closely and sincerely?

Ms Ní Chuilín: First, I was at the Michaela Foundation event, and there was not traffic chaos.

Secondly, and more importantly, I will ensure that everybody is involved in the consultation process on the planning application. The consultation process is not just about planning. During and post construction, the Ulster Council of the GAA needs to be a good neighbour, not just to the people who live in the area surrounding that stadium development but to the west Belfast community, and I believe that it will be.

I believe that you are genuine in trying to ensure that all residents are not disrupted unnecessarily, but it is remarkable that your party has that view, given that it gave clearance for a 42,000 capacity, which was reduced to 38,000. Both the business case and the political direction stacked up. It is not as though we decided in May 2011 to go for 38,000. I am implementing in full a Programme for Government commitment and the Executive decision that was made in March 2011.

Mr Dunne: It was an Executive decision.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Absolutely.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Absolutely. All parties signed up to that.

I will finish with two points that members raised but which were not fully covered. You told us that, on 30 April this year, you became aware of the big issues with emergency exiting. On 14 June 2014, the chief executive of Sport NI said about Casement Park:

"I think the current design has run into a problem in relation to emergency exiting."

She said that in a high-level summary on the three stadiums. She was very clear about the Kingspan Stadium and Windsor Park, but when it came to Casement, all she would say was:

"we are continuing to give advice and work".

That was on 14 June 2014. Were you aware of that?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am aware that there have been issues raised subsequent to the —

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): I am asking you whether you were aware of those comments at that time.

Ms Ní Chuilín: No.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): So, you do not read the papers.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I read the papers, and I read some of the commentary in the papers. That does not mean that the comments that people make in the papers are factually correct.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): If the chief executive of Sport NI says something in a paper and you are the Minister, you should pay some attention to it and at least ask a question. That suggests that you were asleep at the wheel.

Ms Ní Chuilín: No, far from it —

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): You did not know about it.

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is like a lot of issues —

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Fast asleep at the wheel.

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is like a lot of issues: people can make political statements, which they have, that cannot be backed up.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): She is from Sport NI. She was not making a political statement.

Ms Ní Chuilín: That is their opinion.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Sorry, she is the head of Sport NI.

Ms Ní Chuilín: That is not the case. You are being deliberately mischievous.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): No, I am quoting from the 'Belfast Telegraph'.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Oh, right. OK.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Finally, may I ask Denis a question? The Minister said that the people who produced the report have made a clear judgement on the technical issues of eight minutes, the pitch and phased evacuation. She said that they have made a clear judgement. You, on the contrary, said that various opinions come through in it. Who will be the final arbiter of what is right and what is wrong?

Dr McMahon: There will not be a single final arbiter.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): There will have to be because somebody will have to issue a certificate.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Belfast City Council.

Dr McMahon: The process, as you know, involves a number of different stages. When it comes, for example, to the approval of business cases, DFP is often the final arbiter. When it comes to the need to move to the next stage in the programme, that will be the SRO's role. When it comes to the need to get the safety certificate, it will be Belfast City Council.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): It is Belfast City Council, not a commercial concern. We are absolutely clear, then, that it is not some commercial company that has a multi-million-pound connection with the builders; it is actually somebody independent, the official who we had here from Belfast City Council, who was very clear about the eight minutes. Thank you very much. I have really appreciated the input.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Thank you very much, Chair, for allowing us to come to the Committee. Again, I would say that what you need to do, certainly from here on in, is read the factual positions, not quotes from papers or the opinions of someone who did not elevate things to the places where they needed to be. We are happy to come back again in the future to answer questions around factual accuracy, not someone's political perception. Go raibh maith agat.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Minister, that is an issue between you and the person who was then the chief executive of Sport NI, whatever her role or current status is. It is up to you and her to sort that out. Thank you very much.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Thank you.