



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: Mr Dominic Walsh

28 January 2016

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

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

Witnesses:

Mr Dominic Walsh

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): I welcome Mr Dominic Walsh, former chairperson of Sport NI. It would be helpful if you could explain the timeline of when you were chairperson and how that interrelates with the timeline for the stadium.

Mr Walsh has not had access to papers from the Department, so he is speaking of his recollection of events at that time, which is some time ago, and I am sure that people will bear that in mind.

Mr Dominic Walsh: Thank you, Chair, for your invitation to appear before the Committee. I recognise that I am here to answer as best I can questions that the Committee has.

I was chairman of Sport NI from January 2008 until October 2012. Since that time, I have had no involvement with the organisation or DCAL in respect of any issues relating to my time as chair. I understand from the Committee Clerk that the Committee may want to discuss issues relating to the stadia development programmes. In anticipation of that, I approached the current DCAL permanent secretary, seeking access to files, diaries, meeting notes and other relevant information that may have informed the Committee's deliberations today. I wanted to come as prepared as I could. That request was declined, although I believe that that facility was provided to others who have given evidence to the inquiry. I must rely largely on my memory and personal notes, and they are not extensive. Nevertheless, I will endeavour to provide the Committee with whatever information I have and can recall.

By way of background and introduction to members who may not know me, I served as chairman of Sport NI between January 2008 and October 2012. My term would normally have ended in early 2012, but my appointment was extended at the request of the Minister to October 2012. Due to the

significant increase in responsibilities that I had in delivering the World Police and Fire Games, it was not possible for me to fulfil both roles.

Prior to my appointment, I had taken on the executive leadership role for the bid team that secured the World Police and Fire Games for Belfast in 2013. The World Police and Fire Games is the world's third-largest sporting event. The Committee will know well what a spectacular success it was for Belfast and Northern Ireland. During my time at Sport NI, I continued in that role, from the bid process right through, becoming a board member and delivering the games.

I became involved with the World Police and Fire Games as I was also a non-executive board member of the RUC Athletic Association. In addition to my normal working role, I fulfilled a number of non-executive roles. I am a member and currently the warden of Belfast Royal Academy's board of governors. I am a member of the development board for the Northern Ireland Hospice board, which was established to raise funds for the rebuilding of the hospice, and, if you have any loose change, we would be delighted to take it. We have £13 million to raise, and we are at the £12 million point. We are hoping that it opens in April this year.

I am a past president of the British Printing Industries Federation, representing the United Kingdom. As part of my role with Sport NI, I was a board member of UK Sport. I was chair of the major events panel for UK Sport, a member of the audit committee for UK Sport and a trustee of the Mary Peters Trust.

During my term as chairman of Sport NI, the permanent secretary of DCAL was initially Paul Sweeney, followed by Rosalie Flanagan. The ministerial position was held by Edwin Poots, Gregory Campbell, the Chair today — Nelson McCausland — and, later, Carál Ní Chuilín. As this was my first public appointment and experience of arm's-length bodies, it is worthy of note that, at a review of Sport NI undertaken as I was departing, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) noted that there had been no diminution in the standard of governance systems and processes since 2008, so I felt that I had performed at least adequately.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): What awareness did you have that there were issues around emergency exiting at Casement Park?

Mr Walsh: I was aware from the very outset that there were issues in the initial outline business case. I was aware that there were issues with Casement as a site in meeting the expectations of the governing body. Of the three governing bodies, in my opinion, the most organised was the GAA. It is an extremely well organised organisation. I had been aware right from 2008, when the business case was coming together, when the transfer from the Maze took place, when other sites were being considered and when it was settled — I am not sure of the timeline — that there would be three stadia. I am not sure who the Minister was at the time — it might have been Gregory Campbell — who said that it was like trains leaving a station: they will all leave the station at the same time, but they will arrive at their destinations at different times. Ravenhill would be completed first, and Casement was always going to be a challenging site because of the physical footprint.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Can you recall whether that issue was raised at meetings with Sport NI and DCAL officials? Was emergency exiting generally discussed?

Mr Walsh: My role was governance and taking a helicopter view. I was aware of issues, and, certainly, I discussed the emergency exits and satisfied myself that they were on the radar, that they were recognised as being on the radar and needed resolving at the design stage. I discussed that — I can tell you the approximate dates; it was the summer of 2012 — with the permanent secretary at the time and the Minister. I believe that the SpAd — I am sorry, that is a rude term — the special adviser was also there at that meeting. That was discussed prior to my going, and the reason that I can put a timeline on it is that it coincided with the time when we did not have a full-time chief executive in Sport NI.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Who was the SpAd at that time?

Mr Walsh: The gentleman was a Mr Kearney.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Jarlath Kearney?

Mr Walsh: Jarlath Kearney. That was the key part that I wanted from the Department. I wanted the notes of the date and time and what was said, because there were no minutes. That was an update meeting, for which there were no official minutes. That is what I was hoping to achieve, because it was about emergency exits; that was the recollection. We talked about that, and there was discussion at that meeting about the purchase of housing. I thought, "Well, this is obviously well under control".

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): The permanent secretary was at that meeting, as was Jarlath Kearney. Who was the permanent secretary at that stage?

Mr Walsh: It was Rosalie Flanagan.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Was somebody taking minutes of that meeting?

Mr Walsh: It was Rosalie.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Rosalie was taking minutes. OK.

Mr Walsh: Or contemporaneous notes.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Right. That is interesting, because I cannot recall, when she was here, that being mentioned. We may need to go back to that.

Mr Humphrey: Good morning, Mr Walsh. I was alarmed at what I heard you say at the start of the meeting. Which organisation refused to give you notes that you had asked for?

Mr Walsh: It was DCAL.

Mr Humphrey: At the outset, Chair, may I make a proposal? I heard the permanent secretary of DCAL say to the Committee that he wanted to have a good relationship with us and to be open and transparent and so on. I propose that we send a letter to the permanent secretary asking him to explain why Mr Walsh was denied those notes. That is extremely unhelpful to this Committee, which has an important and specific role in its public duty to the taxpayers of Northern Ireland and in the interests of health and safety.

Mr Walsh, was it the summer of 2012 when you became aware of the issue of emergency exiting at Casement Park?

Mr Walsh: No, I was aware of it because it was highlighted in the outline business case. I think that McClure Watters commented on it in the outline business case.

Mr Humphrey: OK. When was that?

Mr Walsh: I am working backwards: if the Executive approved it in 2011, it would have been in 2010.

Mr Humphrey: OK, so you are telling the Committee that, in summer 2012 and perhaps before that, the current Minister knew about these issues. Indeed, that had to be the case. If they were talking about purchasing houses surrounding the stadium to put in new access and egress, that had to be the issue that people were aware of. Why would you purchase the houses if they did not know?

Mr Walsh: I was satisfied that the issue was being addressed.

Mr Humphrey: In terms of feeding that in from Sport NI without a chief executive, you would have been feeding that into the Department, including at the meeting. Who was your direct linkage or the direct linkage for Sport NI in the Department?

Mr Walsh: For the stadia, Nick Harkness was the main person up to 2011. He remained after that. Eamonn McCartan, who was the chief executive and — I am not certain of the titles — the special projects officer was the link up to the point of the handover. Eamonn remained as the accounting officer, liaising with the permanent secretary.

Mr Humphrey: Who was Eamonn or Nick's direct line of communication with the Department on a day-to-day basis on the issue?

Mr Walsh: The permanent secretary.

Mr Humphrey: Within Sport NI, this became an issue before 2012, as you said. You had a representative, Mr Scott, who was on the safety technical group for all three stadia that were being upgraded. Mr Scott was aware of this and presumably made you and your colleagues aware of this.

Mr Walsh: I was aware of the issues. Hindsight is a wonderful commodity. I am not sure what was put in writing, but, looking back at this, I think that this inquiry could have been avoided if Mr Scott had outlined clearly, as a member of the safety technical group, what he saw as the big issues at the time rather than doing it verbally. I genuinely do not know if there is a report — it would have been after my time — but there appears to be a lack of documentation that says, "This is the issue. This is how we need to address it. We should not expend any more money until we've addressed this".

Mr Humphrey: So Mr Scott had verbally made the senior management team in Sport NI aware of this.

Mr Walsh: And he may have done that through some of his monthly reporting, as part of the normal reporting, in writing.

Mr Humphrey: Yes, so, assuming he did that, the same information would have been fed into the Department at a Civil Service level —

Mr Walsh: I would expect so.

Mr Humphrey: — and into the Department at a political level to the special adviser and, more importantly from the Committee's perspective, the Minister.

Mr Walsh: I cannot answer that accurately. The Department would be involved, as you might expect, but I cannot accurately say whether it reached through the Department and was communicated fully to the Minister. Certainly, at the meeting in 2012, we were all aware that there was an issue.

Mr Humphrey: At the meeting in 2012, you were aware that there was an issue. Did this information come as a shock to any of the people who were at the meeting in the summer of 2012?

Mr Walsh: No. They were able to tell me that it was being dealt with through the purchase of housing.

Mr Humphrey: Who was able to tell you?

Mr Walsh: I believe that it was the permanent secretary.

Mr Humphrey: In the presence of the Minister.

Mr Walsh: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Was the Minister at that meeting?

Mr Walsh: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): The Minister was there, and the special adviser was there.

Mr Walsh: In the background; he was sitting behind.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Yes. The Minister and the special adviser were in the room, and they were aware of the potential need to purchase houses in order to provide adequate access.

Mr Walsh: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): In 2012.

Mr Walsh: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): That brings us back to a point that was talked about earlier, which is that people give evidence to the Committee and then something emerges that sheds totally new light on that evidence. There are important issues that we will want to return to at the end. This is getting to the very heart of the matter — the date on which there had already been discussions about buying houses and knocking them down to deal with the issue of emergency exiting.

Mr Dunne: Thanks very much, Dominic, for coming in; we appreciate your contribution so far. I understand that you were not a member of the programme sponsor board.

Mr Walsh: No, I attended one or possibly two meetings, but I was not a member of it. I was invited to attend one or two meetings, but I was not a member.

Mr Dunne: Right. I take it that those meetings that you attended were chaired by the Minister. That is my understanding. Maybe she did not actually attend a meeting that you were present at. You had a representative in attendance if you were not there.

Mr Walsh: That would have been Eamonn McCartan and Nick Harkness as support, I would say.

Mr Dunne: The information that we have is that Nick Harkness would have been in attendance. This relates to the terms of reference. He is named here. How did he report to you as chairman on the issues that arose at those meetings?

Mr Walsh: Reports and progress updates were provided by the group via the chief executive as part of his monthly report to the board of Sport NI.

Mr Dunne: The board of Sport NI, which you chaired.

Mr Walsh: Yes.

Mr Dunne: Do you recall issues that related to emergency exiting? I know that it is difficult; it was years ago.

Mr Walsh: I cannot. I do not know whether emergency exits were discussed at board level, because my memory or recollection would have me ask whether it was a meeting, a board meeting, an update meeting etc. Certainly, there was discussion. At that time, from where I was sitting as the chair of Sport NI and before the stadia transferred over, the biggest issue that I had was probably not Casement: it would actually have been Windsor. That was around governance and whether we would release the money. There was more attention on that because it was a people issue and was more than high-profile at times.

Mr Dunne: The safety technical group sat under Nick Harkness: is that right?

Mr Walsh: I am not sure. I was not sure of the full role or terms. I would not have gone down into that level of detail.

Mr Dunne: Had you any interaction with Mr Paul Scott directly? Obviously, he was on the technical side and was sitting lower down the structure.

Mr Walsh: I know Paul. In the last three years since I departed, I have met him twice. I just bumped into him. I did not have a lot of interaction with Paul on the stadia directly. He is an individual whom I respect for his knowledge and work ethic. He is an excellent person.

Mr Dunne: I think that we all concur with that.

You mentioned earlier, Dominic, that you always saw Casement as a challenging site because of its footprint. What did you mean by that?

Mr Walsh: Given what was to be achieved on the site and with the housing, it is not where you would choose to build a modern stadium. We had discussions. I had detailed discussions with the

permanent secretary — I do not know when it was, but the Ravenhill project had not commenced — about going back to a Ravenhill project plus a joint project for soccer and Gaelic and moving the site from Casement and Windsor to the Boucher Road site where Funderland was situated. It is behind Boucher Crescent Retail Park. There are playing fields on it. I think that T in the Park has been held there. There was a conversation about that. I thought that it was a sensible way forward, but the conversation just fizzled out.

Mr Dunne: It was recognised early on that it was a challenging site.

Mr Walsh: Yes.

Mr Dunne: OK. That is grand. Thanks very much for your contribution so far.

Mr Hilditch: Thanks, Dominic, for coming along this morning. It has been quite a revelation and, indeed, would be quite refreshing if it were not such a serious situation. Certainly, at a very early stage, I asked some senior people in government questions about how this could be resolved, by purchasing property and various things, that were either blanked or totally denied. Now we hear this. Do you recollect any other feedback on issues surrounding emergency exiting? Earlier, in your presentation, you mentioned that you had an idea that that would potentially have been resolved during design stage. Was there any feedback other than that it was being dealt with?

Mr Walsh: Just that there were issues, and it needed to be dealt with. This was pre-design; my input was pre-design. The detail would have come about much later.

Mr Hilditch: It is a pity that you had not kept your position a bit longer, because we might have got more detail.

You mentioned the role of the special adviser who sat in the room, potentially at the back and whatnot. Were there any other communications with the special adviser, either verbal or written, in relation to the issues?

Mr Walsh: On emergency exits, no. I had precious little communication with the adviser.

Mr B McCrea: Dominic, was the meeting that took place with the Minister and the permanent secretary a formal meeting?

Mr Walsh: It was an update meeting. As time progressed, the meetings became more frequent. In the absence of the chief executive, who was off ill at the time, it was absorbing more of my time. There was the Friday meeting — that is how I would describe it.

Mr B McCrea: How often were you in a pivotal position in the Friday meetings? Was it just when the CEO was getting —

Mr Walsh: It became a regular Friday meeting with the Minister and permanent secretary. If not every week, it was frequent.

Mr B McCrea: You mentioned that contemporaneous notes were taken at that meeting.

Mr Walsh: Yes. That was the norm.

Mr B McCrea: Were those notes ever formalised as a minute?

Mr Walsh: I do not believe so. I kept notes as well, but I left those behind me at Sport NI.

Mr B McCrea: Would you expect the notes that you left behind still to be available to the Department?

Mr Walsh: I was hoping that the Department had them. I would doubt if Sport NI had them. I understand that there were two chairs — an interim chair and the chair — and I would think that most of my stuff — the handwritten notes — was shredded not long after I had departed.

Mr B McCrea: OK. You mentioned in your submission that you thought that things might have been a little easier if Mr Scott had had a bit more documentation.

Mr Walsh: That is with hindsight, looking at what has been happening in the last six or nine months to a year.

Mr B McCrea: Can you think of any reason why he would not have documented it?

Mr Walsh: No. It would be pure conjecture. Possibly he did. I do not know. I would have thought that, if he had documented it, he would have put it forward in his very —

Mr B McCrea: Was there a change in his style or documentation vis-à-vis the Casement Park issue in comparison with Ravenhill and Windsor?

Mr Walsh: No. I think that he was consistent. I would be surprised if he was anything other than consistent, because there were issues at all three around access. Ravenhill had challenges over the plans for bussing people to and from the remote car park. It was less of an issue at Windsor because it seemed to be more accessible for the numbers that they were looking at. I would expect Mr Scott to have been consistent. I know that, at times, he was viewed as being difficult, but, to me, that was him just doing his job.

Mr B McCrea: It just seems to me that there was a more formal sign-off. There is a famous email that Rosalie Flanagan sent in which she said that she would expect to get formal sign-off from what became the safety committee. There was a report on Windsor and, I think, Ravenhill. However, for the decision taken on Casement, the Department seemed to be relying on an email from Paul that just says, "I think it's OK now", and the decision to go to the next stage happened almost immediately. Do you recall, when you were looking at the issues to do with Windsor and Ravenhill, if there was a formal sign-off process on safety?

Mr Walsh: Absolutely, and nothing progressed without the previous/current sign-off being required and completed. If I have understood the question right, I would be amazed — I do not know this — if there was not consistency across the three stadia in the safety technical review and if the planning application, as it was being presented back, did not have safety and emergency exits for all three. They were certainly there for the first two.

Mr B McCrea: Just to be clear, are you familiar with the procedure that the Department will go through in project management of signing off at each stage as to when you release funds?

Mr Walsh: There was a road map set. Rugby had progressed further with safety of emergency exits and safety control in the stadium. I remember, at Ravenhill, asking why it had to allow parts of what was the old stand to be closed off during the development, and it was all to do with emergency exiting from the stadium. There were seats there that were covered over and could not be sold. Rugby is my sport. I played rugby for 30 years, so I was asking, "Why can we not sell those seats and have the income?". It was because of emergency exiting.

Mr B McCrea: I will finish on this point. Some people have argued that the safety certificate is never really looked at until the completion of the project and that we are getting the cart before the horse. Do you accept that, or do you have a different opinion?

Mr Walsh: The system may have changed, but I am surprised to hear that. Why would you expend money on something that may not be fit for purpose? The whole design had to be fit for purpose, and, if you are designing a building or a stadium, you have to be sure that you will get it approved.

Mr B McCrea: This is my final question to you on this point. You mentioned the McClure Watters report, the feasibility study —

Mr Walsh: The outline business case.

Mr B McCrea: That will have recognised a potential issue with the site, but, although there would not have been a final determination, it would have been a serious issue of concern that the project managers, the Department and, indeed, Sport NI will have been looking at throughout the process.

Mr Walsh: It was highlighted at the very start. It was one of the issues highlighted. Around the time of the outline business case, which was for all three stadia, issues were highlighted with all of them. That was just one of a number of issues that were highlighted as part of the business case and in the summary from Sport NI. There was a concern about the financial viability of Windsor on the recurring and the landlord, there was emergency exits, and there was a concern about the number, which then became an amendment. It then became live as it developed because Ravenhill's number on the original business case was amended to a higher number.

Mr B McCrea: Just to be clear, you would have expected that to be a formal part of the process.

Mr Walsh: Of the full design and submission.

Mr B McCrea: Yes, but there is a lack of hard documentation either from ministerial meetings that you might have attended or from Mr Scott. I am asking you to provide an opinion, but you do not have to answer this: do you think that that is because some things are quite difficult and it is better to resolve them before you write it down? Do you think that is a way that people might try to manage difficult situations?

Mr Walsh: My experience of the permanent secretary at that time is that that is not how she would have done it. She would have resolved everything, committed everything to paper and kept a detailed record. My previous experience with my first permanent secretary was, "Let us fix 90% of what we can fix —".

Mr B McCrea: Just to be clear, Dominic, do you expect, given the formal nature of the issues being brought up, that there would be a written record at some place?

Mr Walsh: Yes, which is why I was certain that there would be notes of the meeting.

Mr B McCrea: OK. Thank you for that. We will see if we can get those.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Before I bring in Cathal Ó hOisín, I will ask this: did you talk about regular weekly meetings?

Mr Walsh: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): And they were focused entirely on Casement Park.

Mr Walsh: No.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): They were on a range of issues.

Mr Walsh: It changed every week. On that occasion, we discussed issues around management.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Within Sport NI. OK. I understand.

Mr Walsh: It would not have been just about Casement Park.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): I understand.

Mr Walsh: I do remember that meeting, because we discussed particular issues. I have a clear recollection of that meeting.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): OK. The only people who were at that meeting were you, the permanent secretary Rosalie Flanagan, the Minister, and Jarlath Kearney?

Mr Walsh: Yes. Normally at those meetings, it was the Minister, the permanent secretary, me and sometimes the chief executive, if he was available.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): OK.

Mr Ó hOisín: You said that there were concerns about all three stadia, some of which were down to governance and what have you. You said that the GAA was the best organised body. However, you also said that there were concerns about access at all three stadia and that there were event management concerns. What were those concerns?

Mr Walsh: Car parking was an issue at Ravenhill, and the residents had raised issues about the flow of spectators. The situation at Windsor Park was better because it had an overflow. I cannot remember the name of the pitch at the back of Windsor Park.

Mr Humphrey: It is Midgley Park.

Mr Walsh: They had access from three directions, whereas there were concerns at Ravenhill about going above capacity. That is why they went for the initial 15,000 or 15,500 capacity rather than 17,500 or 18,000.

Mr Ó hOisín: What about Casement Park?

Mr Walsh: Casement Park was never progressed at the same speed, so there was never the same detail. The only problem at Casement Park was the broader issue. I am not sure who raised the idea about the stadium being not at Casement Park but at Boucher Road; it was raised with me by the permanent secretary. I said that it was a good idea.

Mr Ó hOisín: That was at a very early, pre-design stage.

Mr Walsh: Yes.

Mr Ó hOisín: At what point were you made aware of issues around emergency exiting?

Mr Walsh: That was at the time of the initial outline business case.

Mr Ó hOisín: Was that for the 42,000-seater stadium?

Mr Walsh: I cannot remember. I do not have the detail. I thought it was for 50,000, but I cannot remember. Was it not their initial plan to aim for 50,000?

Mr Ó hOisín: At Casement Park?

Mr Walsh: Yes. I cannot remember; I am sorry. I do not have that detail. I know that there was a desire for a much bigger stadium. It was presented as a mini Croke.

Mr Ó hOisín: Who made you aware of the concerns around emergency exiting?

Mr Walsh: It was the chief executive — Eamonn McCartan — and Nick Harkness. It was part of a broader briefing at which we would have needed to be aware of a number of issues. It was not just about the stadia issues; pre-games training camps were coming through for the World Police and Fire Games and we were having issues over people committing. It was part of a broad portfolio.

Mr Ó hOisín: Perhaps I picked it up wrong, but you also mentioned a helicopter view: what is that?

Mr Walsh: That was my role. It was a non-executive position and a part-time role.

Mr Ó hOisín: OK, I was just not clear about that. If the concerns about emergency exiting were going to the chief executive, presumably they were coming from Paul Scott.

Mr Walsh: I assume so.

Mr Ó hOisín: Did you see anything in writing at that time?

Mr Walsh: It would have been part of my briefing. If you try to do everything in a detailed briefing, you get nothing done. It was about drilling down into the issues that needed my intervention and delegating the others.

Mr Ó hOisín: I would have thought that something like this was fairly fundamental.

Mr Walsh: At that stage, we were no longer leading, but it was a matter of satisfying myself that the issue was being addressed. I was satisfied that it was being addressed.

Mr Ó hOisín: OK. Were you made aware of any concerns in the run-up to leaving in October 2012?

Mr Walsh: No, other than that I had asked the questions and had been satisfied that it was being resolved.

Mr Ó hOisín: Why did you ask the questions?

Mr Ó hOisín: It was part of the briefing that there needed to be. I do not think that it was even going forward to the planning stage at that time. It was part of the overall size and numbers that were going to go forward for the outline planning. I had been made aware of the issue. I am trying to recall. I had been to some of the meetings of the overview committee that the Minister chaired. It either came up at one of those meetings or in Sport NI. I am not sure.

Mr Ó hOisín: Were you aware of the stage at which reducing the proposed capacity was being looked at?

Mr Walsh: On the number of spectators? I think that they had come down to 40,000 or 38,000 at that stage.

Mr Ó hOisín: At what stage was that?

Mr Walsh: That was at some stage in 2012. I am not sure that they had actually appointed the designers at that stage. All of that evolved in what they could physically get.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. Thanks, Dominic. What was the capacity in the first planning application that went in for Casement Park?

Mr Walsh: I —

Ms McCorley: Were you involved?

Mr Walsh: I would have to have access to the notes to come back to you. I would be guessing.

Ms McCorley: You do not remember.

Mr Walsh: No. I would not have that level of detail. I think that the first planning application may have gone in after my time.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): It was, yes.

Mr Walsh: I am not sure that there was a planning application in for Casement Park.

Ms McCorley: So you do not actually know if you were there when it went in.

Mr Walsh: The planning application?

Ms McCorley: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): No, that was after.

Ms McCorley: No, if you were there.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): I think that that was after his time.

Mr McMullan: It was.

Ms McCorley: OK. You were not really sure.

Mr Walsh: I do not think that they had gone to planning at that stage. I do not think that they had gone to the design stage when I had finished my term.

Ms McCorley: What was your involvement in it from the very beginning? You said that you were involved with the three projects. What do you remember?

Mr Walsh: I think that Sport NI was appointed by the Minister in March or April 2011 to deliver the stadia programme as part of the Programme for Government. I think that it was moved to the Department in 2012. We were delivering the programme from March and, with the instruction of the Department, we would have laid the outline business case and the submission to DFP, which I think would have been during the Chairman's time in office. We were the lead organisation in delivering it up until early 2012.

Ms McCorley: OK. I will refresh your memory. I am not sure exactly, but the first capacity was somewhere around 40,000.

Mr Walsh: Yes. That is what I would have expected.

Ms McCorley: What were your concerns then? You said that you were always concerned. In what way did you raise those concerns?

Mr Walsh: The concerns were raised in the outline business case. They were listed as a concern.

Ms McCorley: What did you do personally? You have said that you were always concerned. Did you raise it with anybody?

Mr Walsh: Not other than to satisfy myself that it was being addressed as it progressed. The design would have had to incorporate the safety review. That all happened after my tenure.

Ms McCorley: OK. So you are saying that, while you had concerns, you were content. You had satisfied yourself —

Mr Walsh: That it was being resolved.

Ms McCorley: — that the process would take care of it.

Mr Walsh: That the people who were then delivering it were fully aware of the issue and knew that they had to fix it.

Ms McCorley: OK. You said that the two issues were the safety of exiting and the footprint of the site. You said that you were aware that those were major issues.

Mr Walsh: Yes. I think that everybody was.

Ms McCorley: Were there other issues?

Mr Walsh: At the time?

Ms McCorley: No. At any point.

Mr Walsh: The issue that was most time-consuming for me was Windsor Park and whether it would be built and whether the money would be released during the governance review of the IFA. I would

like to pay credit to Patrick Nelson and the president for the job that they have done in introducing excellent governance and delivering. I look out my office window and see Windsor Park being built — it is very impressive. The main issue at that time —

Ms McCorley: Why was it exercising you at that time?

Mr Walsh: Because the media were talking about it a lot, about whether the money was going to be —

Ms McCorley: So you were not overly concerned about Casement.

Mr Walsh: No, it had not progressed to the design stage.

Ms McCorley: OK.

Mr Walsh: It was still a blank sheet of paper; no design had been created. There was a footprint and a desire to put a smaller version of Croke Park on the Casement site. It was a very —

Ms McCorley: It would be much smaller. Croke Park has an 83,000 capacity, so it does not —

Mr Walsh: No, it would be a mini version, but I think they were making a comparison. That is a GAA description, because of the housing around Croke Park. That is how they compared it.

Ms McCorley: OK. You are telling us that you were very concerned about Windsor but that are happy with the way it has worked out. You are proud of the way it has worked out, even with the accident, with the problems —

Mr Walsh: The stand falling?

Ms McCorley: Yes.

Mr Walsh: I do not know the details, but it has worked out very well for the football family.

Ms McCorley: It could have been a disaster, could it not?

Mr Walsh: It could have been, absolutely.

Ms McCorley: Did you foresee that?

Mr Walsh: A disaster with a digger? I do not know what caused the stand to fall. It is not in my area.

Mr Humphrey: Chairman, with respect, that has absolutely nothing to do with the inquiry.

Ms McCorley: I am just exploring Mr Walsh's involvement in Casement. What other stadia were you involved in? Was it this three stadia project? Beyond that?

Mr Walsh: None.

Ms McCorley: None. OK, so that is your total experience.

Mr Walsh: Sport NI.

Ms McCorley: The Committee has been told that issues that you said were raised, such as emergency exiting, are on the agenda for every stadium that is built, particularly in cities. Most stadia are built in cities; we have had evidence telling us that. These are issues that come up and are addressed along the way. It would be unusual if emergency exiting was not an issue, would it not?

Mr Walsh: Absolutely.

Ms McCorley: So, that is true. The footprint of any site in a city or built-up area is always going to be an issue to be resolved. The appointed design people were Copius, and they are world-renowned. They told us that they have built huge stadia all over the world. The evidence that I took from what they said was that they know what they are doing; they know how to build stadia. They have not had any disasters. No major problem has arisen. I am sure that there are other builders, but these are the people who were involved, and they seem to be experts at what they do. I cannot remember the name of the main guy who gave evidence, but he told us —

The Committee Clerk: I think it was Mike Trice.

Ms McCorley: Yes, Mike Trice. I specifically asked him this: "Did you have concerns about this site? Were there red lights flashing?". He said no. He was completely comfortable that all of the issues would be worked out along the way. I wanted to be sure about that, because I am the MLA for the constituency that Casement sits in. It is of huge concern to me that the guy who is building this and is designing the stadium in my constituency would not design something harmful. I wanted to satisfy myself, and he was absolutely relaxed that all of these issues would be worked out along the way. Against that, you say that you had concerns, that you were always concerned. In light of that, do you feel that you had extra reason to be concerned?

Mr Walsh: I am not sure that I can answer that question because they were appointed two years after I left office. When I was leaving office, it was a concept without detail. Everyone recognised that it was a concept. The site's footprint was always going to have its challenges. Apart from that, there had been some issues discussed and raised. If I had raised the issue in any meeting with the permanent secretary, those issues would have been pre-notified, and it would have been as a result of a previous meeting, query, question or email etc, but I would have had no contact with the design team or the build team. I am sure that they are experts in what they do. I am not a civil engineer, architect or stadium developer, but I would expect that we would pay for the best and expect the best.

Ms McCorley: Absolutely. I think that we deserve the best. At the point when you left that role, there was a concept of a 40,000-seater stadium, and, among other issues, there was one issue — safety exiting — which I am glad to hear you had issues about, but it was just one issue that would be resolved.

Mr Walsh: A big part of the interaction with the Department at that time, to give context, was London 2012 and the delivery of the pre-games training camps programme, which was successfully delivered. If I were to put things into context as to whether we were talking about the emergency exits on a regular basis, the answer is no. Were we talking about the illness of the chief executive? Yes. Were we talking about delivering boxing and the number of teams for boxing in the pre-games training camps and the gymnastics in Lisburn? Yes. Those were financial concerns. They were live and contractual and had a very clear end date, which was the Olympics. If people had not trained in the pre-games training camps in the time before the Olympics they were not going to do it afterwards. Part of my pressure coming through on the issues at that time was that we could not wait for the normal Civil Service bureaucracy to go through. We needed to respond to queries within days and not wait three or four weeks. Casement was part of it, and Windsor was part of it, but, at that time, in the summer of 2012, the focus was on pre-games training camps, the Olympics, selling that and bringing back medals.

Ms McCorley: Right. OK. It was just one thing in the middle of all the other things that you were concerned with. It did not jump out. This is another issue. I know that you were not involved at the later stage, but we were told that issues were raised all along the way but nobody actually made it a red light issue. If the concerns were at such a level that someone had real fears, and there was terminology used that was unhelpful, you would just go to the top and say, "Listen" — but it did not happen. I am just trying to explore who had the major concerns that they did something about.

Mr Walsh: The point I made to Mr McCrea was that, with hindsight, at the stage when the planning application was being submitted, which was when the design reached a stage of detail, that was the time when anyone, whether it was Mr Scott, the chief executive or the permanent secretary, if they were aware of any issues at that time — two years after I departed — should have committed it to paper so that they could come along and say, "I said this, and here is what I did". I have seen no evidence, as a spectator, that it was raised in that way. I am not sure if it was. I am surprised that it was not, but I would have expected that if somebody had a significant concern and, at that stage of the planning application, their voice was not being heard, they would have committed that to writing.

Ms McCorley: You would make sure that it was raised at the highest level. The bottom line is that building stadiums like other big projects is a process, and you work out all your details along the way. You pay for the best designer, because he is the guy who has the vision and can deliver the concept into reality and knows that he has ways of working it out. That is why you pay the experienced people. That is what you favour.

Mr Walsh: You are paying for his specialist experience and skills.

Ms McCorley: It is probably nothing that he has not seen before. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McMullan: Thank you, Mr Walsh, for coming today. What was your interaction with the previous Minister?

Mr Walsh: Which one? The Chair?

Mr McMullan: Yes.

Mr Walsh: I dealt with Mr McCausland on a regular basis.

Mr McMullan: Was the Minister aware of everything that we talked about this morning?

Mr Walsh: He would have been aware, over the pre-games training camps, of the outline business case, which was a broad and very general document. However, our interaction was more about the day-to-day funding. Of the four Ministers that I have had experience with — these are Ministers who have a very broad, big portfolio — Mr McCausland was much more hands on, not on day-to-day issues, but in being involved and participating in sports matters in the Province.

Mr McMullan: So he was aware of the concerns that you talked about.

Mr Walsh: It was in the outline business case, which I think was approved by DFP and the Executive. Everybody would have had sight of that same document.

Mr McMullan: You said that you were surprised that these concerns were not flagged up prior to outline planning and all of that.

Mr Walsh: That was my comment to Ms McSorley —

Ms McCorley: McCorley.

Mr Walsh: McCorley. I am sorry; I need my glasses on to see. The detailed planning and the planning application was around 2013 or possibly 2014.

Mr McMullan: What was the interaction with the head of the stadium technical group?

Mr Walsh: The safety technical group?

Mr McMullan: Yes.

Mr Walsh: None. I had no direct interaction. It was all done through reporting. I assume that the safety technical group reported to the oversight group led by the permanent secretary and the Minister.

Mr McMullan: Then the Minister had oversight of your concerns.

Mr Walsh: Yes. The concerns were raised.

Mr McMullan: Were those minuted?

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): I will just interrupt for a moment. Could I ask Mr McMullan to speak up? They are having difficulty hearing.

The Committee Clerk: It is just for Hansard.

Mr McMullan: Sorry; I beg your pardon. Were those concerns minuted? Were minutes taken of the meetings you had with the Minister?

Mr Walsh: There were notes taken. I certainly would have had notes of the conversation. Those are the notes that I was seeking when contacting the permanent secretary.

Mr McMullan: Who took those notes at the meeting with the Minister?

Mr Walsh: The permanent secretary.

Mr McMullan: Do you think that those notes are still about today?

Mr Walsh: I would expect them to be, but I do not know.

Mr McMullan: Right. They were never brought back to you in the form of a minute or anything.

Mr Walsh: No.

Mr McMullan: So the Minister then did not give out minutes.

Mr Walsh: Not for those types of meetings.

Mr McMullan: Were those meetings any different from any of the other meetings?

Mr Walsh: Absolutely. We had formal structured meetings, where a full agenda, minutes etc were issued. Not every meeting is fully structured like that.

Mr McMullan: So other non-structured — for want of a better word — meetings were held.

Mr Walsh: Yes.

Mr McMullan: And there were no minutes taken of those. It was only at structured meetings that minutes were taken.

Mr Walsh: Correct.

Mr McMullan: So, right from the start, the then Minister and everybody else had sight of your concerns about safety and all of that. You had conversations with him about that, and notes were taken of those meetings but never formally —

Mr Walsh: I am sure that this was discussed. I expect that there were lots of meetings from which there are notes that discuss emergency exits etc. I expect that there would be lots.

Mr McMullan: Was anybody from the safety technical group at any of those meetings with the Minister?

Mr Walsh: There was a small item on a broader agenda at that time.

Mr McMullan: At the time when you were bringing up concerns.

Mr Walsh: At that time, there were actions rolling over from week to week. We were in a state of flux. We were appointing the acting interim chief executive, as the chief executive was off ill. There was a level of keeping things moving.

Mr McMullan: OK. Had you any meetings with the safety technical group on its own?

Mr Walsh: No.

Mr McMullan: None?

Mr Walsh: None; I had no interaction whatever. I am not sure whether it had been set up in my time; that may have been after my time.

Mr McMullan: OK. Did anybody correspond with you or talk to you about your concerns?

Mr Walsh: The permanent secretary — other than the brief, when the properties were being acquired.

Mr McMullan: That was the only person.

Mr Walsh: Yes.

Mr McMullan: How often did you meet the then Minister?

Mr Walsh: It varied. Sometimes we met weekly, but it depended on the stage we were at in the run-up to London 2012 and the pre-games training camps. We met at least fortnightly.

Mr McMullan: At which your concerns were raised.

Mr Walsh: The main discussion at those meetings was about pre-games training camps and the day-to-day activities. Casement and the emergency exits were still in the distance.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): To clarify, you rightly said there were four Ministers. At that point, who was the Minister?

Mr Walsh: Carál Ní Chuilín.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Thank you.

Mr Walsh: I met Mr McCausland fortnightly.

Mr McMullan: I said at the start, "Your interaction with the previous Minister".

Mr Walsh: OK. Sorry, I was talking about the Minister.

Mr McMullan: No, in my opening piece, I said that.

Mr Walsh: Apologies.

Mr McMullan: No problem. I am not surprised you are getting mixed up. I was asking about your interaction with the previous Minister. All of your concerns were always conveyed to the Minister at the time.

Mr Walsh: To the permanent secretary and the Minister. That was a small part of it.

If we are talking about the previous Minister, Mr McCausland, I do not recall having any conversations in detail with him about emergency exit concerns. Our discussions were more about the funding of the broader project and the fallout from moving from the Maze project to three separate projects and getting that presented in a way that would meet the Programme for Government target and get Executive approval. It was all about presenting, and the main focus at that time was on getting the funds approved and the commitment to spend the money. It was right and proper that we, as the body for promoting sport, chased that down to make sure that sport had that investment.

Mr McMullan: Who was the Minister when the application was first put in for outline planning?

Mr Walsh: For outline planning or outline business case?

Mr McMullan: For this business case.

Mr Walsh: For the outline business case, the Minister was, I think, Mr McCausland. Was it?

Mr McMullan: So that Minister would have had sight of the stadium numbers.

Mr Walsh: In the outline?

Mr McMullan: Yes.

Mr Walsh: Yes.

Mr McMullan: And there were no red flags. I am only using the term "red flags" because it is the first time I have heard it in here.

Mr Walsh: For an outline business case, I would not expect any red flags to be issued. The main part of an outline business case is to show that it is viable; that there is a need, that it can be delivered and that it is sustainable.

Mr McMullan: We were told by other groups that they would expect red flag issues to have been raised at that stage. Other groups said that during the inquiry. You say that you would not have expected red flags to be raised.

Mr Walsh: The main issue I would expect in the outline business case is an overview asking, "Can it be delivered? Is there a need for it? Are we wasting money? Is it sustainable?". That would be the main thrust of any outline business case, whether it was for the stadia or anything else.

Mr McMullan: Surely then, if it was demonstrating that the project was viable financially and was needed, stadium numbers would have been part of it.

Mr Walsh: Yes.

Mr McMullan: So stadium numbers were in the outline business case.

Mr Walsh: Yes.

Mr McMullan: That is the point I am getting to. What were the stadium numbers at that time?

Mr Walsh: For rugby it was 15,000; for soccer it was between 17,500 and 18,000; and for Casement Park it was 40,000-ish.

Mr McMullan: The Minister was happy enough to sign off the outline business case with 40,000.

Mr Walsh: It was signed off, I think, by DFP.

Mr McMullan: Yes, but DCAL would have had sight of it before it went to DFP.

Mr Walsh: Yes, as we would have had sight of it. All of the numbers were then subject to change; the numbers for rugby and soccer both changed.

Mr McMullan: That is true, but it would have gone to DFP, knowing that everybody there, from the safety technical group to the Minister, supported 40,000.

Mr Walsh: Yes.

Mr McMullan: That included the safety technical group and the Minister.

Mr Walsh: The safety technical group did not exist. It could not have commented if it did not exist.

Mr McMullan: Those who were involved with the safety technical group — as we now know it — would have known.

Mr Walsh: They were not there. They physically were not there.

Mr McMullan: It was the safety overview group. Sorry, I used the wrong word. Anyway, everybody would have known about the 40,000 before it went to DFP.

Mr Walsh: The key authors were FGS McClure Watters, and they, I believe, highlighted where there were issues, and that was highlighted as an issue. I remember it being on the physical highlighter.

Mr McMullan: That is fine. Thank you, Mr Walsh.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Of course, in our documentation, we have on record the correspondence from that time, which sets the record very clear as to the fact that it was signed off by DFP, as, indeed, Mr Walsh confirms.

Mr McMullan: Thank you, Chair, for letting me in again quickly. Are the notes of the meetings that Mr Walsh had with the then Minister still there?

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): I have no idea.

Mr McMullan: Could we find out whether those notes are still there?

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): We will come back to that because there will be a lot of notes, documents and meetings.

Mr McMullan: The notes between Mr Walsh and the then Minister —

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): We will deal with that later because a number of members have in mind detailed documentation that they will be looking for, particularly, I suppose, in regard to the meeting that we were never aware of between Ms Ní Chuilín, Rosalie Flanagan and Jarlath Kearney on the issue.

Mr Cree: Good morning and thanks for the information. It has certainly been helpful and a bit of a revelation.

Despite what has been said, our main interest is the emergency exiting. The three stadia, as you rightly say, were started at the same time, and somebody may use the analogy of a train in that some are quicker than others. If I picked you up correctly, the first two stadia had emergency exiting plans as part of the plan approval process, is that right?

Mr Walsh: I can speak with more knowledge about Ravenhill, and, as part of the planning application, there would have been a safety document of some sort, which I would have expected to include emergency exits. It would have included things such as people moving down through the steps area, the standing area and the barriers. This is still fairly fresh legislation for buildings, although the planning application for Ravenhill would have included a section covering safety.

Mr Cree: That is quite right. Whilst you said that exiting was highlighted as a concern at an early stage, you could not simply go along with the line that somebody was going to solve this at the end of the day. Some people told us that it was a matter for Belfast City Council to issue the safety certificate. I think that you said that that is a fairy tale, and you have to design emergency exiting in as you go along so that it comes much earlier in the process, not at the end. Is that a fair comment?

Mr Walsh: Absolutely.

Mr Cree: It is common sense, but sense is maybe not common here.

Mr Walsh: You do not set off on a journey with only half a tank of fuel when you need a full tank. You have to make sure that you will arrive at your destination. Given that more was happening at Ravenhill during my tenure, I thought that there was interaction on stadium safety with Belfast City Council, which is responsible for issuing certificates. I thought that it was consulted, but I have that from memory.

Mr Cree: We have evidence for that.

Mr Walsh: OK. I would have expected that to happen at Windsor and then at Casement, and they would have consulted. If they said that they had any concerns —

Mr Cree: That is when you had a red flag.

Mr Walsh: Absolutely, because, if you have built a 38,000- or 40,000-capacity stadium and they say they are going to give you a certificate for 33,000, 25,000 or 20,000, the Public Accounts Committee would be very interested to know at what stage the money was wasted.

Mr Cree: No sensible person would endorse that view.

Mr Walsh: I agree.

Mr Humphrey: Thank you very much, Mr Walsh. You raised a couple of points that lead me back in with a question, if that is OK. I heard clearly that you were the chair of Sport NI between January 2008 and October 2012, so I am not going to ask you questions about what happened before or after those dates; I do not think that that is fair. I also heard you clearly state that you were the chair, not the chief executive, yet some of the questioning suggests that you, perhaps, were the chief executive. Who were the chief executives of Sport NI during your tenure as chair?

Mr Walsh: There was just the one: Eamonn McCartan, who then was ill.

Mr Humphrey: When did he go off ill?

Mr Walsh: It was mid-2012.

Mr Humphrey: The meeting you mentioned with the Minister, Rosalie Flanagan and Mr Kearney —

Mr Walsh: Actually, it may have been early 2012, but it was 2012.

Mr Humphrey: OK. I will come back to that, Chair, perhaps after Mr Walsh has concluded his evidence. What other Sport NI personnel were with you at that meeting?

Mr Walsh: Which meeting?

Mr Humphrey: The meeting that you referred to in the summer of —

Mr Walsh: Nobody — just me. Eamonn was off sick. In asking the DCAL official, I was fairly clear that I had a time period, but I was not sure which month it was.

Mr Humphrey: I think that you mentioned to the Committee that Paul Scott gave you verbal briefings on these issues.

Mr Walsh: Not directly. I talked to him, but there was nothing formal. Everything that was reported will have been reported through his line manager, through Nick Harkness, through to Eamonn McCartan to the board and me.

Mr Humphrey: That is not to say, however, that he did not provide written documentation to Eamonn McCartan, Nick Harkness and so on.

Mr Walsh: That is the part that I am surprised at. I am surprised that documentation like that does not exist. I would expect —

Mr Humphrey: You do not know definitively, however, that there was not documentation. That is the point.

Mr Walsh: No.

Mr Humphrey: There is exiting and emergency exiting, and this is about emergency exiting. Mr Ó hOisín made a very important point about the early pre-design stage: if those involved had got it right at the early stage, we would not be looking at the situation we are looking at now, and millions of pounds of public money would have been saved. Is it fair to say that?

Mr Walsh: Yes.

Mr Humphrey: The business case was referred to. I am fairly confident that the outline business case, which relates to issues that come up before we get to the point of dealing with emergency exiting, health and safety, access and egress and so on, was signed off in DFP by Mr Jardine. Is that correct?

Mr Walsh: It was signed off in DCAL by Edgar Jardine.

Mr Humphrey: When did you begin to talk about in-depth issues like exiting and emergency exiting and so on?

Mr Walsh: On Casement?

Mr Humphrey: Yes.

Mr Walsh: That came up during 2012 as part of the establishment and transfer. They were in the outline, but there were other issues, because the trains had left and were going at different paces. Ravenhill was progressing at a rapid rate of knots, needing to change its numbers, and there was the transfer from Sport NI.

Mr Humphrey: So it was 2012.

Mr Walsh: Yes.

Mr Humphrey: I think that it is fair to put it on the record, Chair, that you ceased being Minister in DCAL in May 2011.

You are absolutely right, and it is the kernel of the issue: this stadium or any stadium or development will not move forward unless it has the approval of the safety technical group, the emergency services, in particular — they have been in front of the Committee — and Belfast City Council. Belfast City Council's town solicitor and head of health and safety have been at the Committee, and they confirmed that.

That concludes my questioning. Thank you very much.

Mr Hilditch: You would have hoped that the pantomime season had finished in the greater Belfast area, but it seems to carry on. There seem to be members here who are forgetting that this went to planning without these matters being resolved. If I was a member for the area, I would be looking to put in a wee phone call to Mr Trice. I would not be sitting so confidently. It is a big issue out there, as we could see from last night's BBC 'Newsline', which said that more works are planned and people are moving houses and whatnot to try to get a resolution. This has already been to planning without the issue being resolved; that is the bottom line. Dominic, you left post, and, a couple of years down the line, the position is that it has gone to planning without these matters being resolved. Is it fair to say that you are somewhat surprised that it was allowed to get to this stage?

Mr Walsh: Yes, I am very surprised. I am surprised that it has progressed and that the investment has been made prematurely.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat. Dominic, you say that you are surprised that it has progressed to this stage, but we have heard that you do not resolve every issue and then move forward. It is a process, and things get resolved along the way. The confidence that they will be resolved comes from a person's expertise. I have no reason to believe that Mike Trice would stand over this project and believe that it was not going to work out. I do not think that his reputation would allow him to do that. That is my view. You say that you are surprised.

Mr Walsh: Mr Hilditch asked the question. I am surprised that a detailed planning application would be submitted without that being included. I am surprised that the Department, which is taking the lead and insisted that it was part of the Ravenhill development — I expect that it was also part of the Windsor development — omitted it on the third development. If you had a process that worked and then worked again, why would you change the process? That is my surprise.

Ms McCorley: We know what happened with the planning application, and one is being prepared at the minute. My hope is that the planning application will be comprehensive and address the issues that need to be addressed. The final certificate for safety exiting at Kingspan was issued only two days before the first event, so these things happen late in the process. That is how it goes.

Mr Walsh: Absolutely. The administration catches up with the detailed planning. You have to put the effort in early and make sure that you have covered all the detail so that you are not trying to amend things at the eleventh hour.

Ms McCorley: I am very hopeful that this planning application will be comprehensive and will address all the issues. Hopefully, that is what will happen.

Mr Dunne: Thanks very much, Dominic. You have been very open and honest in your presentation.

You said that you have an interest in rugby. I was at the match on Saturday. The capacity there is about 18,000, and I understand that Windsor will be much the same. How do you think those stadiums have fitted into their local communities and their ability to be fit for purpose? After the event, what is your assessment?

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): We are getting into areas —

Mr Dunne: It is all relevant, Mr Chairman, with all due respect. I want an answer.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Sorry, Deputy Chair. There are things —

Mr Dunne: If I can finish, Chair, my point is that this proposal is for a capacity of 38,000, which is over twice the size of the two stadiums that I mentioned: 18,000 plus 18,000 makes 36,000, and another 2,000 makes 38,000. There was talk on the television last night of a 45,000-capacity stadium. Any proposal must be relative and must be subject to planning criteria, obviously. It must fully respect the desires and wishes of local people. That is what we are elected to ensure. That is what the members on the other side of the table are elected to do: to take on board those wishes. That is all part of it. I do not want to draw you into it. All that I ask is this: how do you feel that the two stadiums that you mentioned measure up to being fit for purpose?

Mr Walsh: I have not been to the finished Windsor. I have been to Ravenhill — I still struggle to call it Kingspan.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Hear, hear.

Mr Walsh: The process and the journey that you go on is the key part of this. I am very aware of Mr Nelson at the IFA and Mr Logan at Ulster Rugby. A tremendous effort was made to engage with the community.

Mr Dunne: Fair play.

Mr Walsh: On both those, I saw what they were doing. Watching from a distance, I saw how they were engaging, extending the radius in which they were going to consult and drawing people into consultations. I assume that the same happened at Casement. The GAA is a community organisation and is at the heart of many, many communities, so I would have expected the same at Casement. If you get the community and the organisation delivering to satisfy a need, it is a win-win. My experience, looking at Ravenhill and Windsor, is that they are both win-wins. I am hoping that Casement will be a win-win as well. The community, together with the GAA, needs to embrace it to deliver something that they both feel they have ownership of and are proud of. That will make it a success.

Mr Dunne: It is a two-way process. Well done.

Mr B McCrea: Talking about Kingspan, you said that rugby is your sport, and you take an interest in it. You outlined that some seating was not made available. Can you explain to me when that issue, which is obviously important to you, was discussed?

Mr Walsh: I cannot remember whether it was when the west stand or the premium stand was being built. I bought season tickets in the initial tranche, and, as you looked around the stadium, you could see that there were seats in the old stand, yet lots of supporters were looking to purchase tickets. People could see that some seats were closed and were asking, "Why can't those be sold?". That was down to emergency exiting.

Mr B McCrea: What was the timescale?

Mr Walsh: It was 2009-2010.

Mr B McCrea: I am trying to establish that it was an issue that you were aware of at that time.

Mr Walsh: Yes; it was roughly 2009-2010.

Mr B McCrea: I want to ask a couple of very short questions. In previous questions, you were asked whether you were surprised about various things.

Mr Walsh: Sorry — it was actually 2012. It would have been —

Mr B McCrea: That is more interesting for me.

Mr Walsh: It would have been 2012, because the two end stands were going up at that stage. It was 2011-12.

Mr B McCrea: So, in 2012, which is around the time that we might have been having discussions about going forward with Casement, you would have been overtly aware that it was an issue?

Mr Walsh: Yes.

Mr B McCrea: OK. That is useful.

Mr Walsh: I was very aware of how the approvals for the numbers to attend could be limiting. Even though you may physically have more seats, if your licence or certificate says no, you can sell only up to that number.

Mr B McCrea: OK. Your answers to the questions about being surprised — taken as read — are very useful. Would you be surprised if the Minister was not aware of safety concerns?

Mr Walsh: That is a very unfair question.

Mr B McCrea: Let me ask it again.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): There is no pressure.

Mr Walsh: I would be surprised if anyone involved with leading the development of the project — I am not a political person. I believe that the emphasis sits with the Department to support the Minister. If there are issues, the Department should be delivering, raising and sorting them. I would be surprised if everybody who was leading and involved in it was not aware of the issues, as well as somebody who was chairing a body to deliver it.

Mr B McCrea: So would you be surprised if the Minister had said — *[Interruption.]*

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Shush — please.

Mr B McCrea: If the Minister had said:

"had a serious issue been elevated to my level, I would have known about it and dealt with it"

would you be surprised?

Mr Walsh: That is very difficult. I am uncomfortable going into commenting on —

Mr B McCrea: I am only asking you if you are surprised because you were surprised at various other things. That is on the record. If the Minister said:

"I am not aware of concerns being raised as far back as 2009, or since"

would you be surprised?

Mr Walsh: At what stage was this?

Mr B McCrea: This is in the Hansard report of the Committee meeting of 21 May 2015. She stated that she was not aware of concerns being raised as far back as 2009 or since then. I am asking you whether you are surprised.

Mr Walsh: That surprises me. It is possible that she does not have a record of it. However, the emergency exits and the need to purchase housing were being discussed back in 2012.

Mr B McCrea: I want to get some clarity. Given our discussions about 2012 and the fact that emergency exiting would limit the number of seats, even though those seats are available, you were aware, in 2012, of the limitations on emergency exiting vis-à-vis the physical infrastructure. You also had regular Friday meetings with the Minister, her permanent secretary and, occasionally, her special adviser on these matters.

Mr Walsh: It was on a range of matters. The stadium was just a small part of our general discussion at the time. The meetings were more about day-to-day delivery. It is not hard to recall that 2012 was focused on the London Olympics.

Mr B McCrea: I accept that you are working from memory, but my question is this: were challenges with emergency exiting around the Casement Park stadium proposal raised by you with the Minister during 2012?

Mr Walsh: Yes.

Mr B McCrea: Was it raised in a manner whereby it was regarded as a serious issue, or was it just a modest part of everyday business?

Mr Walsh: It was raised so that I could determine whether the matter was being addressed. I was satisfied that the matter was known about and was being addressed and that it would be addressed when it came to the detailed stages. Given that it was known about and people were aware of it, I was expecting them to address it.

Mr B McCrea: Do you think that you did everything that was appropriate? As Mr Humphrey said, we understand that you were the chair and not the chief executive and that you had a wide remit and a part-time function. Do you think that, as far as your position was concerned, you did everything that was required of you to bring the matter to the attention of the Minister when the opportunity was given to you and that she understood what you were telling her?

Mr Walsh: I believe that I fulfilled the role satisfactorily not only for emergency exits but for all issues. All issues that should have been raised with the permanent secretary and the Minister were raised correctly. They and I had issues and follow-up, and I am comfortable that emergency exits at Casement and governance issues at the IFA were dealt with correctly.

Mr B McCrea: To be specific to this inquiry and the emergency exiting issue regarding Casement: did you bring it to the Minister's attention?

Mr Walsh: I asked the question was it —

Mr B McCrea: Did you raise the issue as being serious, a challenge, a risk or whatever? In other words, she cannot have not understood that you thought that it was a problem.

Mr Walsh: At that meeting, I was assured that it was being taken seriously and that the solution was the purchase of four houses that were on the opposite side to the Andersonstown Road. I think that it is Owenvarragh Park. The only reason I know Owenvarragh is that I met a lady outside who told me where she was from. I was assured that not only was everyone aware of the issue but they had a solution for it.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Thank you very much indeed, Mr Walsh. We really appreciate that you gave your time to come here this morning to present your evidence. It has been extremely helpful.

Mr Walsh: Thank you.