



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for The Executive Office

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Communications and Executive Support:
Overview

19 February 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Colin McGrath (Chairperson)
Mr Mike Nesbitt (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Fra McCann
Mr George Robinson
Mr Pat Sheehan
Ms Emma Sheerin
Mr Christopher Stalford

Witnesses:

Mr Neill Jackson	The Executive Office
Mr Chris McNabb	The Executive Office
Mr Chris Stewart	The Executive Office

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Gentlemen, you are very welcome. Thank you. Please take a seat. There is water in front of you if it gets too hot and heavy in here today, but it should be grand.

Mr Chris Stewart (The Executive Office): I hope that is not portentous, Chairman.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): You are very welcome. You are along today to give us a sense and flavour of the communication and Executive support element of the Executive Office.

Mr Stewart: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, members. Some members I am meeting for the first time; some, I am afraid, have had to endure me before, so, I am sorry — you know what you are in for. I will introduce my two colleagues Neill and Chris. Chris heads the Executive information service (EIS), and Neill heads the Executive and central advisory division. Those are two important parts of what is a very eclectic directorate in TEO. It also includes, for example, the private offices, the offices of the head of the service, and the Programme for Government (PFG) and Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) of the future team, which is intriguingly named. The Committee, I think, is scheduled to receive a briefing from the PFG team in a couple of weeks' time. If you are wondering what the "NICS of the future" part of that means, it is a slightly outmoded term now, but it refers to a programme of organisational reform and development of the NICS that took place over the last few years. That is likely to be given further impetus by the report of the renewable heat incentive (RHI) inquiry in a few weeks' time, so that part of the directorate will probably become busier and pick up pace as we go on. Overall, you might regard us as the machinery of government or the home of the Cabinet Office-type functions in TEO for the devolved Administration. As part of that, one of our key roles at present is supporting the Executive in their consideration of the New Decade, New Approach agreement and

linking the Executive's work on that to the development of the Programme for Government and, along with our Finance colleagues, the Budget.

I trust that members have found our briefing paper helpful. I do not propose to go through it line by line, but we will, of course, be happy to expand on any of its content. Perhaps before doing so, I will outline very briefly, by way of introduction, one or two of the key challenges as I see them. On Neill's side, the key challenge is, clearly, restarting some systems and processes that have been dormant for three years in what is quite a challenging context. Many of those involved are new or are in new positions. There are, of course, new Assembly Members and new Ministers, but there are also many officials in key positions, even senior positions, with limited or, in some cases, no experience of working with Ministers, Committees or the Executive, or through the legislative processes of the Assembly. That is largely a result of something that sometimes goes under the radar these days, and that is the 19% reduction in the size of the NICS overall in recent years. We lost a lot of corporate memory and experience. If it feels new or like restarting for you, it also does for many of us. That places a fairly heavy demand on Neill and his colleagues at present where advice and guidance are concerned right across the NICS to Departments to try to get that machine running smoothly again and at full pace.

On Chris's side, the enduring challenge, of course, is getting a coherent and effective message out on behalf of the Executive, again, in a very challenging context. There has been, and there continues to be, what you might call a channel shift, with social media now becoming much more important and prevalent than it was in years gone by, especially for younger citizens. The pace of that change continues to increase year-on-year, with new channels and platforms coming along all the time. We were having a discussion outside; it is very important now, I am told, to know the difference between Instagram and Snapchat. I confess that I do not have the faintest idea of what either of them does. The information space is highly contested. Our message is not the only one out there. It is noisy, and there is a level of cynicism about the climate of fake news that we have all experienced in recent years. The challenge for Chris and his colleagues is to be the trusted source of candid, accurate and timely information about what the Executive are doing.

The third limb of the challenge in that area — this is something that spans the directorate's work — is the very high level of public and political expectation that the devolved institutions are going to deliver on the things that matter to citizens. Therefore, our particular focus throughout the mandate, but particularly over the next month or two, is on how we can support the Executive and Assembly in taking forward work on New Decade, New Approach, on the Programme for Government and on the Budget, and making it absolutely clear to citizens the difference that that is going to make on the ground.

Chair, that was a very quick skim over the ground. I am more than happy to expand on any aspect of that or on anything in the paper.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Thank you very much. I am tempted to talk about Morse code and gramophones, but we will stick to Instagram and Snapchat if we can. I always forget to say to people coming in — I need to improve on this — that everything is being covered by Hansard today. I think that that is the equivalent of, "What you are saying is being written down and may be used against you", but it is just to make sure that you are aware that that is happening.

Mr Stewart: Hansard I understand; Snapchat I do not.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): I have just a couple of questions to begin with. One of the issues is information coming back and forward, which is something that we need to have improved. We need reports to be timely in making their way to us so that we can give due consideration to them in advance of us discussing them at our meeting on a Wednesday. I think that the general protocol is that 12.00 noon on a Thursday is the deadline for the receipt of information in order for it to filter through the system and get to members to give them time to read it over the weekend and then be ready to discuss it the following week. We had an issue last week with a paper that was not presented on time. We have a continuing issue with the Brexit subcommittee in that we have asked for a presentation to be made at next Wednesday's meeting. We have asked for the papers. We can also go to Hansard and see where the deputy First Minister said that information can be provided and a forward work plan shared with the Committee etc. We have requested that, and we have been told that officials will come up and present, but there will be no written paper sent up in advance. We have queried that and have asked for an explanation, but we have not received anything. Obviously, there are only another 24 hours left before the closing time for receiving it.

Having parked the specific issue with you, I ask you to go off and check that out for us because I believe it is within the directorate's responsibility. Can we ask in general about papers? How are they approved, and how do they come up? In the instance where the deputy First Minister says information can be provided, we request that information and the response is that officials will not provide a written paper. Are officials taking that decision, or is it a ministerial direction that those officials do not send it up? Is there a way that we can progress this so that, if there is a decision taken not to share the paper, an explanation is given for why it will not be shared with us? That is, the Ministers have not approved the paper or the Department has not approved the paper. Rather than just simply being told, "No, nothing will be provided", is there some way that that can be assessed? There are probably three or four points in there for you to address, if I can pass them on to you.

Mr Stewart: Certainly, Chair. On the specific point, we will take that back this afternoon and get an answer for the Committee. Related to that, where a decision is made, yes, we owe you an explanation of that, and we will aim to ensure that is the case. Generally, we recognise that it is our role to assist the Committee in its work. We cannot do that, and you cannot do that, unless the information is provided in a timely fashion. We absolutely accept the need to do that.

Any official giving evidence to any Committee would point out that they are there on behalf of their Minister. They are there acting under the control and direction of their Minister, and all the evidence that we give has to have the approval, explicit or otherwise, of the Minister. The unique factor that we have in TEO being a joint office is that it has to have the approval of both sides of the office and both ministerial teams. In process terms, sometimes that can take a little bit longer than it might in another Department. The onus then is on us as officials, because we know that. We need to anticipate that and make sure we secure that approval earlier.

To answer your specific question insofar as I can, because I am not familiar with that particular request, if a decision is taken not to provide a paper, that ought to be a decision for Ministers and not for officials to take. If we have not as a Department provided you with a full explanation of that, we ought to have done, and I will take that back and make sure it is remedied.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): I think I will have the support of the Committee if I suggest, in as open a way as we can, that we will not tolerate not receiving papers in a timely fashion, and if we do not receive a suitable explanation, I fully expect that the Committee will just dismiss any presentation if we have asked for written information, do not receive it and will have to pursue other avenues to try to secure that information. We want to try and establish that at the beginning of this Committee term so that everybody clearly knows where we stand. If everybody knows where they clearly stand, we will not stray beyond that, but 12.00 noon on a Thursday is the time we will look for information that will be discussed at the Committee the following week.

The only sub-question I have, although it is not related to that, is on the information that was provided in the report. There are 47 press officers. I wish I saw weekly and daily newspapers being delivered out of the Departments, and I would love to think that Twitter, the information stream, is completely filled with information from the Departments, but — these could be just my observations — I certainly do not see the output of 47 press officers. Can you give me a flavour of the work that the 47 of them do?

Mr Stewart: Chair, with your permission, Chris will answer that. I think he might be expecting that question.

Mr Chris McNabb (The Executive Office): I did anticipate that question, Chair. The 47 press officers are spread across the nine Departments. They are there to support the Ministers' portfolios. Some of the work is very visible in that you will see press releases and social media activity supporting Ministers going around and about. Some of the work is not visible. Some of the conversations that we have with the media are to try to clarify some issues that do not make it into the news. The number of press officers has been raised on numerous occasions. I think it is a proportionate number for the size of the NICS and our workload. Certainly, I would not want to increase the size of that pool unless there was a real business need to do so. If that was so, the case for that business need would have to be made.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Could you supply to the Committee a quick response by way of a paper on how many press officers there are in the other devolved regions? Is that something that you would know?

Mr McNabb: I do not know off the top of my head.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Is it something you could secure?

Mr McNabb: Yes, I could find that out.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): It would be just for a comparison to see how many are there.

Mr Nesbitt: Thank you very much for your presentation. You are the communication gurus, so what is the difference between Instagram and Snapchat? *[Laughter.]*

Mr McNabb: Do you want me to answer that, Chris?

Mr Stewart: Yes, I certainly do. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McNabb: There are, obviously, different channels for different audiences. Snapchat is for a younger audience, and Instagram is for a slightly older younger audience. There are —.

Mr Nesbitt: What age brackets?

Mr McNabb: I feel a bit of a fraud as a 50-year-old man trying to tell you about the latest developments in social media. I think Snapchat is for those in the region of about eight to 14, and Instagram is for the 14 to 20 bracket or in and around that.

Mr Nesbitt: I am not sure that our communications expert describing himself as a "fraud" is necessarily a good look here, Chris. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McNabb: Well, I have been called worse. *[Laughter.]* It is a serious point in that social media is a very evolving field. EIS has made huge strides in social media over the last few years, but I am not complacent that we do not need to do more. There are channels in social media that are targeted at specific stakeholders, and we need to understand that more. We need to understand that better. Maybe a "fraud" is an overstatement, but what I am saying is that it is a fast-evolving field and we need to try to keep up with the pace of it and somehow get on top of it.

Mr Nesbitt: Delivering a coherent message was described by Chris as a "challenge". Why is it a challenge?

Mr McNabb: Why is it a challenge?

Mr Nesbitt: Yes.

Mr McNabb: The nature of politics would make it a challenge.

Mr Stewart: Particularly in a coalition Government.

Mr Nesbitt: You seem to be implying that the coalition Government is incoherent and the challenge is to make it coherent. No?

Mr Stewart: I certainly would not use that word to describe it.

Mr Nesbitt: I said "implied", Chris.

Mr Stewart: No, then, I am not implying it either. I will try to be very explicit in my answers and not ask you to work out anything from implication.

We have a mandatory coalition of five parties with distinct and sometimes contrasting political views on a range of issues; we can take Brexit as one example. Nevertheless, there is a requirement on those five parties to come together in an Executive and govern Northern Ireland. The challenge is doing that in a coherent way, arriving at policy positions that are agreed and then coherently

presented. However, I would not want to give you the impression that I thought that the Executive were behaving incoherently — not at all.

If I may, to go back to Chris's earlier point, the serious point behind my facetiousness about social media also relates to the Chairperson's question about the number of press officers. They are not just press officers; they are communications experts. I have shown the depths of my ignorance of social media; like many journalists, that is simply not a mode of communication that I am familiar with. It is not something that I grew up with in my Civil Service experience, so I rely on Chris and his colleagues in EIS to help me get that coherent message across. I know how to do it in a ministerial speech. I might do it well or badly, but I know how to do it. Writing for social media is a completely different skill and one that I recognise I need a lot more help to do.

Mr Nesbitt: A few years ago, in an attempt, perhaps, to be coherent, the Executive brought in David Gordon from the BBC to head up communications. As I understand it, that role no longer exists.

Mr Stewart: There are no plans to fill it. I do not know that a formal decision has been taken to do away with the role, but I am not aware of any plans to fill it.

Mr Nesbitt: It is lying vacant, and there are no plans to replace him. What does that tell us about the role? Does it tell us that it was not necessary, that it was unsuccessful or that it was a waste of money?

Mr Stewart: In answering your question, I risk speculating. I do not know. I can only conclude that the current First Minister and deputy First Minister have not seen the same need for it as their predecessors.

Mr Nesbitt: OK. I want to talk about the government advertising unit. As you say, social media is now the place to go, so one of the consequences of that is that adverts that were traditionally placed in the print media are no longer placed there but are placed via social media. How does that impact on the relationship with newspapers?

Mr McNabb: I do not think it is as much of a blanket approach as that. Through the government advertising unit, we procure an advertising agency to deliver whatever particular campaign a Department wants to deliver. It comes up with a mix of communication channels to reach as wide an audience as possible. Yes, social media is a growing part of some campaigns, but it is not the only part, and there still is a place, as part of the media plans, for the role of traditional print media and to place adverts there.

Mr Nesbitt: Can you give us any sense of what sort of cut there has been in the budget for that type of advertising?

Mr McNabb: For print media?

Mr Nesbitt: For print media.

Mr McNabb: I cannot. I do not have that figure. I suppose it goes from campaign to campaign. A campaign that is targeted at people who traditionally read newspapers will have a heavy spend on that, and a campaign targeted at a younger audience will be targeted primarily through social media, so a mix of channels is used.

Mr Nesbitt: Finally, to what extent have you centralised communications in the Executive Office rather than leaving each Department to do its own thing?

Mr McNabb: In the way that the Executive information service is structured, all press officers belong to TEO, and they are outposted, on loan, to a host Department. They then are responsible for the communications in that Department. I am their professional head, and they talk to me about any relationship. There is no formal structure like that you talked about, but I expect to be made aware of issues that are cross-cutting. I am not there to mark their homework. They are talented individuals and can do their own thing.

Mr Nesbitt: Is it the same structure in Wales and in Scotland?

Mr McNabb: I think the structure Scotland is perhaps more centralised than what we have here, and I know that Wales did a restructuring exercise, but I am not fully across the detail of it.

Mr Stalford: It is a one-party Government so it is going to be more centralised.

Mr Stewart: The whole structure of the Scottish Administration is more centralised, and there is one party. They do not actually have separate Departments there; it is just the Scottish Government.

Mr Stalford: In the presentation, we were told that the Civil Service has been reduced by 19%. Has the number of press officers been reduced by a similar percentage?

Mr McNabb: A number of press officers left through the voluntary exit scheme. Departmental restructuring gave me the opportunity to look at what services we wanted to provide with Ministers and officials and how we would be resourced to deliver that. I do not have an exact figure for the numbers who left during departmental restructuring, but the figure now is lower than it was before that.

Mr Stalford: I have sympathy for press officers because I worked as one for five years in DUP headquarters. We are the biggest political party in Northern Ireland, and our communications unit, at its height, I think had five people. I find the figure of 47 across government incredibly high. Maybe I am being naive about that, but 47 seems a very difficult number to justify.

Mr McNabb: None of my staff are sitting idly by. They are fully engaged, and they are very committed to what they do. Press officers have received a reasonably bad rap in the media, for whatever reason. I know that, because of that, some press officers have left the discipline and moved into general service. I am confident that I can stand over the figure of 47, and I am confident that all of them are fully engaged in what they do and try to support their Ministers and Departments.

Mr Stalford: I find social media very useful. I prefer Facebook and find it very useful for picking up constituency cases and stuff like that. On Mr Nesbitt's question about advertising spend in newspapers, has there ever been a review of that to assess whether social media would represent a bigger reach and a bigger opportunity? I was in Belfast City Council when there was a review of advertising policy, and there was almost the assumption that, "We always advertise in the 'Belfast Telegraph', 'The Irish News' and the 'News Letter', therefore we must continue to". If you are not getting the benefit of the audience reach from newspapers, which, in general, are clearly in decline, does it represent best value?

Mr McNabb: I am not aware if there ever has been a review; certainly not in my time. I can see this from both sides, as a former journalist. You could argue that newspapers still hold a place within certain communities —

Mr Stalford: Of course, yes.

Mr McNabb: — and if you are trying to reach a particular demographic, that is fine. I have heard the other argument that sometimes having an ad in a job section or in a newspaper presents a persona of a Department that goes beyond the ad itself. I am not sure I totally subscribe to that theory, but I have heard that argued. For campaign advertising in particular, you need a mix of media channels to satisfy yourself that you are reaching all the audience that your campaign is looking to reach.

Mr Stalford: Can you give us a flavour of what the 13 campaigns that were run last year involved and what they related to? That may be in the paper, but I did not see it.

Mr McNabb: No, it is not; sorry. I should have included that. I have not got a list at hand. Some of them were around the Department for Communities' Make the Call campaign, and I think some of them were on road safety campaigns. It was a mix of public messaging campaigns. For the Make the Call campaign, there was a mix of traditional and social media to try to reach as maximum an audience as possible.

Mr Stalford: How, at the end of a campaign, is its success or otherwise quantified and measured?

Mr McNabb: The process for campaign advertising is pretty rigorous. The government advertising unit works with the host Department — or the Department that is running the campaign. At the outset, a

business case is prepared and objectives for the campaign are set. It goes out to tender, an agency is involved, then that is prepared. The media campaign is based on that. At the end, there is an evaluation process to say whether the campaign delivered against the original targets. Campaigns that go for a longer burst than others might have a midterm evaluation to make sure that the target audience is being met.

Mr Stalford: Who carries out the evaluation?

Mr McNabb: I think it is carried out by an independent research company.

Mr Stalford: OK, so it is independent?

Mr McNabb: Yes.

Mr McCann: I understand that there needs to be a shift towards advertising on social media, because that is what most people are clued-in to now, so I get that. I know that there has been a decline in the readership of many papers, but there are still many people who are not clued-in to social media and rely on newspapers for advertisements for jobs and for other things, such as consultations. To move away from advertising in newspapers would near enough be cutting off your nose to spite your face. I am not saying that you do not advertise in newspapers. It is not either/or, but both.

Mr Stewart: That is absolutely right.

Mr McNabb: That is the point that I am making. If you want to reach as wide an audience as possible, you have to try to use as many channels as possible.

Mr Stewart: I made the point about the pace of change. The emergence of social media is something that has happened during my career. I remember the time when there was not any. The pace of change is increasing.

Mr McCann: We were much happier back then.

Mr Stalford: I remember faxing press releases.

Mr McCann: I think Christopher was the first *[Inaudible]* with a mobile phone. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Stewart: I will not go that far in case it ends up in Hansard. The pace of change is accelerating. The social media channels that are the right channels today may not be the right channels in a year's time. We must not be on the lookout for things that will happen over someone's career. It is the things that are changing over a year or 18 months. The communication channels that we are using today might not be the right mix this time next year. We have got to be more fleet of foot than we have been in the past.

Mr Clarke: I will be slightly more controversial than Fra on that. There has been a danger with and a culture in Northern Ireland of spoon-feeding people for too long. Chris, you came from the media. I believe that the media have tapped into that in advertising costs. When you hear the costs for government advertising versus private adverts, you imagine that the direction of travel is that they know you need them. It is interesting how some things relating to jobs have changed. We have the Community NI online system. People go to job markets and are directed towards Community NI, but there is still this need to use print media. We have spoon-fed for too long. There has been the rationalisation of the Civil Service and everything else. Part of that should be how you spend money. I just wanted to make that point, which is possibly slightly controversial. In response to Christopher's point about the 47 officers, I would dare to say that, at one stage, maybe we had too many: we had five in the DUP.

Mr Nesbitt: Hear, hear.

Mr Stalford: How dare you?

Mr Clarke: That is only because Christopher was one of them, of course. With regard to the 47, I am not saying that you ducked the question in your response to Christopher, but are the percentages

comparable to the 19% reduction in the Civil Service? I think that it would be useful — maybe this is more for you, Chris — to have a chart of your organisation, who is in it and what they are doing, and compare that with a chart from around four years ago. There has been a culture in the Civil Service —. I will not say what the culture is perceived to be, because I think that you have got yourself into trouble by making perceptions in something that you said earlier, Chris, but it would be nice to tie that down, because, whilst we are telling other people to cut their cloth accordingly, I am still to be convinced that the Civil Service has cut its cloth accordingly. Even with regard to your organisation — you three very able gentlemen are probably on very good salaries as well — how big is it and how many do you really represent? Is it value for money? I suppose that it is not a question, but more of a request that we get that organisational chart.

The other one that I actually think is contradictory is that public safety campaigns are good, but some Departments are cutting what they spend on actually delivering on the ground, one being Infrastructure, which cut its road safety budget. On one hand, we have road safety messages coming out from central Government, but, on the other hand, we have Departments such as Infrastructure cutting its road safety budget. Do you see a conflict there, Chris, with regard to the message that you are trying to get across when some Departments do not take responsibility by spending the money on the ground?

Mr McNabb: I think that that is a very good question. All that I would say with regard to the road safety campaign that is run by the Department for Infrastructure is that the issue of how much money it wants to spend on the campaign is a decision for that Department. It sets the budget for that; I do not set that budget. We then deliver the campaign to meet whatever objectives it has, but the actual setting of the budget comes from that Department. I do not have any role to play in setting any departmental budget for whatever advertisement campaigns there are.

Mr Clarke: You will appreciate my observation: on one hand, we are going to spend tens of thousands of pounds on a campaign for road safety, which is important — there are far too many deaths — but, on the other hand, the Department is cutting how much it spends on actually delivering road safety programmes to prevent deaths on the roads. That is a conflict. It is not directed at you, but it seems that the Department for Infrastructure has come to you and said, "Design us a programme. Design us something to get out into the media to promote road safety", but, at the same time, the same Department is actually cutting what it spends on road safety.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): I suppose I am bound to say that that was the case under previous Ministers and may not be the case going forward. *[Laughter.]* It is a point well made.

Mr Clarke: Sorry: that is not directed at any Minister. I think that that is a fair point.

Ms Sheerin: I just wanted to follow on from some of the points that have been made previously. With regard to Snapchat and Instagram — I may be one of the people in the room who does understand the differences — I assume that Snapchat is not one that you use.

Mr McNabb: We do not use Snapchat. Across Departments, we have a number of social media channels: Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and LinkedIn. Some Departments use Instagram, but that is not universal across all Departments.

Ms Sheerin: I just wanted to clarify that.

Leading on to the budget and *[Interruption]* in using print media advertising, the vast majority of advertising that you would do on Facebook or Twitter would be low cost and fairly cost-effective. You talked about doing a review of the effectiveness. Obviously, Facebook gives you that: you can review how many people you have targeted and which age range or demographic you have hit. I assume that that could be done fairly cost-effectively without impacting too much on what you spend on print media.

Mr McNabb: With regard to social media, we do boosted tweets and posts. There is a relatively small budget to that, but you can see the return from it very quickly. Where we use it really effectively is on nirect, where we post weather warning events. We did some boosted messaging on Storm Ciara, and it went out to quite a large audience.

Advertising spend in relation to print media is part of a mix around campaign advertising. A Department will ask for campaign advertising on a particular issue, and it will then come with the mix of channels that it wants to use to reach whatever audience it wants to reach. The observation I am making is that, more and more in the budgetary allocation, there is a greater spend on social media, but there is still a mix of different channels, including TV, radio, outdoor, digital and print.

Ms Sheerin: My thinking was that social media could be used almost as an additionality without having to divert funds away from some other —.

Mr McNabb: The budget for that comes from the Department. It will say, "I've x amount of money to deliver a campaign". That will then go to the advertising agency, which will say to me, "Here is the mix of channels we will use, and, against that mix, here is the spend we will use against each channel to try and maximise reach".

Mr Sheehan: Thanks for your presentation. What is the cost to the Executive of 47 press officers?

Mr Stewart: I do not have a figure for that, but we could get it fairly easily.

Mr McNabb: I do not know.

Mr Sheehan: How hard or easy a job do you think you would have in convincing the ordinary man or woman in the street that there is a need for 47?

Mr McNabb: It is not really a conversation that comes up with me on the street, to be fair, but I suppose that you could argue —.

Mr Sheehan: I suppose that very few people actually know that there are 47 press officers.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): They might next week.

Mr McNabb: I think that the figure they work off is 160. I suppose that you could ask that about any part of the public sector, apart from nurses and teachers, of how many people you actually need to do a job. The only point that I am making is that, given the roles and responsibilities that we carry out, there is not much fat within EIS to deliver all that for the Ministers.

Mr Clarke: I am interested in your response there, Chris. Where is the 160? Are you saying that there are 47 dedicated press officers but that the total —?

Mr McNabb: No, it is a figure that went out years ago that is still quoted in the media as being the number of press officers. It is a historical figure.

Mr Clarke: OK. You just alerted me there. I thought that there was something that you were hiding from us. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McNabb: No, I am not hiding anything.

Mr Stewart: He alerted me as well.

Mr Clarke: I did see your face, actually.

Mr Robinson: Thanks, Chris and your team, for your presentation. During the last financial year, you have run a number of formal and work-based training events, including crisis communications. Can you give us an example?

Mr McNabb: Yes. I have a training budget that I use across EIS. A lot of it has been spent on social media development, but I commissioned an external company to deliver a crisis communications course, which was really a tabletop exercise for all EIS staff to participate in. It was about how we, as a system, would deliver communications around a significant event; I think that it was an aeroplane landing on the M2 or something. That was the crisis communications course.

Mr Robinson: OK. Thanks.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): OK. I am sure that 47 people and a few others will be delighted that we have got to the end of this presentation. There is one question that I omitted earlier. Many of the other devolved regions and other governments have almost a daily briefing for journalists from some central source that gives an update on what is happening. I think that it could be "the gaggle", as it is referred to, if I go back to my 'West Wing' days. It is that sort of interaction.

Mr Stalford: Did you work for an American Administration?

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): I sometimes get a sense that journalists feel frustrated about getting information from the Executive. Is any consideration given to increasing the direct contact from the Executive Office, sitting at the centre of the Executive, and passing information back and forward to journalists in a formal daily or weekly way?

Mr Clarke: Do you mean to make that easy for them?

Mr McNabb: Obviously, the First Minister and deputy First Minister would have to suggest that as an idea. I know that they do it in Downing Street. It is not to say that I do not talk to journalists on a daily basis, but a formal structure like what you are talking about would have to be with the agreement of FM and DFM.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): I think that it happens in Scotland. I am not 100% sure about Wales, but it happens in other places.

Gentlemen, thank you very much indeed for coming along today. It is appreciated. I know that we have a couple of follow-up actions that we will come back to you on in writing.

Mr Nesbitt: Mr Jackson got away lightly there.

Mr Stewart: I was just thinking that.

Mr Clarke: Do you want to leave him behind with us?

Mr Neill Jackson (The Executive Office): I will initiate you into the mysteries at some future date, perhaps.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): It had better be a report by 12.00 noon on a Thursday, if it is coming up. *[Laughter.]* Thank you.