



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and  
Rural Affairs

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Withdrawal of DAERA and Local Authority  
Port Staff: GMB, NIPSA and Unite

11 March 2021

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Declan McAleer (Chairperson)  
Mr Philip McGuigan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Ms Clare Bailey  
Mrs Rosemary Barton  
Mr John Blair  
Mr Maurice Bradley  
Mr Harry Harvey  
Mr William Irwin  
Mr Patsy McGlone

**Witnesses:**

Mr Alan Perry	GMB
Mr Alan Law	Northern Ireland Public Sector Alliance
Mr Kieran Ellison	Unite

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan):** I remind members that this is the first of our oral evidence sessions on the Committee's scrutiny of the DAERA and local authority decision to withdraw staff from the ports due to an alleged security threat. I welcome, via StarLeaf, Alan Law, the assistant secretary of NIPSA; Alan Perry, a general officer of the GMB union; and Kieran Ellison, a general officer of Unite. You are all very welcome. We will ask you to give a brief presentation, and then we will open up to questions from members. I am not sure which of you will kick off, but you are free to do so.

**Mr Alan Law (Northern Ireland Public Sector Alliance):** I will go first, Deputy Chair. Thanks for the invitation. I represent NIPSA, and I am accompanied by an official from Unite and an official from GMB. We are the lead officials with responsibility for the staff employed by Mid and East Antrim Borough Council. The incident in question commenced around 1 February. It started with an email communication from my colleague Kieran to the head of human resources in the council, raising concerns. I quote the email:

*"It has been brought to my attention by a senior officer in Unite that staff, whose job it is to carry out the Brexit NI protocol, appear to have been threatened, by graffiti and potentially other methods, for carrying out the role."*

That is a fairly standard type of enquiry when we have concerns about members. It is important that we all bear in mind that, as trade union officials, our priority is the health, safety and well-being of the people whom we represent. We take no exception to an employer wishing to withdraw staff because

they feel that those staff are at risk. However, we are concerned about how we were dragged into this particular issue. Certainly, the embellishment of statements attributed to us has caused us great concern, because including us in those statements seeks to give credence to council decisions that we were not a part of.

We received a response email from the council, saying that it was aware of this issue, that it was to be discussed by the full council later that evening and that there was a group party leaders' meeting. Subsequently, we met the mayor, who advised us that the group party leaders' meeting was to take place at 3.00 pm that day. We were also made aware that, around the same time, the council had reached out to the PSNI and been assured that there was no threat to staff. It is our understanding that staff were advised of that and told that they would be able to continue working. Later in the evening, the decision was made to withdraw staff. There is a significant gap in our understanding of how some of those decisions were made. Of course, we all want to have a full understanding of this.

This was unlike scenarios in which I have been involved where staff had to be withdrawn from work. We were surprised that the council did not want to meet us first thing the next morning to alert us to that decision, discuss what it knew and what it was going to do to protect the interests of the staff. The next morning, I was surprised that we had not received any communication from the employer to say that it had taken the decision. In fact, trade union officials found out about it only because it was on the evening news.

The next morning, the MP for the area made some very serious claims on the radio that have not been repeated since, one of which was that the trade unions were calling for staff to be withdrawn. In addition, comments were made about how staff were concerned because graffiti had appeared on gable walls near their homes. We have never heard that repeated by anyone. We do not know where that information came from or why it was stated, but it was stated.

The next day, I asked for a Zoom meeting with the director responsible, but we never received a response to that request. Therefore, I telephoned her. I was concerned about the fact that the council was saying in some of its statements that it had been in communication with the trade unions, when, in fact, the only communication to date had been a short email exchange between my colleague Kieran and the head of HR — that was it. We were concerned that the council was saying that it had been in communication with the trade unions when we knew that that was not the case.

The fact that the mayor's statement was made orally meant that we were not officially in receipt of it. I managed to obtain a transcript, and one paragraph of the statement, which was read out at the council meeting on 1 February, caused us great concern:

*"Trade unions on behalf of council members of staff assisting with the checks at the port have raised serious concerns around increasing suspicious activity".*

Had it stopped there, nothing would have been in dispute. However it went on to say:

*"such as apparent information gathering, including the taking of personal registration plates from their vehicles."*

We have no knowledge of where that statement came from or why it was made. We have repeatedly asked for it to be withdrawn. It simply beggars belief. From our point of view, if we had ever been aware that our members, members of staff of any union or people who are not even in a union were having their number plates recorded and that serious things like that were happening, first, we would have alerted the PSNI, and, secondly, we would have immediately discussed their immediate withdrawal with their employer. It concerns us that someone would say that we were aware of such matters and that we took no action. We have asked the council to clarify that. We have failed to obtain any clarification.

With regard to how the council responded to the incident, despite our request, we never had any formal meeting with the employer during that whole time. That strikes us all as utterly bizarre. Considering what the council said in its public statements, we would have expected that there was a need to meet the trade unions to discuss that issue to ensure that the staff's well-being was protected, because, in all of this, people have jobs to do, they have families, and they will have their own concerns about all that is happening. Clearly, anyone who is affected by their employer's decision to withdraw them from work will be under stress. Therefore, we would all expect that any such decisions would be based on evidence and that there would then be meetings with the stakeholders who are

involved and the trade unions, and we would all discuss what we were going to do. That did not happen.

On 4 February, we had a planned local negotiating forum. That is the formal structure by which trade unions meet the employer. There is an agenda. All sorts of issues are on the agenda, and we discuss them. The council had not decided that we were even worthy of an update at that meeting on why any of that had happened. We brought it up. In particular, we brought up the issue of the mayor's incorrect and inaccurate statement, because it is important when issues like that happen that the facts are clear, that we all understand why things are being said, that what is being said is accurate, that people have confidence that the decisions and everything that is happening are based on the best available information and that there is no misrepresentation of any of the existing information.

Those are the issues, in a nutshell, about which we have had concern with the employer. We copied you into and provided you with some of the information that we have issued. We felt, because we were getting nowhere with the employer, that we needed to ask the chief executive a number of questions. I have provided the email that we issued to the chief executive on 2 February. We also issued a statement calling for the council to withdraw the inaccurate remarks that were attributed to us and to clarify its official record, because we believe that we have a relationship of good faith. We work productively and positively with this employer, and we need that to be on the basis of accurate and truthful statements. That has been a particular area of concern.

We met the chief executive and mayor to raise our concerns. There was an acceptance at that meeting that the council statement was inaccurate and had been a miscommunication. However, to dismiss those matters as a miscommunication is somewhat unhelpful. When you get to the stage of withdrawing staff because of threats to their safety, any information that a public authority issues has to be accurate. We all have to understand what is being said and why it is being said. We feel that, through this whole process, there was very limited engagement with us to ensure that every step taken was taken on the basis of good faith. That is really all that I need to say at this stage.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan):** OK, Alan. Thank you very much for that. We received your documentation, which, along with your update, was very fulsome. I appreciate that.

I will kick off before inviting members to ask questions. There are a couple of issues. There is the obvious issue of the misleading statement and information provided at the council meeting. You said that there was an embellishment of trade union concerns. The other issue is the decision itself and the process and engagement that led to it. The trade union requested that the council's misleading allegations and embellished information be withdrawn and that the record be corrected. Has that happened?

**Mr Law:** Not to my knowledge. There has been some suggestion that clarification has been issued to us, but I am not aware of any formal statement in the council chamber withdrawing the remarks.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan):** OK. On that particular night, the mayor said, and you read this out:

*"Trade unions on behalf of council members of staff assisting with the checks at the port" —*

of Larne —

*"have raised serious concerns around increasing suspicious activity such as apparent information gathering, including the taking of personal registration plates from their vehicles."*

You said all along that neither you nor any trade union has any information about that, that you have no idea where it came from and that you have no knowledge whatsoever about where that line in the mayor's statement came from.

**Mr Law:** None. We have asked the council why that was said, given the very limited information contained in the email from my colleague Kieran. If COVID had not existed, we would all have gone straight down to the port area to meet people face to face to see what was going on. However, there are restrictions on non-essential travel, so we were prevented from doing that. We did not say and have never said, and there was no communication whatsoever from us to indicate, that staff number plates were being recorded. I can only imagine how, if I were a member of staff, I would have reacted

to hearing that for the first time, potentially on the evening news. I would have been horrified. We were certainly horrified.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan):** You have asked the mayor and the chief executive of Mid and East Antrim Borough Council how that line came to be inserted in the mayor's statement of that night. You have asked for it to be withdrawn and clarified, and you have had no explanation of how it arrived there.

**Mr Law:** None. It is being put down to a miscommunication.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan):** It is a very serious one. We have all seen the email from Kieran to a senior member of council staff, and, as you rightly outlined, it does refer to "concerns". However, in terms of miscommunication, there is a brave jump from "concerns" to:

*"information gathering, including the taking of personal registration plates from their vehicles."*

**Mr Law:** Absolutely. The response that we received from the council's head of HR at 16.37 on the same day did not indicate to us that the situation had even reached the stage at which the withdrawal of staff from work was being considered. It refers to meetings going on and that sort of thing, but we certainly were not aware that a threshold had been reached. The council now advises that it had been in receipt of all sorts of communications and sensitive emails, none of which anyone has seen, to suggest that things were happening in the background on which it needed to take action. As I said earlier, we wholeheartedly support any employer who feels that the safety of their staff is at risk and that they need to withdraw people to protect their health, safety and well-being. That has never been in dispute. I need to repeat that because I do not want there to be any ambiguity. If there are any safety concerns for staff and an employer cannot reasonably support the staff remaining in the workplace because of those concerns, it is important that the well-being of the staff is paramount. That is not what was at stake here: the employer said that staff were having their number plates recorded and that that information came from the trade unions when that simply did not happen.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan):** I do not want to hog this. I have a couple of more questions. and then I will open it up to other members. Do you have any information that that was happening, never mind that it was not —

**Mr Law:** No. I know no more about the inclusion of those remarks in that statement now than I did when the mayor read them out on 1 February.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan):** Have the trade unions seen the PSNI's risk assessment? You said something that I had not heard before: that the council was informed by the PSNI that there was no threat before the decision was taken and that — I think that you said this — the PSNI relayed that to council staff. Before the decision was taken that night, either through the PSNI or the council, staff were told that there was no threat to them.

**Mr Law:** Just to be absolutely clear, it is our understanding from sources that we have that the council was in contact throughout the day with the PSNI and advised staff at around 3.00 pm that it had had it confirmed that there was no threat to staff and that they could continue to work. However, subsequently, between that time and the council meeting, a decision was taken that a threshold had been reached, and staff were withdrawn from work.

**Mr Harvey:** Thanks for coming, Alan. Did the trade unions have serious concerns about the safety of council employees? There were "potentially very serious threats", according to the Unite rep's email of 1 February? What changed for the unions for them to take exception to the council's temporary decision to protect the welfare of its staff until the degree and severity of the situation had been appropriately ascertained, with the priority being staff safety?

**Mr Law:** As I said, we have never taken exception to the withdrawal of staff. It is paramount that an employer has the ability to take that decision to make sure that the health, safety and well-being of its staff are upheld. We do not diverge from that. What we do diverge from is the statement that was attributed to us in which it was alleged, quite clearly, that we told the council that staff were having their number plates recorded. That simply did not happen. As for the staff being withdrawn from work, if an employer feels that the safety of staff can no longer be protected or maintained, it is absolutely important that the employer take steps to protect them. If those steps need to include the withdrawal of

staff from work until it can get assurances that it is safe to go back, that should absolutely happen. We would never diverge from that and nor have we.

**Mr Harvey:** Would the unions have preferred the council to have taken no action and potentially left their members at risk of harm?

**Mr Law:** I have quite clearly stated that we would never have preferred that to be the case. We do not understand what events occurred on 1 February and what events occurred when staff returned to work later that week. To our knowledge, nothing really changed in the environment and in the local community during that time, but something occurred on 1 February that the council decided passed a threshold to require the withdrawal of staff, and then later in the week something occurred that allowed the council to return staff to work. We have always said, and we continue to do so, that the health, safety and well-being of the staff are paramount and that, when an employer feels that it needs to withdraw staff to protect them, it has our absolute support.

**Mr Harvey:** Alan, when was the PSNI risk or threat assessment requested and when was it carried out? Was there an acceptable time frame between the two, given the severity of the situation?

**Mr Law:** I hope that you will be content with my explanation. I do not know when the PSNI risk assessment was requested, how long it took or when it was carried out. The council had a risk assessment provided to it, but a risk assessment is what an employer does; the PSNI does a threat assessment. The terms sound fairly similar, but there is an important distinction. You will need to get council officers to clarify this, but my understanding is that the PSNI threat assessment was requested on the Monday or Tuesday and was provided to the council later in the week. We certainly had sight of the council's risk assessment, which took into account the PSNI threat assessment. That was provided to us towards the end of the week as well.

**Mr Harvey:** OK. I understand. I appreciate that, Alan; thank you very much.

*(The Chairperson [Mr McAleer] in the Chair)*

**Mr McGlone:** Thank you to Alan and his colleague Kieran for coming along and being so frank with us. In relation to the sequence on 1 February and the email from your colleague Kieran, who is probably best placed to speak about that, there are two specific issues that I want to ask about. There is mention of a senior Unite colleague having relayed the information. If any of us received an email like that from someone whom we knew and trusted as a colleague or at least someone who works on the trade union side, the very first thing that we would want to do is to find out more. Kieran will be fit to tell me whether anyone from the council contacted him or his senior colleague to establish more detail on the allegations.

I presume that it has been verified that no one was threatened or intimidated, there were no reports to the police or council of that nature and that no vehicle registration numbers were taken. Can you advise whether anyone in a senior management role spoke to either Kieran — I presume not — or his senior colleague in Unite? On foot of the email, did the PSNI follow up — I presume not with Kieran but with his other colleague who was referred to in the email — to establish further details on that?

**Mr Law:** I will let my colleague Kieran respond to the majority of your points. I have provided you with the communications that took place, which were by email. I have provided you with the three emails that we received: one at 13.45, one at 16.37, which was a response from the employer, and a follow-up from Kieran at 16.41. I have provided those emails to the Committee, but Kieran is best placed to answer questions on any other aspects of that.

**Mr McGlone:** I am trying to establish whether anybody lifted a telephone to drill down on the detail. It would not be like me to do that sort of business by email. That is what I am trying to find out.

**Mr Law:** I emailed council the next morning at 9.17. I did not get a reply, so I eventually phoned the director who has responsibility for staff at around 10.30. That is the only proactive communication in which we were involved.

**Mr McGlone:** You did that, not the employer.

**Mr Law:** That is right. Kieran can come in in relation to the emails.

**Mr Kieran Ellison (Unite):** Thank you for giving me time. We were all working at home, and the officer to whom I am subordinate got in touch with me and told me that he had become aware — I do not know how — of graffiti going up in areas, which appeared to target those carrying out checks as part of the Brexit NI protocol. He also said that he believed that there was social media stuff on that. However, the graffiti thing was easier to understand. The social media stuff would have involved quite a degree of searching, so, instead of specifically calling that out, I referred to it as "potentially other methods". That email went in because Richard is incredibly busy, as are trade union officials who — I am not looking for sympathy — have been doing 70- to 80-hour weeks for a considerable period. The ability to make contact while people are on Zoom calls etc has proven, through experience, to be very difficult. I put that in an email so that it was in the system, expecting that Richard might get back to us, preferably by phone, but he chose to do that by email. Really, what I wanted was to put that on the radar and for the council to be aware and cognisant of the behaviours that had been reported to me. Essentially, I sought assurances from Mid and East Antrim Borough Council that it was carrying out risk assessments and was introducing security measures for those staff if the risk assessments deemed that necessary.

There were no phone calls from me to Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, and nor were there any phone calls in response to me from any employees of the council, from the bottom to the top of the organisation. In fact, as Alan pointed out, communication with trade unions was sadly lacking. That is my view. I am open to being open and honest and answering questions. Hopefully, that met the answers that you were looking for.

**Mr McGlone:** There is just a bit more. Part of the question that I was asking was about the colleague to whom you referred in the email who had spoken to you about graffiti appearing, as he or she had seen it, and the other stuff on social media. Was the council aware of the identity of that individual? If so, did its representatives speak to him or her to seek further detail about those allegations or perceptions or to get any information that that person had to get to the core of the issue?

**Mr Ellison:** In short, the answer is no.

**Mr McGlone:** They did not.

**Mr Ellison:** The only correspondence that the council had was with a senior officer in Unite. The council did not know who that person was, so it could not ask him or her. Equally, the council did not come back to me in an exploratory manner to find out who that individual was so that it could have that conversation.

To try to be balanced, by that stage, in many communities that are perceived as, potentially, Protestant, unionist or loyalist, that graffiti has been on the walls within a recent time frame. In the area in which I live, there were several incidents of that in the locality. I do not think that they would need to go too far to verify with the senior member of Unite that there was graffiti on the wall. My understanding is that, on the way into Larne, it had already been — I am trying to find the right word — tagged, sprayed, painted — whatever the method was — on the walls. I do not think that you would need to go too far to verify that there was graffiti in areas around Larne that may be perceived as Protestant, unionist or loyalist.

**Mr McGlone:** I do not think that that is the issue. It is not the graffiti. It is when somebody refers to "potentially other methods". That is a pretty broad ambit of what those methods could be. What you are telling me is that, when reference was made to the council about people being threatened via graffiti and "potentially other methods", the council did not contact you to establish (a) what those other methods would be or (b) to make contact with the senior officer in Unite, who could elaborate on what those other methods might be. None of that was done.

To tidy it up a wee bit, likewise, the police did not speak to you or, insofar as you can speak for that person, the other senior officer in Unite to establish what those other methods potentially were.

**Mr Ellison:** That is entirely correct. The first time that that detail was drilled down into was when that senior officer appeared on 'The Nolan Show' to ask questions about the email exchange.

**Mr McGlone:** OK, that is grand. Thanks very much, indeed, Alan and Kieran.

**Mr Ellison:** No issue.

**Mr Blair:** I thank Alan and Kieran for being with us, and I assure them that all of us take these matters seriously. Staff, who have probably been placed under additional pressure by actions that took place, also have our support.

Chair, if I may, I want to hone in on a couple of details. I want to refer to an email from 1 February at 16.37 from the head of HR to Kieran. I do not know in advance how important or relevant this detail will be to the trade union side, but it is important for the Committee and for the inquiry that we do our best to clarify it. The email states that the "Group Party Leaders are meeting". We know that, and that has been discussed. It also indicates that:

*"Council are also meeting with Minister Poots".*

That is relevant to the Committee. Not to put anybody under pressure, but does the trade union side agree that that indicates that either the full council or a representative group from the council were meeting the Minister? I believe that not to be the case — that one or two individuals, if any, met the Minister — but is the trade union side aware that that would not have been the full council or necessarily a representative group of the council?

**Mr Law:** The email just states:

*"Council are also meeting with Minister Poots".*

That, in my view, could mean the full council, but it could also mean that officers of the council were delegated to meet Minister Poots. I do not know, and I do not think that it would be fair for me to comment on to whom exactly that is intended to refer, but it certainly indicates that council was meeting the Minister to discuss the issues. I do not know whether that is limited to a group of councillors, group party leaders, the entire council or a council officer acting on its behalf.

**Mr Blair:** Or, as the case may be, none of the above. I have to make clear — not to get an opinion, but so that this stage of the inquiry is clear — that that line may not give a full picture.

I will refer to the chief executive's email. That email does not tell me very much. It could not possibly tell you anything about the assurances that you have been looking for. Can I ask again for clarification? Have you been given any indication or even a holding reply on what is holding up the withdrawal of the remarks? Have you been given an explanation as to why they have not been withdrawn or whether they are likely to be withdrawn?

**Mr Law:** I have no further knowledge about that. I simply do not understand the resistance to formally withdrawing the remarks and setting the record straight. That would have been helpful and would have alleviated, from the employer's perspective, the intense scrutiny that it was subject to from local, regional and national media. I do not understand the resistance to ensuring that the record of the statement was amended and clarified formally and that we received the responses that we required.

**Mr Blair:** OK. You have been given no information as to if or when that withdrawal might happen.

**Mr Law:** I have been given no indication. There was a suggestion that the mayor may have issued something on social media about that. I have not been able to track that down — perhaps others may be able to achieve that — but that is certainly not the way in which we would expect this to be communicated. The most constructive way would be to withdraw the remarks at the next opportunity at a council meeting. When the mayor was pressed on the media about this issue, he dismissed it as a distraction. It took up an entire paragraph of his statement, and I therefore felt that it was unhelpful to dismiss that as a distraction and was not in keeping with the tone of the discussion on the issue.

**Mr Blair:** OK, but it was not relayed directly to you or the union.

**Mr Law:** Neither I nor my colleagues have had communication from the council formally withdrawing those remarks and setting the record straight. That is just the bottom line.

**Mr Ellison:** The most that we got was a discussion with three officials — the head of HR, the chief executive and the mayor — at which they acknowledged that the remarks attributed to the trade unions were incorrect. It is up to you to judge or decide what you think, but the best reason — I do not

want to use the word "excuse" — put forward was that it was a very busy day with a lot going on and that the matter needed to be adjudged and dealt with quickly and expeditiously.

I expressed scepticism that a lack of time would have led to such a huge deviation from what I put in my email to what was attributed to my remark. At best, we have had an acknowledgement that what was attributed to us was incorrect and that it was due to a short turnaround time. I am not aware of any official correspondence to us or anything widely circulated that removes that remark by any means.

**Mr Irwin:** The rights and wrongs of what you were or were not told are probably important to you. My view would have been that the protection of staff was paramount, and, normally, the precautionary route is the best route.

I, like the rest, I am sure, was aware only of news report, and one showed the mayor in a meeting making the announcement and saying that it was a unanimous decision of the council. Am I not right in saying that it was a precautionary move, the safety of staff was paramount and that it was a wise decision under the circumstances?

**Mr Law:** Mr Irwin, I think that I said already that we do not diverge from the council's decision-making in relation to this. I have raised my concerns around the fact that that was seen to be a unanimous decision by the council because — no disrespect to the councillors — it was not its decision to take; it is the chief executive's decision to take, as the officer responsible for staff. Therefore, I would have hated to have seen a scenario in which she wanted to withdraw the staff but that there was not a decision because councillors voted not to do that. That would not have been constructive or helpful for anyone.

Certainly, it would not have been helpful if, for example, councillors took various decisions and they were not unanimous. We made it clear to the council, and we continue to make it clear to you today, that we do not diverge from the decision to withdraw staff if it is felt that staff are at risk. That is not an issue at all. We have never, ever in this entire scenario said that we would have any concerns about that.

Our concerns remain, principally, that we were being accused of having told the council that staff were having their number plates recorded. That is quite a serious development for people because it implies that people's personal safety is at risk not only because they are at work but because people are trying to create some sort of database to gather information on where they may live and follow them home, and target their families and homes. There are serious connotations to implying that. If anyone heard that on the media, the first thing that they would have thought was, "Well, that's no way to handle an issue for your staff". The staff who were going to be taken out of work think, "Well, it's because there's graffiti in Larne". Then the mayor reads a statement to say that the trade unions have also alerted your employer that your number plates are being recorded. Those are not the actions of someone who wants to behave responsibly.

**Mr Irwin:** OK.

**Mr Ellison:** May I interject there? In the email that I originally sent, it quite clearly states:

*"I am seeking assurances that MEA is risk assessing the issue and introducing security measures for these staff."*

We all wanted the staff to be protected. That was the primary purpose of the email. At no stage do I diverge into politics. The only thing that I was interested in was the safety of the staff.

**Mr Irwin:** Could that email not have been taken as your support in that situation?

**Mr Law:** It is. We — myself, my colleague Kieran from Unite and Alan Perry from GMB — have always supported the council's decision to withdraw staff, because it felt that a threshold had been reached that meant that staff needed to be taken out of work over safety concerns. We have never diverged from that. We do not, however, believe that it is helpful to attribute additional comments that never existed to the trade unions, because that creates fear and anxiety, which did not need to happen.

**Mr Irwin:** OK. Thank you.

**Mr M Bradley:** Thank you very much, Alan and Kieran, for your presentation. It has cleared up an awful lot of things. I agree with you that staff safety must be paramount, and I think that all steps were taken along those lines. Having been a councillor for some 18 and a half years, and as a fellow trade unionist, I know that union members sometimes would have said things to me, as a like-minded individual, that they would not have to their officials, their line managers and so on and so forth, so there can be jungle drums. I wanted to ask about a tiny matter. Alan or Kieran, did any of your members contact you directly over this prior to the withdrawal? Did any of your members make contact with any of the union officials to say, "Look, there is something happening here", did they not contact you at all or did they not contact you until after the press statement?

**Mr Law:** There has been no contact in relation to that issue. That in itself explains that staff probably did not have the concerns that have been attributed here. On the whole piece that we are trying to get to the bottom of, if anyone had at any stage contacted me, Kieran or Alan Perry and said, "I'm concerned my number plate's being recorded. I'm concerned I'm being followed. I'm concerned that anything sinister is happening in relation to *[Inaudible]*", we would have been straight on to the employer saying, "There are major concerns here in relation to certain things", and we would have explained those to the employer. That is how unions work. We protect our members' interests. We would never have held back on that issue.

**Mr M Bradley:** I have been a trade unionist for quite a long time, and I know how they work. I know that, sometimes, people make contact more quickly with somebody whom they know than with somebody who is in officialdom, like you. I am just aware that, sometimes, union members would contact councillors, a friend in the council or a council officer before they would contact you. I think that that is maybe what we are nailing it down to. Thanks for your answers. Thanks, Kieran.

**Mr McGuigan:** I want to assure the members of the trade unions that, despite some individual Committee members downplaying this as some kind of miscommunication or non-event, the Committee is taking the issue very seriously, hence our inquiry. We take very seriously the decision around the safety of staff, be they Mid and East Antrim Borough Council staff, other council staff or DAERA official staff. The decision was a major decision, and the inquiry is trying to ascertain how that decision was made and on which information it was based. I totally understand the upset that you feel about information that did not come from you being attributed to you and the impact that that had on you, as a movement, and on individual staff. The Committee will try, through the inquiry, to get to the bottom of where that information came from, why it was used, why other processes were not followed, and why information from the police was overlooked, etc. Be assured that the Committee takes what you have presented to us very seriously and that the inquiry will diligently try to get to the bottom of how and why the decision was made.

**Mr Law:** Thank you for that assurance. We are no more aware today than we were when the was issued of anyone having their number plates recorded. I have had no information presented to me by anyone to suggest that that statement would have been accurate if it had not been attributed to the trade unions and the council had just said, "Well, we are aware that this is happening". We are still not aware of anyone having had their number plate recorded, and no one, including the council, has provided us with any statement or assurances to say, "Actually, we were aware this was happening, but we shouldn't have said you said it". Our position is that that statement was attributed to us, but, as well as that, we are not aware that that was actually occurring, and no one has provided us with any evidence to suggest that it was.

**Mr Ellison:** If we are looking for a reasonable comparator, a very similar email was sent to Belfast City Council. How it dealt with the situation was entirely different; there was no misattribution of remarks, and constructive updates were regularly sent to the trade unions. It also withdrew its staff. There were absolutely no complaints and no suggestion that the decision had derived from trade union side. Local authorities handled it very differently.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Clare, were you looking to make a quick point?

**Ms Bailey:** Thanks, Declan; just a wee quick one. Many of my issues have been addressed already. Our thoughts are with the staff regarding any continued threat against them. Have any of your members or staff in general at the ports been in touch with you? Do they continue to fear for their personal safety today at all?

**Mr Law:** In order to protect the interests of staff, I am not going to comment on that question. We address anything in relation to staff health, safety or well-being with the employer. That is the only constructive response that I can give.

**Ms Bailey:** Thanks for that, Alan. Is there any constructive dialogue going on about that issue with their employer?

**Mr Law:** There has been no proactive engagement with the employer. There was talk of establishing a WhatsApp group should there be the need to urgently update trade unions in that regard, but, beyond that, no.

**Mr Ellison:** The director who looks after them shared with us not the PSNI threat assessment but the council's risk assessment on two occasions, to the best of my knowledge, and welcomed remarks from us. However, since remarks being misattributed to us, you have to understand that there has been a breakdown in trust and communication. That has had a detrimental effect on open dialogue: you do not know whether, if you go back with anything further, it will make 'The Nolan Show' and turn from a serious issue into a pantomime.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Thank you very much, the two Alans and Kieran, for attending this morning. You gave comprehensive answers, and we really appreciate you taking the time to meet us. Thank you very much. Have a nice day.