



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Criminal Justice Committee

Wednesday 26 October 2022

Session 6



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Wednesday 26 October 2022

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CRIMINAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE

26th Meeting 2022, Session 6

CONVENER

*Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab)

*Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con)

*Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)

*Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)

*Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab)

*Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Lynn Brown (Scottish Police Authority)

Keith Brown (Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans)

James Gray (Police Scotland)

Interim Chief Officer Ross Haggart (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service)

David Page (Police Scotland)

Interim Deputy Chief Officer Stuart Stevens (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service)

John Thomson (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Stephen Imrie

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

Criminal Justice Committee

Wednesday 26 October 2022

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Audrey Nicoll): Good morning, and welcome to the 26th meeting in 2022 of the Criminal Justice Committee. We have received no apologies. Pauline McNeill joins us online.

Our first item of business is to decide whether to take in private item 7 on the agenda and, at future meetings, consideration of oral evidence and any draft letters as part of our pre-budget scrutiny. Are we agreed to do that?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Subordinate Legislation

Scottish Biometrics Commissioner Act 2020 (Code of Practice) (Appointed Day) (Scotland) Regulations 2022 [Draft]

09:31

The Convener: Our next item of business is to consider an affirmative Scottish statutory instrument. I refer members to paper 1. The instrument specifies the appointed day for the coming into effect of the code of practice that has been prepared by the Scottish Biometrics Commissioner under section 7 of the Scottish Biometrics Commissioner Act 2020. I welcome Keith Brown, Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans, and his officials Ms Elaine Hamilton, forensics policy team leader, and Mr David Scott, policy manager, both from the Scottish Government's police: workforce, equality and forensics department.

I invite the cabinet secretary to make a short opening statement on the SSI.

Keith Brown (Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans): Thank you for the opportunity to speak briefly about the draft Scottish Biometrics Commissioner Act 2020 (Code of Practice) (Appointed Day) Regulations 2022. The Parliament passed the 2020 act in March of that year. The legislation speaks to some of the key societal issues of our time, touching on data protection, privacy, human rights and ethics as they relate to the police's use of very personal information. The Scottish Government therefore welcomed the Parliament's appointment of Dr Brian Plastow as Scotland's first Biometrics Commissioner in April last year.

Given the rapid increase in the use of biometric data and technologies, it is important that we have an independent commissioner who will raise public awareness about rights, responsibilities and standards, as well as monitor compliance with such standards. It is vital that a clearer understanding of those issues is promoted in our communities, especially for young people and for vulnerable people.

An integral part of the legislation was for the commissioner to prepare a code of practice. That code has been prepared by the commissioner, and it symbolises what I believe is Scotland's progressive approach to biometrics in a policing context. It is worth mentioning that the code is the first of its kind in the world. It is designed to promote good practice, transparency and accountability by setting out an agreed framework of standards for professional decision making. It is intended to strike the right balance between the

needs and responsibilities of policing and the criminal justice system and the fundamental obligation to guarantee the basic human rights, privacy and freedoms of individual members of the public.

The commissioner has developed the draft code in consultation with key interests, including the bodies that will be subject to the code, statutory consultees and other bodies that are represented on the commissioner's advisory group. Earlier this year, the committee had the opportunity to consider a draft of the code, alongside evidence from the commissioner, and I know that the contents of the draft code were viewed positively by committee members.

The purpose of the instrument is to bring the code into force on the appointed day. As agreed with the commissioner, the day that is proposed is 16 November 2022. From that day, Police Scotland, the Scottish Police Authority and the Police Investigations and Review Commissioner will be required to comply with the code. The commencement of the code will therefore represent a major milestone in the implementation of the 2020 act.

The Scottish Government is happy to work with the commissioner and other partners to ensure that an ethical, proportionate and lawful approach continues to be taken in the collection, use, retention and disposal of biometric data in Scotland for policing and criminal justice purposes.

The Convener: I will now open the discussion to members. If anyone has questions on the instrument, they should indicate that now.

No member has indicated that they wish to speak, so we will move to the next agenda item. I invite the cabinet secretary to move motion S6M-05960.

Motion moved,

That the Criminal Justice Committee recommends that the Scottish Biometrics Commissioner Act 2020 (Code of Practice) (Appointed Day) (Scotland) Regulations 2022 [draft] be approved.—[*Keith Brown*]

Motion agreed to.

The Convener: That concludes our consideration of the SSI. I thank the cabinet secretary for attending. We will have a short suspension to allow the cabinet secretary and his colleagues to leave.

09:36

Meeting suspended.

09:36

On resuming—

Judicial Appointments Board for Scotland (Membership) Modification Order 2022 (SSI 2022/268)

The Convener: Our next agenda item is consideration of a negative instrument. I refer members to paper 2.

Do members have any questions about the instrument?

No member has indicated that they wish to comment. Are members content for the committee not to make any recommendations to Parliament on the instrument?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We will have a short suspension to allow for a change of witnesses.

09:37

Meeting suspended.

09:38

On resuming—

Pre-budget Scrutiny 2023-24

The Convener: Our next item of business is our first oral evidence session as part of our pre-budget scrutiny of the Scottish Government's forthcoming budget for 2023-24.

Submissions received from our call for views have now been published on the committee's web page. Submissions from the witnesses who are before us today are included in members' meeting papers. I refer members to papers 3 and 4.

We will hear from two panels of witnesses, who represent the policing and the fire and rescue services respectively. I extend a warm welcome to our first panel: Lynn Brown, chief executive of the Scottish Police Authority; and David Page, deputy chief officer, and James Gray, chief financial officer, both of Police Scotland.

We will move straight to questions. I will open with a general question, but it is one that might be helpful in the current circumstances in which we have a difficult financial climate. Before we deal with any implications of the indicative flat cash settlement announced by the Scottish Government, perhaps you would share your initial overview of its proposals. I appreciate that that might be difficult.

I put that to David Page initially, and then I will bring in Lynn Brown and James Gray.

David Page (Police Scotland): Good morning, committee members. We are very surprised about the removal of real-terms protection. In our planning for the resource spending review, which is what we have to do to plan for our budget, we looked at the requirements that were laid out in the RSR. We fully understand the challenges throughout the public sector. What was asked for in the RSR was that public sector bodies should be looking to deliver public sector transformation, reduce head count to pre-Covid levels and try to make efficiencies to alleviate some of the pressures.

One of the huge challenges for us in policing is that we have successfully delivered one of the biggest public sector transformations in the United Kingdom, let alone in Scotland. As members will be aware, the merger of the eight police forces and the two other bodies into a single body—Police Scotland—did not come without a lot of challenges, but we have delivered improved services and £200 million per annum of savings. That has not been without a huge amount of pain, and a huge amount of stress and pressure on our staff, but we are delivering a much better service. If you compare Police Scotland's service delivery

with that of our peer groups in England and Wales, you will see that our transformation has been successful.

We have a non-pay budget of only 13 per cent—£176 million—so the vast majority of our budget is on people. Any requirement to bring in more efficiencies to deal with a flat cash settlement will fall squarely on the officers and staff who work in Police Scotland. However, we continue to push hard to deliver more efficiencies in Police Scotland. That journey never stops.

The transformation journey of Police Scotland is far from complete. Although we have delivered a huge amount of transformation through cost reduction and the technology improvements that we have delivered in the past, we are still far from completing that journey. In 2017, we asked for about £300 million to deliver the digital transformation of eight police forces into a single platform, which has to be digitally enabled to allow us to compete with organised crime and other threats. That journey is far from complete. We have mentioned in the past, and it has been mentioned by Dame Elish Angiolini and others, the requirement for things such as body-worn video cameras, which every force in England and Wales has. In fact, every force in England and Wales has moved on to second-generation body-worn video cameras. We do not have the national capability for body-worn video. That is a key example of the transformation that still needs to be done by Police Scotland. We have delivered on the bulk of the transformation activities that make us more efficient, but we still have a long way to go, and we will still push into that space.

Where we have got to in our analysis of the flat cash settlement is that we are left with a choice of either no pay rises—in effect, a pay freeze for officers and staff—or funding them ourselves, which would mean basically cannibalising policing to pay for policing. Given that 86 per cent of our budget is on people, every 1 per cent rise would cost us about £11 million. If we are looking at a 5 per cent pay rise, which is what we provided to officers and staff, and was accepted, for this year, that would be £11 million, which equates to about 225 staff. That relates to officers and staff, because the effects would fall equally on the workforce, but there would be a disproportionately greater impact on officers, because we have a lot more officers than we do staff. If you look at it from another perspective, the attrition rate of our staff is much lower than the attrition rate of our officers, so it would be officers who would take the hardest part of that.

09:45

We have had informal discussions with our union and federation colleagues about what their

position would be if we were to adopt a pay freeze over the next four years to try to protect the service that we have at the moment. Understandably, both have reacted quite strongly to that informally and have said that they would not accept it and that we could anticipate potentially severe industrial and strike action on the staff side. We all know where we were in the run-up to the pay settlement with police officers this year. It is the chief constable's intention to discuss with the board the requirement that we provide our workforce with a living pay rise as we go through the next three or four years.

We have modelled a 5 per cent pay rise. We are not saying that the pay rise would be 5 per cent, but a 5 per cent indicative pay rise—which is what we gave for this year—over the next four years would cost us about £222 million. That would equate to a reduction of just over 4,400 officers and staff. We know that the resource spending review has been given to us as a planning guide and is not a budget. However, if it were to translate into a budget, we have been clear that that is the sort of impact that it would have on policing. We have laid out the maths of the impact of an RSR-based budget on policing. The effects on policing would change Police Scotland from what we are at the moment, which is probably one of the better police forces in the United Kingdom. I feel that way personally, and I know that officers and staff feel that way, too.

Police reform has delivered a really good example of what policing should look like. Numerous papers have been written about the fact that the 43 forces of England and Wales are inefficient in the way that they operate, how they should be merged and how things should be regionalised. That is what needs to be done in order to achieve cost efficiency and better service delivery.

We have done that in Scotland. We have a service that is now £200 million cheaper and that has delivered, for example, a really effective Covid pandemic policing model and COP26—the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—which was the biggest policing operation that the UK has ever seen. We delivered that better than anyone else could have done on the ground. We also reacted extremely well to operation unicorn, following the death of Her Majesty the Queen. We stood that up at very short notice and delivered it very successfully.

We have been able to manage incredibly complex and very large operations at very short notice, because we have a really efficient police force. Our problem is that, if we have to reduce police numbers, we will lose that capacity and become much more reliant on England and Wales for mutual aid to dig us out of holes that we will not

be able to police ourselves. Obviously, we have to use mutual aid at the moment because of the scale of some things, but our reliance on England and Wales would become much heavier.

In addition, because of the cut in capital funding and the threat to reform funding, our ability to continue to develop technology capability in Police Scotland will, in effect, be halted. Usually, if an organisation is being squeezed in relation to its people resources, it offsets that pressure by using technology. However, if we have not got the money for technology and are losing people, all that will happen is that the service will be degraded. We are fearful that that will be the direction of travel for Police Scotland if the RSR dictates the shape of our budget for next year.

The Convener: Thank you very much. I think that members will have follow-up questions on that opening topic, but I will first bring in Lynn Brown and James Gray.

Lynn Brown (Scottish Police Authority): Good morning. The Scottish Police Authority is aware that the Government has to make choices given the financial challenges that it faces. It has set out those choices in the RSR. Our ask is that it rethinks its decision to give flat cash for the police, and that it recognises that the reform that the police have delivered cannot be a reset. We have taken reform forward and would like to do more; we would like some investment to do that. Our ask is that there is a rethink of that choice and that the Government chooses to support the police.

James Gray (Police Scotland): I will make two points. My first point is about the uncertainty. The RSR was published on 31 May, and there was a number of planning assumptions around inflation at that point. Clearly, events have overtaken those expectations. Real-terms protection was dropped and replaced by flat cash as a planning assumption. In a stable environment of 2 per cent inflation, flat cash is more manageable. However, with inflation currently running at 10 per cent and likely to still be high next year, with uncertainty beyond that, it is quite difficult to have any kind of certainty around medium-term planning. The year ahead is now only just over five months away, and we will have an acute issue in relation to inflation if flat cash becomes the settlement for policing next year.

The DCO set out the point about the pay award. To clarify, a 5 per cent pay award would cost £55 million, which is the equivalent of 1,125 officers and staff. In order to afford a pay award at that level, we would need to have that in place by April. However, that is indicative, because we do not know where we will be with pay next year.

The second acute issue relates to the non-pay elements, particularly the estate. We have been

doing budget work for next year. The work is still in draft, so these figures are indicative, but our current estates budget is about £60 million a year to run about 300 buildings—all the call centres, stations, custody suites and so on. Next year, we are looking at a pressure of £9 million on that £60 million budget. That is after we have applied savings through good practice relating to building energy management systems, putting in more solar panels and reducing temperatures in buildings. After we have done everything that we can reasonably do to change behaviours relating to the use of energy, we would still have a £9 million pressure, and that would be five months away from now. That is a really acute issue. How would we take 15 per cent out of that budget in five months' time in order to manage on a flat cash allocation?

We have deep concerns about what flat cash would mean for us in the short term as well as over the medium term. As the DCO said, the degrading impact of compounded year-on-year pressures would be of real and significant concern to us.

The Convener: That is very helpful. Jamie Greene has a follow-up question on the initial topic.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): It is important to put on record our thanks as a committee and as members to officers and staff in Police Scotland who do an incredible job. That being said, to sum up Mr Page's opening statement, if the RSR comes to fruition and you are offered a flat cash settlement, it sounds like you will be facing a simple choice between two options.

Option 1 is a pay freeze for five years, with all the implications that that would have. However, it sounds as if you have written off that option, as it is simply not doable because of the effect that it might have and, indeed, the resistance that you would be met with.

Option 2 is to offer some form of annual pay rise to staff and officers. Modelled on a 5 per cent pay rise, that would equate—if I am correct—to a loss of 4,400 staff over five years, which sounds like a lot.

What effect would that have on your ability to perform your basic statutory functions as a police force, notwithstanding any additional upgrade and investment projects that you may have to shelve? I am talking about your core work in protecting the public and in responding to their needs as the first response body.

The 4,400 number is modelled on a 5 per cent pay increase. If that pay rise was to increase as a result of industrial relations conversations, or

industrial disputes or action, would the figure of 4,400 go up and, if so, by how much?

David Page: The 4,400 number is over four years and relates to the spending review period. The chief constable and the force executive are modelling the impacts of the types of workforce reduction aligned with a lack of transformational capability enhancement. We are looking at having to pull back from the types of policing that we do at the moment because, to be frank, we will not have the bodies to do it. That would include community policing and campus cops, for example, and thinking about which incidents we attend in relation to things such as roads policing and mental wellbeing.

As Lynn Brown said, we are acutely aware of the pressures on other parts of the public sector, such as local government, which we are very concerned about. What has happened in the past has shown that people still need services when they have been withdrawn—they still need to pick up a phone and get help. If services are withdrawn because they are suffering from funding cuts, we pick up the slack.

Our problem is that, as demand increases because we are picking up increasing slack, our resource is reducing. Our ability to answer 999 calls will be slowed. Would we continue with the 101 service? If we do not, all that will happen is that people who would have dialled 101 previously will shift to dialling 999. If more people dial 999, it will take longer for them to get through and for us to respond. Response policing, digital forensics and public protection will be squeezed. There is a real concern that we will not be able to discharge our duties as we currently do.

We provide one of the best policing services in the world, if not in the United Kingdom. Our officers are part of our communities, and that will start to be lost. Our clear-up rates are good, albeit that they could always be better. That is partly a result of the engagement with our communities. Nobody wants Police Scotland to become quasi-paramilitary law enforcers who can deal only with the most serious incidents. That is not what Police Scotland was intended to be, nor what our officers and staff joined Police Scotland to do. They are focused on the wellbeing of communities, on helping kids in schools, helping councils and helping vulnerable people. All those things would be at risk.

Jamie Greene: How much of this is about your putting on a face to show a strong message to the Government that a flat cash settlement is simply not on? Is it realistic to say that you would close down the 101 service? Is it realistic to say that you would have to pick and choose which call-outs you attend? In reality, would there be a delay in

answering 999 calls? In reality, would those calls not be responded to or even answered at all?

David Page: It is interesting that we in Police Scotland now have a really good grip on our finances. Over the past five to seven years, we have been managing it to the penny, in effect.

We have done the math of translating the RSR into our budget. We have laid out all the options. It is for the chief constable to determine how those would affect the operational service delivery of policing. All that we have done is to lay out the mathematical consequences in terms of police service reductions. It is then for the chief constable to juggle that and work out where to put his resources.

All the things that I have touched on are under consideration. A lot depends on threat, risk and harm. Again, the chief constable has been clear about that. As a society in the UK, we have had disruption around the direction of politics, and there are other issues—a potential future referendum, social cohesion, inflation, Ukraine and an increase in digital threats through organised crime. There is a very choppy ride ahead, and you will want a strong police force to help to glue society together.

The chief constable is concerned about where we put limited resource when the threat is increasing. I do not speak for the chief, but the maths give him some very difficult decisions to make.

Jamie Greene: I will let others come in.

James Gray: I will make a point similar to that of the DCO, about what things will look like. It is worth reminding ourselves—it is on page 7 of the written submissions paper—that the police service, through reform, has reduced its cost base by 20 per cent.

That amount is similar to the reductions in England and Wales over the same period—those are now being reversed, through the increase of 20,000 officers. The impact of that in England and Wales may be something to look at because what we are now facing over the next four years is broadly another 20 per cent reduction on top of what has already been delivered through reform.

There has been service improvement, and that has been positive. However, once that service improvement has been had, we might be able to get 1 or 2 per cent a year in efficiencies. That is what we are doing and are focused on. This year, we have taken nearly £1 million out of our fleet costs, because we are moving to electric vehicles. We are reducing our estates costs by sharing accommodation with Aberdeen City Council, Aberdeenshire Council and many bodies around the country. We are pushing ahead with efficiency,

but what we have been talking about cannot be done through efficiency.

10:00

It is more like what was seen in England and Wales over the period. They made their savings not through reform but through service reduction. That is an example of withdrawing from communities and focusing on core capability and response. Although the model is different in Scotland, that might be some kind of parallel.

The Convener: I will bring in Pauline McNeill, then Jamie Green wants to come back in, I think.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Good morning. My question has kind of been covered. I was going to ask about the implications of having a flat cash budget. You have outlined stark terms to the committee, and I want to confirm that I have understood things correctly.

I will start with David Page. All three witnesses seem to be saying that, if the issue is not resolved, there will be a serious reduction in service and, perhaps more fundamentally, a change in the model that we have been used to of an exemplary Scottish police force. I agree with Jamie Greene. The role that the force has played in Scotland, and its exemplary record on big events, is different from the model in other forces across the UK.

I presume that you have put that to the cabinet secretary and to the Scottish Government. Given what you have outlined to the committee, which is very concerning, what response are you getting from the Government on the stark reality if a flat cash settlement remains in place for the next four years?

David Page: We have had a series of conversations in private with the SPA board, senior officials in the Scottish Government, the cabinet secretary, the chief constable and the chair. The cabinet secretary and the officials are aware of the potential implications of an RSR-driven budget settlement. They are sympathetic. However, as we have mentioned, we are fully aware of the other pressures on the public sector.

One of the things that we have emphasised is that we have delivered the types of saving that are being looked for across the public sector—£200 million of savings in 2,000 staff jobs, and all the other efficiencies—when we brought police reform together. The fact is that we do not have anywhere else to go, because we have delivered that reform, albeit that it is an on-going journey and there is an on-going need for transformation.

They are hugely sympathetic to that, and are working to see, as they say, that the RSR is not the budget. One of our issues is that it is not that long until the budget arrives; then, if it reflects the

RSR, we will have a very short time in which to make some very harsh decisions. They are fully sighted, fully aware and sympathetic.

Pauline McNeill: Lynn Brown, have you similarly expressed those views to the Government, and what response are you getting?

Lynn Brown: The authority has expressed probably two main concerns. The first goes back to a previous question from a member of the committee, about the pay award versus staff numbers. What is unique about policing is the covenant with police officers that they cannot strike—unlike other public sector workers, who can. The withdrawal of goodwill was not taken lightly by police officers. That was concerning to me and is concerning for the future as well.

The second is the scale. Again, there is some detail. The scale of what is being asked concerns the authority. That is because that figure of 4,500 is equivalent to having no police staff—none—in four years. We might have the officers but there will be no staff to support them. It is equivalent to either not having a contact, command and control operation or not having any police on the streets of Glasgow or Edinburgh. The scale of what is being faced concerns the authority.

We are making those points to the Government and, hopefully, it will take them into consideration. As I said, I hope that it rethinks its choices. We will find out in December when the budget is decided.

Pauline McNeill: When you talk about a reduction of 4,400 staff, do you mean staff and not officers, or is it a mix of staff and officers?

Lynn Brown: In our terminology, police staff are non-warranted officers. There are police officers, who are warranted, and police staff. The figure of 4,500 covers police and staff. If police officers were protected, we would have no police staff to support them.

David Page: The modelling that we have done on the 4,500 is a blended mix. Policing is delivered by a combination of officers and staff. There are jobs that the staff do that officers cannot do and, obviously, vice versa.

We have modelled a 4 per cent or 5 per cent pay rise over the number of years mentioned by bringing down officer numbers and staff numbers. We also have to consider attrition rates and the types of jobs that we need to protect. Four and a half thousand would mean a reduction of about 17 per cent in police officer numbers and a reduction of about 31 per cent in staff numbers under one model, which is the model that got us to the number that we have talked about. However, we would bring down the numbers of both officers and staff.

The unions have made clear to me in my discussions with them that they would be aghast if we went back to what happened when police reform came about and, to protect police numbers, we slashed staff numbers because we can offer them voluntary redundancy and VER. If we do that, we end up unbalancing policing and we end up with police officers having to do staff jobs, which makes no sense economically because staff are cheaper than officers if we look at the total cost to the public sector.

We are keen to bring down the numbers equitably to ensure that the balance is maintained. What that balance looks like is a decision for the chief constable based on the operating model that we have to put in place at that point in time.

Jamie Greene: Thanks for that further clarification. To be clear on the numbers for the modelling of the 4,500, did you say that you had modelled a 17 per cent reduction in police officers and a 31 per cent reduction in staff, which would be back-office operational staff—non-warranted staff?

David Page: Yes—civilian staff do a variety of jobs.

Jamie Greene: I presume that the 17 per cent would be what we would classify as front-line officers—people who are out in the communities and on the streets responding to events and interacting with the community.

David Page: Warranted police officers.

Jamie Greene: Seventeen per cent is quite a lot. Other than the removal of community policing or campus police and other types of community engagement, what would a 17 per cent reduction look like in the number of police officers that the public would see on the streets responding to emergencies?

David Page: Again, that would be a decision for the chief constable based on threat, harm and risk and what was happening in society at the time. However, at the highest level, it would mean fewer police officers on the streets and in schools.

The modelling—not so much our maths modelling but the operational modelling—is always based on where the acutest risk is, so we have to keep pulling back. That is exactly what happened in England and Wales. There have recently been reports comparing house break-in clear-ups in England and Wales to those in Scotland. Of course, house break-in is one of the most acute invasions of a person's rights to them personally. That clear-up rate would be adversely affected because we would not have as many officers to do that type of investigation.

Jamie Greene: Are you talking about a scenario in which, given reduced numbers, you would only

send officers out if something was dreadfully serious, such as a life-threatening situation or serious violence?

David Page: That is the slope that we would be on.

Jamie Greene: In effect, would other types of crime, such as burglary, vandalism and car break-ins, be at the end of the queue?

David Page: Yes.

The Convener: I will ask about what I think of as support staff—or non-warranted staff, as you described them, Mr Page. Does that cohort of staff include, for example, specialist forensic investigators and information technology specialists? Would they be included in the numbers that you mentioned?

David Page: They would be included. As far as we can, we will protect the cohort of C3 staff, civilian staff who work on the 999 and 101 lines, forensic scientists and custody officers. We would try to take the civilian staff as far away from threat, harm and risk as we could. However, the challenge that we would have is that the only way that we could reduce the staff numbers is by not replacing people—by having a recruitment freeze—but we cannot dictate where people leave from so we might find pressures in key areas. The second way in which we could do that would be the introduction of a voluntary redundancy and voluntary early retirement scheme. Again, we cannot choose who leaves through such schemes.

Although we would try to protect the staff in those key areas—forensic services, C3, custody, technical roles, key digital forensics roles and key cyber roles, all of which are as much on the front line as officers on the street are—we are at the mercy of where people leave from when they choose to retire. We would try to manage that, but we would be managing what we were given, in effect.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Where is the chief constable today?

David Page: He will be at Tulliallan doing chief constable duties. This is budget scrutiny, which is why you have the finance people here.

Russell Findlay: You have said that you cannot speak for the chief constable, but a lot of what is in your submission and what you have said to the committee will affect him and his officers. Is not it important that we hear from him directly?

David Page: You will hear from the chief constable. The key issue at the moment, as we have mentioned, is that we have been told to use the resource spending review as the planning guide for what will happen in the future. The operational implications will fall when the budget

falls. The chief constable and the chair of the SPA continue to have conversations with officials and the Cabinet Secretary for Justice. We are here to talk about the financial and potential operational implications.

As I have said a number of times, the choices for operational service delivery impacts will depend on what the actual budget is and on threat, harm and risk at a given point in time.

Russell Findlay: I appreciate that it is all largely speculative just now, but some of what you have spoken about will have real effects on police officers and members of the public. We are talking about 101 services potentially being suspended. As I understand it, in recent years murder inquiries have been the subject of investigations by major investigation teams—MITs—as a given. I suppose that only the chief constable could answer a specific question about an operational need to change that: only the chief constable or one of his senior officers would be able to answer much of what I would like to ask.

It was reported a month ago that the chief constable is pursuing other roles. Have you had discussions with him? Is that in any way connected to the budget projections?

David Page: The chief constable's looking at other roles was not connected to the budget. He is fully committed to Police Scotland, going forward.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): I want to ask a bit more about the modelling process, from the perspective of the 31 per cent of police staff who are civilians.

I understand that over many years there has been a process of civilianisation of the police service, in which roles that might previously have been carried out by uniformed staff are now being done by civilian staff.

10:15

What are the implications of that process for reductions in the numbers of such groups? The convener has already mentioned forensic services. What are the implications for Police Scotland's levels of expertise? What is likely to happen if some of those roles go? Would it mean that you would have to outsource work of that nature? Would you be reliant on outsourcing it to, say, people in England and Wales? How would you deal with the loss of expertise that has been developed over many years? Is that a major issue that you are having to consider?

David Page: If we were at a point at which we were losing staff numbers because we did not have the budget, I would not, to be quite frank, have the budget to outsource the work, either. In effect, the money either goes on outsourcing or it

is spent internally. Police Scotland's preference is always to deliver a service in-house, because generally that is more cost effective and cost efficient. We continue the process of ensuring that in any job in Police Scotland we have the right person with the right skills, whether they are an officer or a civilian member of staff. There has been a process—there continues to be an on-going refresh of it—of asking who could do a job most effectively.

As I mentioned earlier, when police reform came into being as part of the journey towards saving £200 million, a very large number of police staff took redundancy, which enabled us to bring the cost base down to what we could afford at the time. That left a good number of jobs that civilian staff had done, and which needed still to be done in order to keep policing going, being filled by police officers. We have moved away from that approach, but the journey is on-going. As technology improves, as different types of crime, such as cybercrime, come to the fore, we can use civilian staff in roles that might previously have been thought of as involving front-line policing but which can now be done by civilians.

We continue to refresh and examine our model, but outsourcing is not something that we have looked at. I know that the SPA has a bit of it going on around aspects of drug toxicology. However, that has more to do with capacity: we can hire only what is out there. One of the challenges that we have across Police Scotland and the SPA is that a good number of tasks that we need to do use skill sets that are in demand and we cannot compete financially. Our competition is always around the vocation of policing, so we struggle in certain areas.

Katy Clark: In an area such as fingerprinting, if you lose expertise because staff go, does that mean that you might have to bring in officers who are less likely to stay in those roles for a lengthy period because they will be progressing through the organisation or are more expensive? Is it a false economy?

David Page: It is a false economy. I am not sure that officers would be used in the forensic sciences, per se. However, from Police Scotland's point of view, using police officers to cover jobs that should be done by civilians would absolutely be a false economy.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Good morning.

I would like a bit of clarification. As I understand it, you do not want a flat cash settlement, but negotiated pay rises will cause massive job reductions in the police force. In previous years, have pay awards always led to a big reduction in staff? Have the two always been related?

David Page: No. When we get our budget there is usually an allocation in it that is linked to public sector pay policy; historically, we have always offered public sector pay policy increases to our civilian staff. We have also always offered an equivalent to police officers, although there is a different negotiating mechanism for them.

The position of both Police Scotland and the SPA is that we do not offer more than we can afford, and we usually never move beyond that. The only time that we might do so—as we have done on the 5 per cent for this year—is if the Scottish Government determines that it will give us more money than was in our original budget to fund a police and staff pay offer. We never offer more money than we can afford. In the most recent pay round, 5 per cent was more than we had in our budget, so from a negotiation position, Police Scotland and the SPA agreed to provide the additional 5 per cent only if we had a letter from the Scottish Government to confirm additional funding for the budget for this year, and on-going funding.

Our baseline position for next year and over the next four years is what we had this year, including £37 million, which is the cost of the 5 per cent and the subsequent years of that cost. We offered that increase only because we had a written guarantee from the Scottish Government. We do not usually have to lose staff. That is completely new territory for us.

Rona Mackay: Yes—that was part of the reason for my question. I do not remember the situation being this critical in previous years.

David Page: It has never been like this.

Rona Mackay: I get the impression that you are presenting us with the worst-case scenario that will happen unless things change, so I am looking for a bit of light. Apart from the obvious solution—more money—can you suggest anything that might help us to see a way through the situation? What you have said sounds pretty critical.

David Page: It is not a worst-case scenario—it is based on a 5 per cent pay rise. Inflation is running at 10 per cent plus, so at the moment plenty of bodies out there are rejecting a 5 per cent pay rise and are balloting for strike action. We have got a 5 per cent pay rise for our officers and staff, so that was a reasonable assumption to put into our modelling. The pay rise might not be 5 per cent in subsequent years, but we will adjust the modelling. We have just extrapolated that.

In answer to the question what we can do about the situation, we continue to push really hard around things such as blue-light services collaboration and local government collaboration. We are working with our fire service colleagues and the Scottish Ambulance Service on shared

services and how we can work more effectively. We are accelerating that work.

We are also looking at a number of things in our non-pay areas, such as estate reduction, as James Gray has said. Even though 4,500 staff is the number that we talked about under one model, that is not to be seen in isolation; we would still need to reduce our estate because of non-pay pressures. Again, we have spoken with the chief constable, and he is looking at the options that are in front of him. If we start to lose officers and staff, we will also start to lose our presence, because we might have to close police stations. If we do not have people in them, we cannot afford to run them. Therefore, we are looking at that, as well.

The Convener: Katy Clark was interested in asking about non-warranted staff—unless your question has already been asked.

Katy Clark: It has been asked.

The Convener: That is fine.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): On efficiencies, I believe that a pilot scheme is being run for mental health first responders, which means that there is an efficiency within Police Scotland. Can you elaborate more on that and how it will run over the next four years? Have you put that in as part of your review?

David Page: That is something that we are doing, but I cannot go into a huge amount of detail, because I am not very well sighted on it because it is a more operational component. We are working with mental health nurses to try to reduce the pressure on the front line, so that through our C3 operation we can, rather than send a patrol car out, redirect calls to people who are better qualified. We are working with national health service colleagues to catch people who are coming into the system earlier, so that the issue does not run all the way through the system and we have to dispatch a 999 car. We will continue to work with fire and ambulance services on such models.

We have not looked specifically at modelling the effect of an RSR settlement on that. Again, that would be one of the operational service delivery impacts, so the chief constable would have to sit back and look at the whole range of our services in order to determine where he can put his resources.

Collette Stevenson: One of the other things that you mentioned was the impact of a reduction in use of body-worn cameras. Compared with what you do now, what impact would it have if you were to stop allowing police officers to wear those cameras?

David Page: At the moment, only around 500 officers wear them—for the most part, they are the

armed officers. It is a proven fact that in England and Wales body-worn video equipment has massive benefits. We did a public consultation in Scotland that shows that 81 per cent of the public want our officers to wear body-worn video equipment. In relation to complaints against police officers, having body-worn video equipment helps to negate the effects of complaints: it helps to protect people who complain when there is a justified complaint, and it helps police officers when there is a malicious complaint.

I have spoken to officers whose careers have, because of how the system works, been derailed for years because of malicious complaints. If people knew that things were being recorded, that would protect people and it would massively increase trust in policing. It is a real weakness that we do not have that basic capability to enhance our trust and confidence in policing.

Collette Stevenson: I have no more questions.

The Convener: I apologise to James Gray—I forgot to bring you in. I know that you wanted to respond to Rona Mackay's questions, so you are very welcome to come in now.

James Gray: It was just to go back to the point about our now being in different territory from where we have been. If you look at the journey of policing over what is coming up for 10 years since the start of police reform, you will see that the cost of policing in 2012-13 and the last year of the old legacy arrangements was £1.2 billion a year. That dropped to £987 million in 2015. There is no smoke and mirrors—that drop happened through cash reductions, shrinkage of the workforce by 2,000, disposal of 165 buildings, economies of scale through better contracting as a single national service, and other efficiencies.

Past that point, the reason why we have not been getting into a headcount reduction year on year is that there has been an element of real-terms protection, but that protection is recognition of the facts that the service had undergone such reform and that £200 million a year had been taken out on a recurring basis.

All the big elements of efficiency have already been delivered. As I said, we will continue to do that, but in the context of facing what looks like potentially another 20 per cent reduction on top of the 20 per cent that has been delivered, there is concern. I am not scaremongering or anything like that. That would be unprofessional and is not what this is about: it is about setting out the reality of what will happen if that reduction is, in fact, what we will face over the four years.

To go back to what the DCO said, I repeat that that is a planning assumption that is based on flat cash over four years. In reality, my feeling is that that will not happen, because such a level of

reduction over that period in a high-inflation environment cannot happen. That is the case not only in the context of policing, but across the public sector because—as I said—the spending review was based on flat cash and an environment in which inflation would peak at 9.3 per cent this year and drop back down to 2.7 per cent next year. It is clear, however, that that will not happen—we might not even be at 2.7 per cent by 2025-26—but that was the basis on which the resource spending review was produced.

The intention to give longer planning horizons and a bit more certainty to public bodies through multiyear planning was absolutely the right thing to do, but the environment has changed significantly. That is why what you are hearing from us today is based on flat cash in a relatively high-inflation environment. What have said is what the consequences would be if that situation were to play out.

The Convener: I will come to David Page, then Lynn Brown and then back to Jamie Greene, who I think wants to follow up on Collette Stevenson's question.

David Page: One of the big frustrations that we in Police Scotland have is that we successfully delivered a massive public sector transformation such as no one else in the UK has delivered. We delivered the savings and improved the service, but it feels as though there is a lack of recognition of that. As James Gray just said, when you have already taken £200 million out of the service, you cannot take another £200 million out or we would have no non-pay resource—we would have no cars, no estate and no technology.

We ask that it be recognised that we delivered public sector transformation on a scale that was unprecedented in the UK, and which England and Wales failed to do. We have one of the best police services in the UK that does one of the best jobs in the UK, and we are doing it highly efficiently. We will continue to work on and develop that.

The men and women in Police Scotland are hugely proud of the job that we do—indeed, it feels that we have reached a point at which everyone is superproud of what we do. If we have to go back down the hill again, it will not only be frustrating professionally, but will feel like lack of recognition of the fact that we have actually delivered the things that everyone is being asked to deliver with regard to public sector transformation. We have delivered the public sector transformation that we were asked to deliver; there has to be some recognition of that by protecting our ability to deliver the policing service for the men and women of Scotland.

10:30

The Convener: Lynn, do you want to come in?

Lynn Brown: I will come back to the question of mental health. I appreciate that the committee has a real interest in the challenge in that respect for policing and the mental health and wellbeing of police officers. I know that this work is sometimes framed as efficiency, but much more than that is going on at C3: we are trying to get the right result for the citizen in the best way possible. That is a priority for the authority. There will be a round-table session in December, at which the convener and the cabinet secretary have been invited to speak, to look at the mental health challenges in citizens, in the community and in policing so that we can get better answers to the question of how we deal with issue. C3 is only a small part of that.

The Convener: I will bring in Rona Mackay with a small supplementary.

Rona Mackay: I totally agree with David Page: we are all very proud of the police service and what it has achieved in the transformation. I do not disagree with any of those comments.

However, perhaps he, too, will recognise that the Scottish Government is in new and very challenging territory with a fixed and therefore reducing budget. I know that he knows that, so it is a case of working together to try to work something out. I just wanted to put on record that I do not think that the police service's work has not been recognised—I think that it has been.

The Convener: I call Jamie Greene and then I will bring Russell Findlay back in.

Jamie Greene: I want to ask about two things. First—and I apologise if I have misunderstood this—I thought that the modelling of a potential reduction of nearly 4,500 staff and officers was the worst case, but you are saying that it is not.

David Page: It is based on 5 per cent.

Jamie Greene: In that case, if a 5 per cent pay offer were rejected and you had to pay more to keep officers—or, at least, to stop industrial action, strikes or whatever method would be available to them—what would happen to that 4,400 figure? Would we be talking about 5,000, 6,000 or 7,000? Would it double? Would a 10 per cent offer mean a reduction of 8,000 or 9,000?

David Page: We can extrapolate the model pretty much any way we like. There is an operational model that the chief constable will use to say, "I cannot go below that number if I am to deliver my statutory duties", and that will influence the pay settlement that we will be able to offer. If it went up by another 1 per cent, that would be another £11 million and another 225 people.

Jamie Greene: So it is 225 people for every percentage-point pay rise.

David Page: Yes.

Jamie Greene: That is quite a lot.

Secondly, the Scottish Police Federation, which is not here today, has submitted written evidence, in which it says that if the current plans

“come to fruition ... Crime will increase, victims ... will be let down,”

public

“confidence ... will diminish”

and

“more people”

will be left

“in crisis”

with

“many offenders unlikely to face any form of sanction, or ... any form of justice.”

To what extent do you agree or disagree with that statement?

David Page: If you were to look at the experience in England and Wales, you would have to agree with it.

Jamie Greene: Thank you.

Russell Findlay: Frankly, a lot of what we have heard and what you have said so far is terrifying, and I really appreciate your candour. It is necessary, but it cannot be easy to be so forthright with some of this stuff.

I have two separate questions, the first of which relates to body cameras. I suppose that they are an example of equipment issues and how the proposed budget will affect things.

In your opening statement, you said that body cameras have been rolled out pretty much universally in England and Wales and that, in fact, second-generation body cameras are now being used there. Despite the fact that the security guards in any supermarket will have body cameras, Police Scotland has only around 500 such devices, most of which are with armed officers. The level of provision seems pretty basic.

Given that we now face really serious financial pressures, is there not an element of your not having fixed the roof when the sun was shining? Is there not a sense that a huge opportunity has been missed and that someone somewhere should have prioritised the provision of body cameras or found the money to make that happen?

David Page: It will cost about £25 million over five years to roll out national body-worn video. You

asked why we have not done it already, given the on-going transformational activity that Police Scotland is involved in. You need to be conscious of the fact that when body-worn video is used, it is necessary to capture the data and then to secure it somewhere, because it could be used in a court. The data must be secure because there cannot be a break in the chain of evidence. That links to our digital data and information and communications technology strategy, the fact that we inherited a multitude of systems from the legacy police forces and the journey that we have been on to create a single national digital platform that would allow us to have the necessary infrastructure behind national body-worn video.

The issue also links to the digital evidence sharing capability, or DESC, project, which is a digital project involving the Scottish Government, the Crown, the courts and Police Scotland. The aim is to allow evidence that can be captured on technologies such as body-worn video to be moved digitally right through the justice system, which would be very efficient and would greatly reduce pressure on the justice system.

The first part of the answer to your question about why we have not yet rolled out body-worn video is that we have not really had the capital to do it. We have not had the capital or the revenue to fix a lot of the infrastructure in the way that we wanted to. We built the initial business case to make a submission for the funding that would be required because the timing was right, but one of the big challenges that we face is that having a digital-first environment—we obviously want to have a digital-first environment, and it is a Scottish Government priority—creates revenue pressure; you are not reliant on capital per se. One of the big issues with body-worn video is that we will need additional revenue to pay for the licences to pay for the data capture, and revenue is the thing that is under most pressure.

Russell Findlay: Sure, but dozens of forces elsewhere in the UK have managed to overcome similar challenges and have prioritised such spending.

The next issue that I want to ask about is to do with mental health. Lynn Brown has already touched on the fact that officers have to deal with people in the community who require mental health support and treatment. I am coming at the issue from a slightly different perspective—my concern is police officers' mental health. We have heard very strong evidence on the pressures that officers are under and the struggles that they face, and how that can seriously impact on their wellbeing. There is a sense that they do not currently have the support that they need. There have been some absolutely tragic outcomes, with

officers taking their own lives and others coming close to doing so.

If what is proposed comes to pass, even in part, that situation will only get a whole lot worse. What thought has been given to improving the support that is available for officers?

David Page: Mental health and wellbeing and general wellbeing are right at the top of everything that we do because, at the end of the day, we cannot have a police service without having people. Unless we do our utmost to protect our people, who do one of the most difficult jobs in society, we will not be able to sustain the police service.

A good number of years ago, the chief constable made a commitment to protect and support the mental health and wellbeing of police officers and staff. We have done an awful lot to protect and help the 23,000 officers and staff in the workforce. We have wellbeing teams and managers, and we are trying to invest more in that. We have an outsourced service to help us with specialist performance. We would like to put more money into it, but obviously we are restricted in that, because we are struggling with our budgets in financial year 2022-23 due to the inflationary effect.

Another issue for us is that, because of Covid and training, we started the year with police officer numbers down—we were about 400 short at the start of this financial year—and that has meant that we are having to push an awful lot more money into overtime. That provides a level of service but it also puts a lot more pressure on our officers and staff, and we are spending almost double what we planned for on overtime.

We are acutely aware that police officers and staff try to deliver the same type of service that they have always delivered, because they do not want to let people down. If the workforce shrinks, it is not the case that it shrinks and then we can use overtime; it shrinks full stop. If people try to provide the same level of service, they will be going above and beyond, which will put more pressure on them. We are acutely aware of the fact that police officers and staff will not want to let people down, even if we do not pay them not to let people down, and that they will face increasing pressure, including mental health pressure.

We make mistakes; we are a really big organisation with a lot of people, and I recognise and apologise for where we have handled things badly. However, when we handle things badly, we investigate it fully and try to fix it for the future. The mental health of police officers and staff is probably the most important thing on the chief constable's list of priorities, alongside violence against police officers and staff.

Lynn Brown: I would like to give some context of where officers' mental health sits in the authority's oversight. It is very much a priority. When we reviewed our governance structures, the first thing that we did was separate out the resources committee that used to look at people issues. We now have a separate people committee that focuses on the issues that affect police officers and staff. Another change is that the unions and staff associations are invited to meetings of that committee, which they were not before, and they are asked to contribute to any conversations or reports on those issues.

As David Page touched on, when things have not gone as we would have liked, learning lessons is very much part of the authority's role, and we try to link up what has been heard in the people committee with what has been heard in the legal committee, where some issues can end up due to financial implications.

The issue is very important to the authority—it is a priority, as I said. I think that the SPA chair contributed to the round-table meeting that the Criminal Justice Committee convened to look at mental health issues. We see it as a major area for us in the future.

Russell Findlay: I would like to quickly recap. Is it correct that we will not see body cameras any time soon, and, on mental health, there is no extra money but there are some organisational issues that can be improved?

David Page: If the budget reflected the RSR, it would not be a straightforward matter of reducing numbers; we would have to look at what types of operational service delivery we could deliver and how we could protect our people as much as they need to be protected to enable them to do the job. Again, the chief constable has the challenge of considering what services to pull back and whether to provide an extra £1 million for a wellbeing contract or to shut two police stations. That is the type of dilemma that he has.

Rona Mackay: On mental health, I want to ask about the external contract that you have with Optima Health for officers. What is the value and duration of the contract? Have you ever considered bringing the services in-house? Would that be more efficient?

James Gray: I could perhaps start on that question. The contract will expire on 31 March 2024, after our exercising a one-year extension.

Rona Mackay: I am sorry to interrupt. Is it a three-year or four-year contract?

James Gray: It is a six-year contract.

Lynn Brown: Five, with a one-year extension.

10:45

James Gray: I will clarify the exact value after this meeting, but I think that it is in the region on £1 million to £2 million per year. I can get clarity on that.

We now have a window to consider options beyond that contract, so the human resources team in Police Scotland is looking at what the service offering needs to be. It recognises that the situation is becoming increasingly complex, so it is looking to see what enhancements can be made, but that is in the context of where we get to with the spending review and the availability of resources.

What the future needs to look like is actively being considered at the moment. That includes consideration of whether the service will be outsourced with additional enhancements in the specification, or what alternative models could be. That will be picked up during the coming months.

Rona Mackay: Lynn Brown, is the service that is provided by that contract evaluated? Quite a lengthy contract is awarded. Do you review with the officers how effective it is?

Lynn Brown: The people committee gets regular reports on a dashboard of issues to do with staff welfare, and how the contract is performing comes up at those committees.

Rona Mackay: Where does that information come from? Does it come from the officers?

Lynn Brown: No, it comes from our colleagues in personnel and development.

Rona Mackay: I wonder where they get the information from. Is it fed back to them from officers or is Optima marking its own homework and saying it is doing a good job?

David Page: We have a series of wellbeing forums that the federation and unions attend. At those, we get input from Optima on service level agreements, contract performance and things like that, and we also get feedback from unions and the federation. We also get individual members who are going through the service and dealing with a human resources contact to give us direct feedback, so there are a number of touch points. The federation and unions sit on the health and wellbeing board as well, so there are a number of ways in which unions and the federation are able to give their input.

I am conscious of the fact that you had a private session with some officers, and I am aware of some of the issues that arose during that. We are a big organisation, and sometimes we get it wrong. We need to find out where we got it wrong and fix it.

Also, unfortunately, with things like ill-health retirements or injuries on duty, a lot of the results come down to independent medical examiners—not us—determining whether it was an injury on duty or does not qualify as such. If a decision goes against someone, they can be very disgruntled about that. They can be unhappy with the world and with Police Scotland, and they can feel that it is unfair. That will generate a lot of angst, and I have huge sympathy with people who find themselves in that position.

We have to ensure that where we identify that the service is not as good as it should be—either from people going through the process or from feedback from Optima—we fix it. We also have to explain better to people who, because of the decisions of independent medical practitioners, do not get the outcome that they hoped for why they are in that position and try to provide them with as much support as we can.

Rona Mackay: The committee is concerned because our impression is that the service seems to offer a one-size-fits-all solution that does not recognise the unique pressures of policing and the incidents that occur, which brings me back to the point that maybe an in-house service would provide that better. You said that you will look at the modelling, but our concern is that it is just a general wellbeing service that does not home in on the experiences of officers.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Good morning. I have been a member of this committee and its predecessor for six years, along with Rona Mackay—I think that we are the only two members who are in that position—and I have to say that this budget scrutiny is the starkest that I have heard. During previous sessions, colleagues of Jamie Greene and Russell Findlay would actually have had to ask questions to try and get you to say what you have said today.

All credit to the police, you have always come to the committee and said that you can manage the issues, but today, for me, it sounds totally different, and I think we need to sit up and take note of that because—like James Gray said—you would not come here and scaremonger, and we know that because of the previous meetings. That is really important. None of us can be in any doubt about the serious pressures that you have put to us. I guess that you expect the committee, including the four of us who are Government back benchers, to take that back to the Government. We will do that.

On the issue that Rona Mackay raised, by the same token—this is for the record rather than a question, as I know that you would not want to be involved in the politics—I hope that our Conservative colleagues will use their influence in

the position that they are in to ensure that the new Prime Minister does not take a sledgehammer to public services and put the Scottish Government in that position, too.

As I said, the committee's job is to scrutinise the Scottish Government—there is no getting away from that—but I wanted to put on the record what I have heard today, because it has been very stark and different from what has been said in previous years.

I want to ask about the interaction with other services, which David Page has already touched on. We will hear from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service in a wee bit, and I guess that it will have a similar thing to say. There is a flat cash settlement for other key justice sector organisations, including the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and the courts. Have you had any thoughts about how that will impact on you? Obviously, you all work together. What sorts of impacts do you see coming down the line if the cuts to those other services go ahead as well? How will it all work?

David Page: As I have said, we work very closely with the fire and ambulance services. We have a blue-light collaboration board, which I chair along with Ross Haggart, who is the interim chief fire officer and is sitting behind me, and the Scottish Ambulance Service. As a group of three blue-light bodies, we discuss the huge pressures that we all face, and we are actively looking at accelerating collaboration opportunities across the three services. We held a conference on 4 October, I think, in which IT, procurement, personnel and development, finance and strategy people involved in around a dozen different workstreams all sat together virtually looking at how we could work together to reduce costs and improve services, not just for one service but for all the services.

In the blue-light collaboration committee, we talk about trying to do shared cost pressure management. If one of us could save some money in a particular area, could we help to spread that across the three services? We have always tried to collaborate and we have a long history of collaboration, especially with the fire service, but we have worked more acutely over the past couple of years, especially since the resource spending review. We are really trying to get the three of us to deliver an outcome that helps all of us in the face of the flat cash environment. Other partners—councils, obviously—are involved. James Gray has already mentioned the north-east division integration project, in which we have saved a small fortune for Police Scotland and improved rental income for Aberdeenshire Council and Aberdeen City Council on an on-going basis.

We are constantly looking for opportunities for collaboration.

Fulton MacGregor: It is really good to hear that. I know that you have said that you are worried about the impact on all the services and how the collaboration can work. On possible ways forward, do you think that any upcoming legislative changes can help? Obviously, the committee is looking at the Bail and Release from Custody (Scotland) Bill, and a criminal law reform bill is coming up. I know that the police will feed into them, as the police always do. Have you had any thoughts about how such reforms could help in these challenging financial times, or is that thinking a bit of a way off, until the bills come before you?

David Page: I will probably reserve judgment until the proposed legislation comes. Any new legislation tends to put more pressure on us. It usually means more training and more work that we have to do. To be honest, anything that involves more legislation coming through means more work and more cost, generally speaking.

Fulton MacGregor: I appreciate that, but the Government has said that the particular bills that I have mentioned are an attempt to help with the pressures in the system. However, you are right: they will initially mean more training and learning about them.

The Convener: Before I bring in Pauline McNeill, does Jamie Greene want to come in?

Jamie Greene: Yes; I have been mulling over a supplementary question as the conversation has been going on. I will pose a scenario. If, as a result of the evidence that we have heard today, Government ministers—sitting in their offices and listening—take action, and instead of having the flat cash settlement that you have been forecasting and scenario planning around, they offer you an increase to your budget, would it simply be swallowed up by the pay increase? Of course, we do not know what any increase might be, if it occurred, but, assuming that there were an increase to your budget, do you think that that is what would happen?

It sounds to me that even a 5 per cent increase in cash terms to your budget would simply disappear into any potential pay increase anyway, so you would still be halting ICT upgrades, still have problems with fleet investment, still not be rolling out body-worn cameras and still have problems with recruitment and retention and so on. So, if the Government were to offer you more cash—you are welcome to put a number on it if you have one—would you still be staring down the barrel of potential problems and cuts?

David Page: We have had a lot of conversations with senior officials and the cabinet

secretary, and they have been fully engaged with us and are fully aware of the various scenarios around where we could be. We would welcome any additional capital or revenue. Whether it would be sufficient to fund future pay increases depends on how much it is.

We constantly want to evolve as a service, so we are looking at our operating models. We are considering a number of things to try and improve our efficiency, but a lot of those take a bit of time. It could be that an additional cash settlement helps us towards future pay or helps us to accelerate a model change or something like that. It could result in a differentiated service, but we are always looking at differentiated services anyway, because of cybercrime and serious organised crime—there is an ebb and flow to things. A change in the model could result if we got additional cash but not as much as we need. It would be for the chief constable to make a determination on that.

Jamie Greene: That probably raises more questions than it answers, I am afraid, but okay.

The Convener: Pauline McNeill, would you like to come in? Then I will finish off with a final question for the panel.

Pauline McNeill: What we have heard this morning is stark and concerning, but we have not even got to an issue that we have already heard about in evidence, which is the number of police officers that have retired or indicated that they will retire. Given what the panel has said about the flat cash settlement, the savings that you have already made and the pressure that is on you with regard to staffing and police officer numbers, what impact is the impending retirement of police officers having? Do you have up-to-date figures on that?

We have previously seen figures for officers who have indicated that they will retire with 30-years' service or retire early. There is some relationship to pension changes, although the federation has said that that is not the only reason why we are losing police officers. It said that morale in the force is low.

A few months ago, I raised with the First Minister the issue of officers complaining of their leave being cancelled at the last minute and of their not being given proper welfare treatment and so on, and the suggestion that that is the reason why we are losing officers. Can you comment on the impact of that issue? Any update on the retirement figures would be very welcome.

David Page: Our five-year average on retirements over a calendar year is usually around 573. This year, as of last week, we are at 1,118 retirements. The key thing to note there is that the five-year average during the calendar quarter of October to December is 137 retirements. We are at 124 retirements in October, so that will probably

take it well above the average. It is more than double at the moment. The peak has come and gone and is starting to settle down at a new number. We used to have an average number of people leaving the service in the high 60s. We are probably running at around 83 a month at the moment.

11:00

We expect that there might be another peak as we get into April next year and we are watching that position carefully. In itself, that brings its own challenges because, obviously, the people leaving are those with the most experience in policing. They are often superintendents and chief inspectors. Therefore, we have to carefully manage the service in terms of training people and on-call duties, for example.

We are monitoring the pensions impact. The situation will have a continuing impact. We expect more people to retire from the service month on month than was previously the case and, in April next year, there may well be a bit of a spike purely because the 5 per cent pay rise that we gave in this financial year will wash through into pensions at that point. In October 2023, the pensions remedy regulations become effective, which might also have an effect, so we are keeping a close eye on what that means for overall numbers and the level of experience in the service.

I hope that that answers the question.

Pauline McNeill: Thank you. Perhaps you cannot answer my next question and it needs to be asked of the chief constable. I raised the issue before. We can see how concerning the situation is, based on those numbers. One of the reasons that police officers are choosing to retire is the conditions that they are working in. For example, as I said, they are having their rest days and holidays cancelled at the last minute.

Do not answer this question if you feel that it is for the chief constable, but has there been any response to that? As an organisation, you would want to try to retain those police officers and their experience given the stark points that you have outlined to the committee. Are you able to say about how you will try to address that?

David Page: We obviously want to retain people with experience. Most people leave the service through retirement. The spike that came in April was because of the removal of the commutation cap. In effect, it gave officers with 25 years' service over the age of 50 the ability to access a higher lump sum, and that is what they have done.

On whether we can retain skills, one thing that we have been looking at and on which we are

making progress is that a number of people leave the service as warranted police officers and then come back in as experienced civilians. However, we are monitoring closely the impact of pensions on our workforce.

Pauline McNeill: In your last sentence, you said that you are monitoring police officers leaving and coming back as civilians. Are you suggesting that they would not be able to do that because it is encouraging them to take retirement if they come back as civilians? Is that what you meant?

David Page: No. If an officer retires because they can retire and there is a job that they could do as a civilian, we will bring them in if there is a vacancy because they have good skills and experience. However, it has to be the right fit. It cannot be a case of jobs for the boys. It must be a role that we need to be filled and they must have the right skills and experience. However, that is a valuable resource.

The Convener: Time is against us and I would like to draw the evidence-taking session to a close. There has been some helpful discussion. I will ask one final question in follow-up to the discussion about body-worn cameras, kit and resources that Russell Findlay brought up.

The IT refresh plan that you spoke about earlier is a critical organisational requirement. I am interested to know whether the potential cuts will impact on progress with that plan, in areas such as the on-going mobile phone data triage work and the photo lab. Are there implications for that operational delivery?

David Page: The affordability of all our planned spend on enhancing our digital and technology capability across any of our programmes is under review. We may have to shift our transformation programme from capability enhancement, which has been the focus for the past good number of years, to more radical cost-saving programmes. Again, we are looking down every crevice to find ways of saving money.

As James Gray and Fulton MacGregor mentioned, we are not here to shroud wave. We are just pointing out the maths of a budget that is driven by the resource spending review, and the potential consequences, as the chief has put in the written submission. We do not want to get into exactly which service could be withdrawn or what the delay would be on a 999 call. We will not know that until we get a budget. All the modelling is ready. We will apply it once we get a better idea of the budget; we will present that to the chief constable; and he will have to take everything into consideration—the budget, the modelling, what we have in front of us and what the societal position is at that point.

James Gray: There is a close link between investment priorities in the capital allocation and the resource allocation. We have been told to plan on flat capital for the next number of years. However, as you know, “flat” means a real-terms reduction.

Broadly, our capital budget is split into two. We maintain our existing asset base, insofar as we can, in ICT, vehicles, specialist policing equipment and buildings. Then there is transformation, which involves some of the things in the digital, data and ICT strategy and other programmes. As the buying power of that capital budget shrinks, it will gravitate towards maintaining the asset base.

We are not maintaining our buildings. If based on a flat cash model, the size of our estate is not sustainable, so we would have to rationalise it. However, the rise in the cost of doing maintenance work on the estate is running far higher than at 10 per cent. Inflation in construction and materials is much higher than that. Although people might think that inflation is reducing the buying power of the overall budget by 10 per cent, it is considerably higher than that in certain areas. There will therefore probably be a core focus on maintaining what we need to do for statutory health and safety around the estate, and making sure that the vehicles are safe and that the core systems are protected.

That will leave a lesser amount for transformation work. As the DCO has said, that is then more likely to have to be focused on cost reduction initiatives. That pressure on the revenue budget then creates pressure on the capital budget, because if, from a revenue maintenance perspective, the upkeep of buildings is not done, there is a deterioration in their fabric, which involves bigger repair costs—for example, through replacing a roof because it has not been maintained over time. Things get into a downward spiral.

Your question is therefore pertinent. It is a real concern for us. Given flat cash for both revenue and capital, our ability to take things forward diminishes. In addition, there is a concern around the reform budget, which has not been mentioned. It provides the resources that we need in order to do change activity, and we do not know where we might be with that, going into next year and beyond.

David Page: All of that concerns wellbeing, too. As the committee is aware, we have, rightly, had lots of criticism in the past from the Scottish Police Federation and unions about not maintaining buildings and about gaffer tape on cars. We have tried to move away from that and have made a lot of good improvements but, given our direction of travel—we have cut right back, this year, because of inflation, and are doing only essential health

and safety repairs across the estate—we are going to go straight back to where we were, which is, unfortunately, waiting for something to break before we fix it.

The Convener: Thank you all for—

Russell Findlay: May I raise a point of order?

The Convener: Yes.

Russell Findlay: Normally, as a committee, we try to avoid party-political issues, but I think it important to get on the record a response to the points that were made by Fulton MacGregor. The Scottish Government makes decisions about how it spends money. It is in receipt of a record £41 billion block grant from the UK Government. In June, the chief constable told the SPA that the Scottish Government had

“clearly set out its spending priorities”

and that

“Policing is not among those stated priorities”.

Perhaps that helps to give some context to the bigger financial picture.

The Convener: I thank the witnesses for attending. I appreciate it. As usual, if members have any further questions, we will follow up in writing.

We will have a short pause to allow for a change of witnesses.

11:10

Meeting suspended.

11:18

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome our second panel of witnesses, who are from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service: Ross Haggart is interim chief officer; Stuart Stevens is interim deputy chief officer; and John Thomson is acting director of finance and procurement. Mr Haggart will make a short opening statement.

Interim Chief Officer Ross Haggart (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service): Good morning, convener and committee members, and thank you for your time. As you said, convener, I am the interim chief officer of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, and I have with me Stuart Stevens, interim deputy chief officer, and John Thomson, acting director of finance and procurement.

In our written submission, which is contained in the meeting papers, we have provided information on four areas, as requested by the committee: first, the assessment that we are making of the

impact of a possible flat cash settlement on the delivery of our services for 2023-24, the contingency plans that we are developing and what the impacts might be on the SFRS and our services to communities; secondly, the assessment that we are making of the impact of a possible flat cash settlement on our capital spending for 2023-24; thirdly, the assessment that we are making of the long-term impact of a possible flat cash settlement out to 2026-27, if the present inflationary cycle continues beyond this year; and, finally, some additional comments on the potential impact of a flat cash settlement on the SFRS.

Since the publication of the resource spending review, we have been exploring the implications of the indicative flat cash figures and the application of a flat cash settlement to the service's resource budget, which currently sits at £294.207 million. Similarly to our approach to the questions, we have approached that in two stages: first, we are exploring savings that we would need to start making for 2023-24; and, secondly, we are looking at what a two to four-year programme of work to make longer-term savings would look like, which would take us from 2024-25 to 2026-27. That work has been supported by our developing—utilising our medium-term financial model—a range of potential future financial scenarios, which have informed our considerations to date. I am sure that John Thomson can provide additional information on that modelling.

As outlined in our submission, our modelling indicates that a flat cash settlement in 2023-24 would require the service to make savings next year in the range of £12 million to £18 million. Thereafter, as we move further into the future, it becomes more challenging to accurately predict the impacts of the indicative budget, because it is more difficult to forecast with a degree of accuracy the key variables that will impact on the cost base of the service. Those variables are, in essence, the medium to long-term impact of inflation and pay settlements to staff over that period. However, in our submission, we have set out indicative savings, which will be required by the end of the four-year period, of between £29 million and £43 million across the service's budget.

Although there are degrees of uncertainty within the modelling, it provides us with indications of the potential scale of the challenges that we might face and, from a resource budget perspective, the measures that we might need to take to overcome those challenges. Further details in relation to that are provided in our written submission.

We have also set out the impacts of our capital budget remaining at its current level of £32.5 million per year. That is very much in the context of the current condition and suitability of our

community fire stations, vehicle fleet and equipment. Again, further details on that are in our written submission.

I again thank you for your time this morning. Stuart, John and I will be more than happy to provide any additional information that is required and to answer any questions that you might have on our written submission that will assist the committee with its pre-budget scrutiny work.

The Convener: Thank you very much. John Thomson, would you like to follow up on that opening statement?

John Thomson (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service): Yes, thank you, convener. Thank you, and good morning, to all the committee members.

As Ross Haggart has indicated, we have produced a number of financial scenarios. It is important to stress that, although they are scenarios, they are based on the reality of what we face as a service, from potential inflationary impacts and pay award impacts.

I will explain a wee bit more about some of the assumptions that we have made in that work. Similarly to what Police Scotland said, I highlight the immediate impact for the financial year 2023-24, because we are talking about savings in the range of £12 million to £18 million, which is a significant level of required savings. However, the cumulative impact over the four-year period means that the required savings could potentially ramp up to £43 million.

I will give the committee an indication of the assumptions behind the financial scenarios—they are all based on assumptions. We have assumed inflation rates of 9 per cent for 2022-23, 6 per cent for 2023-24 and 2 per cent for 2024-25. One could ask whether that is the right position, but that is the target inflationary pressure, so our modelling takes that into account.

In addition, we have taken account of the fact that it is likely that we will have to cover the pay award for this year. The figure that has been negotiated around is 5 per cent. However, that will flow through into the next financial year, 2023-24, because we will have to find recurring savings for that pay award. On top of that, we have done some financial scenarios for what will happen if we have a subsequent 5 per cent pay award in 2023-24.

That is what gets us to the position of £43 million in cumulative savings. I say that so that the committee is clear on our assumptions behind the modelling. Obviously, we are looking at a range of financial scenarios—23, I think, to date—based on different variations of pay awards and inflationary pressures. Those scenarios are to guide us as to

what the scale of the challenge will be for the service.

I also highlight the fact that a flat cash settlement has a significant impact on the service. Our staff costs are 80 per cent of our overall budget. Therefore, to meet the requirements of a flat cash settlement, we will potentially have to reduce our staff bill by looking at the pay award increase year on year. That is another important factor. We need to make those savings within an annual financial framework. As there is no compulsory redundancy within the service, possible reductions are based on retirements and natural wastage.

As a metric, I mention that a 1 per cent pay award costs £2 million for the service. Non-pay costs are 20 per cent of our budget. Therefore, although the headline rate of inflation is 9 to 10 per cent, it does not impact the organisation uniformly. For example, we are experiencing pressures on fuel, with a 45 per cent increase in prices. For electricity, it is 30 per cent and, for gas, it is 89 per cent. On the capital side, the increase in construction costs is about 30 per cent. Although we are talking about an average headline inflation rate, incredible pressure is coming through the supply chain in relation to the resource spending review and our capital position.

The service does not hold reserves. When we are looking over four years, it would be really advantageous to be able to hold reserves so that we could bank savings and carry them forward into future years. However, the service does not have that financial lever.

That is my opening statement, convener. I am open to questions.

The Convener: Thank you. I will pick up on the point that you raised about staffing and the potential implications that you face with the current financial constraints. You were in the committee room earlier when Police Scotland outlined some of the scenarios that it could face. Will you provide any more detail on what considerations you might have to make on workforce planning and your staffing profile for the future?

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: I will answer that, convener. At the moment, we seek to balance the savings that we need to make across the whole organisation. Because of the nature of our organisation, we want to prioritise the delivery of front-line services to communities and outcomes for communities. However, as we outlined in our written submission, 80 per cent of our budget is staff employment costs, and around 80 per cent of that is spent on operational staff costs, including operations control personnel, so around 64 per cent of our costs are operational staff costs. Therefore, we will not be able to make

savings of the magnitude that we have to make without that impacting on staffing, including operational staffing, in the organisation.

11:30

As far as firefighter numbers are concerned, we employ different types of operational staff across the organisation. We employ whole-time, or full-time, firefighters; we have 74 fire stations in Scotland that employ full-time firefighters. We also have on-call firefighters across Scotland, who comprise personnel who are conditioned to the retained and volunteer duty system. When we talk about firefighters, we have the different categories of whole-time and on-call firefighters.

As I have already said, we will always seek to protect front-line service delivery for communities, but the staffing arrangements in our service delivery model in its current form would not be sustainable if the resource spending review figures turned into annual budgets for us. We would base any changes to our service delivery model on community risk, while maintaining the safety of our firefighters. Any proposals for significant changes to the model would be accompanied by appropriate stakeholder engagement and consultation, and we would do specific impact assessments on any changes that we were going to make.

There is a suite of options that would be open to us to reduce the cost of our staffing budget. We could consider the crewing arrangements for particular fire stations, which might mean changing crewing arrangements from whole-time to on-call firefighters, on a risk-assessed basis. We might have to remove fire appliances from service, and we might have to close some community fire stations, too. Those are the suite of measures that we could use in order to continue to deliver a balanced budget, whether our budget is a flat cash settlement as per the spending review or anything else.

There is not necessarily a direct link between firefighter numbers and our budget, because we might have firefighters conditioned to different duty systems in the future. However, as John Thomson has pointed out, we support the Scottish Government's no compulsory redundancy policy, so we would reduce our head count through retirements, other leavers and vacancy management. That is across all staff groups—operational and support staff. That could cause challenges, because where people retire from or where they leave the organisation geographically might not match our risk-based decisions regarding future crewing arrangements.

To give an indicative figure, we can employ approximately 28 whole-time firefighters for £1

million, which roughly equates to one appliance being crewed by firefighters 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. That £1 million is roughly how much it costs us to crew one fire appliance on a whole-time basis. As John Thomson has already mentioned, each 1 per cent pay rise across the service equates to approximately £2 million of additional costs to us.

I hope that that sets out the quantum of the numbers, and I hope that you will appreciate that, in making savings, that might not translate readily into firefighter numbers, because we might change the duty pattern that firefighters are working. However, doing so would not be without consequences, because on-call firefighters would need to mobilise to stations and incidents. All those things will have impacts on communities. It is not easy to translate a numerical figure into firefighter numbers because of our different duty systems.

The Convener: On staffing numbers, we heard earlier from Police Scotland witnesses, who predicted that there would have to be a cut of around 4,500 staff over five years to service a 5 per cent pay award. Have you done any modelling that would allow you to consider the implications of a similar pay award?

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: We have not done that modelling based on pay award. As John Thomson alluded to, in our financial modelling—it is just financial modelling—we have modelled a 5 per cent pay award for this year across all staff groups. We have modelled it again for next year and then we have moved back down to 2 per cent for the years thereafter. That is an indication of where we think inflation might track. That is how we got to the overall figure of £29 million to £43 million by the end of the resource spending review period.

If we were to translate that into whole-time firefighter numbers in proportion to what we spend on operational costs, it would equate to a reduction of approximately 780 whole-time firefighter posts. That would be between 20 and 25 per cent of the whole-time firefighting workforce, if we applied the modelling that has been done proportionally across the whole organisation. That is the scale of the numbers that we would be talking about across the spending review period.

The Convener: Thank you. That is helpful.

Katy Clark: My question is on pay. The Fire Brigades Union is lobbying the Parliament tomorrow. As you know, it is currently having a consultative ballot on the 5 per cent pay offer and has recommended rejection. The case that the FBU makes, as I am sure you are well aware, is that its members have received year-on-year real-terms pay cuts for 15 years and, over the past

decade, there have been significant job cuts. We all know the inflation rates. It is not that the FBU has a bad or unreasonable case.

How will you make decisions about how to deal with the pay issue? Will the cabinet secretary be involved? It is clearly a massive issue for the people whom you employ.

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: You are right. We have different negotiating mechanisms for different staff groups in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

On support staff pay awards, we negotiate directly with the unions, which are Unison and Unite. We made them a 5 per cent offer, which is currently out for ballot. The support staff unions have recommended to their members acceptance of that, as the best negotiated package. We expect that ballot to close imminently, so we will soon know the outcome.

For uniformed staff, pay is negotiated through the national joint council for local authority fire and rescue services at UK national level. Although we have a seat at the NJC table, the pay offer is not entirely within the gift of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, because it is decided at a UK national level.

The original offer that was made back in June was 2 per cent, which was based purely on the affordability of services across the UK. We then engaged with the Scottish Government—we produced a business case for it—and it increased our funding for this year to support us, through the NJC, to be able to make a 5 per cent offer. That 5 per cent offer has now been made at UK national level.

You are right that the Fire Brigades Union executive council has rejected the offer and is going to ballot, which starts on Monday, recommending to its members that they reject the offer. It would be inappropriate for me to comment on anything else in relation to that negotiation when a ballot is about to commence on Monday.

Katy Clark: If we could be kept advised on that issue, that would be helpful.

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: Certainly.

Jamie Greene: Good morning, gentlemen. I have listened carefully to what you have said about it not being easy with your service to equate reductions in budget to reductions in head count, due to the nature of the roles and the types of contracts that people have. However, for the purpose of budget scrutiny, we have to perform some type of analysis, so maybe we could work on a full-time equivalent arrangement, which is not necessarily equivalent to how you operate, but it gives us an ability to equate people and numbers.

Could you help us to quantify what would happen in terms of front-line people if the proposed budget comes to fruition as a budget rather than as a forecast warning? The public are probably most interested in how many firefighters will be available, how many stations will remain open or have to close, how many fewer vehicles will be available and how many crew will be on a particular job or call-out. I am keen to dig below the surface in relation to that front-line service. What would it mean to front-line firefighting in Scotland if the budget comes to pass?

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: In relation to the figure that I gave you earlier, if we applied the reductions that we would need to make across all parts of the organisation proportionately, that would equate to approximately 780 full-time firefighter posts. As I said, 64 per cent of our budget currently goes on operational front-line staff costs. That would equate roughly to about 30 full-time fire appliances. We currently have 116 full-time fire appliances and 345 on-call appliances in the service. That gives you the probable order of magnitude that we would be talking about if we were to apply the savings proportionately across the organisation. About 25 per cent of the whole-time firefighting establishment would probably become unaffordable by the end of the four-year period.

Jamie Greene: So, even on a flat cash settlement, have you factored in a pay rise or not? Does the calculation include a percentage pay rise?

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: That is based on the figure of £43 million, which is the higher end of our modelling, and that modelling is based on a 5 per cent pay rise for 2022-23, a 5 per cent pay rise for 2023-24, and then a 2 per cent pay rise thereafter across the remainder of the resource spending review period. Those are the pay rises that we have factored in, for modelling purposes only. Clearly, as John Thomson has alluded to, the pay rises are negotiated annually, whether that is directly with support staff, with unions for support staff, or through the national joint council. However, those are the numbers that we have factored in for financial modelling purposes.

Jamie Greene: On the modelling of a potential 5 per cent annual pay rise for the next couple of years—it sounds as though that has been rejected at this stage, so it could be more—and with a flat cash settlement, you would be looking at a reduction of more than 780 full-time equivalent firefighters and around 30 full-time appliances out of 120. That is quite a big reduction. What are the consequences of that?

11:45

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: At the moment, we are doing modelling. We have our community risk index model, which is a geographic information system into which we have plugged a lot of data, including our historical incident activity data. I realise that, just because incidents have occurred somewhere in the past, that does not necessarily suggest that they will occur there in future, but the model provides a good approximation of risk across the country and shows where there is a predominance of certain incident types.

We have also looked at population data—for example, we have used the Scottish index of multiple deprivation and software systems such as Mosaic—so we have a good understanding of risk across Scotland. As a result, we are able to overlay our current disposition of resources against that risk map, and we can then understand from the modelling the specific impacts of, say, changing duty patterns at a particular location, removing appliances or closing particular stations.

We will always do that sort of thing as best we can on a risk-assessed basis and in a way that minimises the impact on community and firefighter safety but, ultimately, as I have said, if the flat-cash settlement becomes budget reality, it will not only impact on firefighter numbers but undoubtedly increase across the piece in the areas where we have to make changes, response times to incidents and potentially the initial speed of response to incidents. That is just an inevitability.

We will undertake specific local impact assessments on any local proposals that we make for change, and we will engage and consult stakeholders. We will always seek to minimise that sort of thing. Although having to change our crewing arrangements as I have outlined or removing resources will ultimately impact on our response times, we will always benchmark that and provide information to communities so that they, too, can benchmark it against our median response times to ensure that we understand the impact on those response times across Scotland.

Jamie Greene: That was quite a jargon-filled response, although I understand the reason for that. You will have heard the candour in some of the responses from the front-line services represented in the previous panel about what the situation will mean in layman's terms for people. Are we talking about, for example, delays in responses, the prioritisation of call-outs, the closure of stations or incidents not being responded to? What will this actually mean for the general public, who are worried and concerned about the situation?

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: I apologise for using jargon—it was unintentional.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service always responds to every emergency that it is called out to. It is very rare for us not to make an immediate response to an incident, but it can happen when we experience certain conditions. We tend to stack calls when there are, for example, particular storm conditions—or, indeed, as we approach bonfire season, as we are now—because demand outweighs capacity.

Generally speaking, however, we do not delay response, and we do not expect to be in a position where we are delaying response, stacking calls and not immediately responding to calls, other than in the situations that I have highlighted. Because of a lesser disposition of appliances or because of a move from crewing appliances on a full-time basis to crewing them with on-call firefighters—who are naturally delayed in arriving at a station—there might be an impact on the attendance time for appliances. We would expect that time to increase in proportion to the amount of resource that we have to remove from service.

Jamie Greene: That was helpful. Thank you.

The Convener: Before I bring in Russell Findlay, I want to come back to the issue of where you make the cuts and how you configure that across your service provision. During Covid, fire death numbers increased, and I think that I am right in saying that there was a correlation between that increase and areas of deprivation.

Does that mean that you would have to think carefully and perhaps even use modelling or data to inform in a geographical context where and how you make the cuts? I hope that I am not straying too much from budget but, as Jamie Greene said, how those cuts might look is important in relation to public confidence.

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: You are absolutely right that there are links between deprivation, vulnerability and susceptibility to all manner of unintentional harm, including fire. As I mentioned, we have a community risk index model that gives us a good indication of what population risk looks like across Scotland. We are adding to that the ability to look at physical risks such as flooding and wildfire risks.

We have a good understanding of risk across Scotland, and any decisions that we make will always be made with a view to minimising the impacts on community safety as best we can. It will absolutely be risk assessed, and any significant changes that we make will be subject to impact assessments and full stakeholder consultation and engagement.

Russell Findlay: It is good to see senior officers here today. Firefighters and the public will be grateful for that. I have been taken aback by some of the figures; I did not imagine that it costs £1 million to crew a single fire appliance for 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. It is obvious that you face some very tough choices.

I have one quick question that picks up from something that Mr Thomson raised, which was the inability to hold reserves. It might be academic in the short term, given the budgets, but can that be fixed? Have you addressed that issue with the Government?

John Thomson: We are seeking to understand that. Going back in history, prior to 2013, we were local authority-based and had the ability to hold reserves. Since becoming a single service, we no longer have the ability to borrow or to hold reserves, which is why I made the point.

The point about reserves is more that they can help to smooth delivery, especially in relation to potential changes in crewing models or stations. It helps to smooth the overall position but, ultimately, we would have to work with Government and say, "Look, here is our savings plan. It might be a bit lumpy, so can you support us by, in effect, acting as a reserve?"

Russell Findlay: Is there any discussion about having that ability?

John Thomson: There is no discussion about that ability.

Russell Findlay: More generally, you also mentioned that 23 scenarios have been modelled, which sounds like the equivalent of wandering through a smoke-filled room. I presume that those go from one extreme to the other, and include everything in between. Do they include worst-case scenario things such as ending the policy on no compulsory redundancies, or is that off the table?

John Thomson: We follow Government policy, which is for no compulsory redundancy. The highlight there is that the fastest you can go is linked to the retirals and the number of people who are leaving the organisation.

Russell Findlay: Is that particular policy set in stone as far as the service is concerned?

John Thomson: That is my understanding.

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: From my perspective, the no compulsory redundancy policy is a Scottish Government policy that the service supports. It is of great comfort to our staff. It provides our staff, not only in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service but across the public sector, with a great deal of reassurance. It is clear that it is a policy decision for the Scottish Government, but I would certainly not advocate changing that for the

service, because it gives a great deal of reassurance, comfort and security to our staff.

The Convener: I will bring in Rona Mackay, and then Jamie Greene might want to come back in.

Rona Mackay: I have a quick question for John Thomson. It has been mentioned that community stations might need to close, subject to a risk assessment. Has any financial planning been done in relation to the revenue that could come in if you were to sell those premises? Is that within your ownership, and what could be brought in or gained from it?

John Thomson: We have not identified specific stations at this stage. We have looked more at the general context and what it means for the number of stations, crewing models and so on. It is not until you get to the specifics—

Rona Mackay: I understand that, but could revenue come in from that?

John Thomson: Absolutely. To put it in context, Ross Haggart mentioned that a single-pump station costs us about £1 million, and, typically, 80 per cent of that is the cost of the crew—in fact, it might be slightly more, so I had better check my numbers—but there are then property running costs, so we would be able to save those costs and potentially realise a capital receipt, which would help us with our backlog of capital investment. We have highlighted that we have a growing backlog of capital investment. At the moment, it is just over £492 million.

Rona Mackay: Thank you—that is useful to know.

I realise that this next question is probably difficult to answer but, given everything that has been said, and if cuts need to be made in the way that you are describing, what area will be most impacted, in a general sense?

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: To clarify, are you talking about an area of the organisation or a geographical area?

Rona Mackay: I am talking about an operational area.

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: As I have mentioned, we always try to protect our front-line operational resources but, similarly to Police Scotland, we have been on a journey of reform for the past 10 years, and that has resulted in our removing in the order of £482 million from the cost base of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service over the past 10 years. That is the figure that you get if you compare our budget over that period with what the legacy service budgets would have been if they had been subject to inflation over the period.

That has resulted in our being an extremely lean organisation. We will always seek to make savings across the whole organisation, but we are a very lean organisation and we have pretty lean back-office functions. The Police Scotland witnesses spoke about seeking opportunities for shared services and collaboration. We are absolutely seeking those opportunities with Police Scotland, the Scottish Ambulance Service and other partners. However, unfortunately, because we are already quite a lean organisation, it is difficult to make substantial savings in those areas. There will be an impact on our front-line operational resources, because we do not have the ability to make significant savings from elsewhere in the organisation.

We spoke earlier about full-time resources, which are predominantly in more urban areas across the central belt of Scotland. Because of the nature of our operation, we employ people on a full-time basis, and those resources take up more of our budget than on-call resources. On-call firefighters provide fantastic services to their communities, but they are paid a retaining fee, and are then paid for training and to attend incidents and things such as that. That is a less expensive model. Therefore, unfortunately, when we look to make substantial savings, we can make those savings more from the whole-time elements of our service than from the on-call elements.

Rona Mackay: I understand. Thank you—that is helpful.

The Convener: Fulton, do you have a follow-up question on that?

Fulton MacGregor: Yes, it is on that point. I have other questions to ask later, but one of my questions follows on directly from the points that Rona Mackay has raised, so thank you for allowing me to come in, convener.

Ross Haggart talked about the on-call crew. In your written submission and earlier, you said that a consideration of how stations are crewed is a possibility. Even before the current situation, I had queries about the issue and I have done a wee bit of work on the crewing situation at the Coatbridge fire station.

It sounds like the on-call service is really helpful to the fire service. What difficulties does that model bring? What risks are associated with it? I have heard from those involved that there are risks. Is it a less responsive service? Is there a greater risk that something will go wrong when using that service?

12:00

Interim Deputy Chief Officer Stuart Stevens (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service): I will pick

that up. Good afternoon. My on-call colleagues provide an exceptional level of service across Scotland, particularly in our remote rural communities. However, the model is old and it is increasingly difficult for us to resource. A number of societal changes, which are reflected around the world, affect the provision of on-call staff. For example, the migration of staff from rural areas to urbanised areas reduces the ability to recruit from rural communities.

We have a huge amount of work on-going to try to bolster our on-call service. We have a programme of work that is looking at improving the attraction and retention of on-call staff, but the service is not without its challenges. To try to bolster the on-call service, we are also rolling out a youth engagement scheme, which we see as a way for young people to form an interest in the fire service and to join the on-call service. We also hope that that will provide a pathway into whole-time firefighting.

On-call services remain a challenge not just for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service but for all services around the world.

Fulton MacGregor: Thank you very much for that. I will save my other questions for later on.

The Convener: I will bring in Jamie Greene, then Collette Stevenson.

Jamie Greene: I will open up a line of questioning that I hope Collette Stevenson will ask about in more detail.

The budget forecast is for flat cash settlements for the next couple of years, which will present challenges, as you have indicated. Is it fair to say that, even before that announcement, the SFRS had funding problems? My understanding is that, as far back as 2018, Audit Scotland identified a huge backlog of capital investment in the service, which is presumably the result of years of capital underinvestment. Where were we at before we got to today's position? It is all very well looking ahead at what you might need to cut now, should a flat cash budget come to pass. However, even if the Government offers you more cash for your capital or revenue budgets, and you do not find yourself in the planning scenario that you have outlined today, that will not address the huge capital funding backlog. We know that that is putting the health, wellbeing and safety of fighters in jeopardy, given the stories that we have seen in the media in recent months.

Where were we at before now, how did we get to that point and why were things so bad in the first place?

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: You are right, Mr Greene. Back in 2018, Audit Scotland

described our capital funding backlog as “insurmountable”.

At that time, Audit Scotland said that we needed about £80 million of capital investment over a sustained period of about three years, after which the amount could drop off to about £50 million a year. Clearly, we have not had capital allocations of that magnitude. Our current allocation is £32.5 million a year. As John Thomson mentioned earlier, the spending power of that amount is a lot less than it was even 12 months ago. John mentioned the 30 per cent inflation in construction costs and things such as that.

Towards the end of the previous calendar year and into this year, we undertook a risk-based assessment of our capital needs. Essentially, those cover our community fire stations, vehicle fleet and equipment. We assessed that we had a capital funding backlog of almost £500 million and that we would need to invest £63 million a year for the next 10 years to make good that deficit. However, as you have said, that follows on from decades of insufficient investment in our capital portfolio.

As we say in our submission, the most pressing concern that we have is our 14 stations that have the construction method of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. We have taken remedial action to safeguard them, but in the long term they will require to be rebuilt. Based on previous estimated costs, that would cost about £70 million, but that amount will clearly increase given the current inflationary pressures.

Those stations alone, which need to be replaced because of a safety concern given the construction method, would cost us £70 million, so there are real concerns. We are taking a risk-based approach to how we invest our capital money at the moment, because it is insufficient to meet our needs.

Jamie Greene: We quite literally did not fix the roof while the sun was shining. The roofs have fallen down in some fire stations. That must present a huge challenge and risk. Fourteen stations is a lot to not be in satisfactory condition. It is no wonder that the unions are up in arms over that. It sounds as if the working conditions for some people are unacceptable.

Half a billion quid is a lot of cash to have as the cost of a backlog, and that developed when inflation was low, construction costs were low and budgets were going up. Now we are staring the opposite in the face. It seems very unlikely that you will ever get that amount of money. If you did not get what you asked for when times were good, how are you going to get £62 million when times are tough? What would be your request to the

Government, given what we are talking about today in relation to cash budgets?

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: We believe that our capital requirement per annum is £63 million. That is what we believe that we require based on our risk-based assessment of our current estate, fleet of vehicles and equipment.

We are always seeking to make improvements to our vehicles and our equipment, be it to support our low-carbon initiatives or improve community and firefighter safety. For example, over the past couple of years, we have replaced all our hydraulic rescue equipment, which had petrol-driven generators, and hydraulic hoses with battery-operated equipment. It is better for the environment and safer for firefighters and members of the public when we use that equipment. That cost us in the order of £4 million. However, it is extremely difficult for us to make such improvements while our existing capital budget is being used to make properties good and things such as that.

One thing that we are doing—Police Scotland spoke about it earlier—is that, wherever possible, we are collaborating with Police Scotland, the Scottish Ambulance Service and other partners. At just over 50 of our stations, we have either the Ambulance Service, Police Scotland or another body utilising the premises.

Jamie Greene: I live across the road from one of them.

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: We take up those opportunities for collaboration, and we are not just doing that in our front-line operational premises; we are doing it in our corporate buildings as well.

The way that people work now is vastly different from what it was three years ago. We have an agile working policy for all our support staff who do not need to come into the workplace every day, and we are reviewing our corporate building requirements based on the fact that people are working in a more agile way. We are doing that with our partners so that we can make better use of our partner properties from a non-operational perspective as well.

We are doing all that we can to ameliorate some of the problems that we have. Ultimately, however, we still require significant capital investments in the organisation.

The Convener: I think that Russell Findlay has a quick follow-up question.

Russell Findlay: It is kind of connected to that, but I have a couple of questions, so you might want to bring others in first, convener.

The Convener: Okay. I will bring in Collette Stevenson first and then Russell Findlay.

Collette Stevenson: Good afternoon. Based on what you said in response to Jamie Greene's questions, and notwithstanding the capital backlog that you are dealing with, the flat cash settlement is obviously going to have an impact on the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's ability to put more investment into your estate, as you touched on, into the fleet and into improvements to digital IT and whatnot.

Can you give us more detail about the significant impact of all that and the particular risks in certain areas of not upgrading or improving the current systems?

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: I think that there are two aspects to that question, the first of which is the resource budget. We have already talked about the potential impacts on front-line service delivery; we have some quite ageing IT systems, but the fact is that quite a lot of the new initiatives that can make organisations more efficient and effective, particularly those requiring new ways of working, new IT systems and so on, require up-front investment. From a resource perspective, it is difficult for us to make investments that can make improvements and, subsequently, efficiencies in the organisation and, at the moment, we are reviewing the viability of all our major change projects, because we might not be able to invest in them as much as we would like to.

Secondly, from a capital perspective, I have already mentioned that we have quite a significant capital backlog, and we are having to use the money that we have to—I hope that you will pardon the expression—make do and mend in stations instead of being able to improve our portfolio of properties. Over the past few years, we have been able to invest approximately £10 million in green ways of working with regard to appliances and stations, but such investment relies on additional ring-fenced money from the Scottish Government. That money is very welcome, but we cannot make those sorts of improvements from our own core capital budget.

We also have concerns about dignified facilities for all staff and visitors in a number of our premises in Scotland, and another concern that is becoming more apparent is the occupational cancer that is associated with firefighting and the ability for firefighters to decontaminate appropriately in our premises when they come back from incidents. As a result, we require capital investment not just to maintain what we currently have; the fact is that, in some of our premises, there is a lack of dignified facilities and firefighters lack the ability to clean themselves properly after coming back from incidents. We need to be upgrading existing premises instead of maintaining

them in their existing condition. We would love to be able to invest more money in all these things, but it becomes more of a challenge when our capital budget is so challenged.

Collette Stevenson: John Thomson touched on the service's inability to borrow, but, on the issue of the capital backlog, do you have the ability to lease premises instead of having to purchase them outright? If you did, that expense would be shown as revenue rather than capital on your balance sheet.

John Thomson: We could undertake a lease or purchase arrangement, but I would just point out that there has been a change in the accounting standards in that respect. Such expenditure would now be on our balance sheet, which would mean that we would need to have the capital to cover it. Even though there would be a lease arrangement, it would effectively be capitalised, which means that the impact would be the same: it would have to be funded through our capital programme.

Collette Stevenson: But would it not lengthen things in your capital budget?

John Thomson: Yes, but we would have to capitalise the whole-life cycle of the lease period, and that would be represented on the balance sheet in that way. In essence, what I am really saying, in a cumbersome accounting way, is that it makes no difference to the impact on our capital funding whether we lease or purchase premises.

Collette Stevenson: Thank you.

The Convener: I am mindful of the time and the fact that there are other members who want to come in on this topic. I will bring in Katy Clark, who has not yet asked any questions of our fire service witnesses, and then Pauline McNeill. If there is time, I will bring in Russell Findlay.

12:15

Katy Clark: I want to pick up on the extensive research that now exists on the carcinogenic effect of fire particles and ask about the implications, including legal implications, of that for the fire service and the duty of care that you have for the people who you employ. My understanding is that there is a significant number of stations that do not have adequate shower or toilet facilities or—I know that you have referred to this—even a proper fresh water supply. Will you give us more detail about that? As I said, there are legal obligations in terms of your duty of care for staff. I understand that a lot of work has been done abroad and a lot of research is now available that shows that there is a significant link between exposure to fire particles and various forms of cancer. Will you expand on the need to upgrade the estate?

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: The first and probably most important thing to say is that it is an issue that the organisation takes extremely seriously. We created a contaminants working group to look at the issue, and we are working closely with the Fire Brigades Union on it. Indeed, next week, we have some sessions with one of the foremost academics in the field, who will be visiting us and the Parliament. The sessions are sponsored by the FBU and we are very supportive of that work.

To date, we have audited all our stations so that we understand what the current picture is of our ability to enable firefighters to decontaminate appropriately when they come back to the station. In some cases, stations have a combination of technical solutions and practical applications— one-way systems and things such as that. We are looking at all our premises and how we can devise something that is appropriate for each one. You are right that there is a small number of stations that do not have running water. We provide specialist decontamination wipes to those stations so that firefighters can undertake decontamination when they come back to the station.

It is a priority area for us and we are doing a lot of work in that regard. There is a lot more to do, but we see it as an absolute priority, and we are working closely with the Fire Brigades Union on it.

Katy Clark: I have been told that there are more than 100 stations without sufficient shower or toilet facilities. Is that correct? Are you able to provide a cost for the resource implication of undertaking upgrade work for those specific reasons?

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: I would not disagree with that figure for the number of stations. We have individual costs for those elements but, when we talk about our current assessment of a £630 million backlog for capital investment, all of those are taken into account in the figure. We have individual figures for the individual elements; I do not have them to hand, but please be assured that all those issues are wrapped up in the overall risk-assessed approach that we are taking to our capital investment and are included in the £630 million.

Katy Clark: Do you agree that that work has to be a priority? I am sure that there is a whole range of upgrading work on the estate that, ideally, should take place, but this particular work has to be a priority. It would be useful to get as much information as possible on the capital spend for this tranche of work that is necessary for the reasons that I have given.

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: I wholeheartedly agree that it is a priority, and I am more than happy to provide additional detail to the committee if that would assist.

The Convener: I now bring in Pauline McNeill.

Pauline McNeill: Good afternoon. I will go back to the issue of pay. Mr Haggart, you told my colleague Katy Clark that the pay negotiations were taking place at the NJC at national level. There is talk of a 5 per cent pay increase, and Katy Clark already said that it looks like that is likely to be rejected. If the NJC arrives at a figure, whether it is 5 per cent, 6 per cent or something else, do you simply have to implement that figure out of your existing budget? I know that you have a seat round the table but could a decision be made in a national forum on a figure that you would just have to implement regardless?

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: The NJC is made up of employers and employee representatives. The employee representatives on the NJC negotiating body are from the Fire Brigades Union and then there are employer representatives from across the UK. Scotland has a seat on that group. However, to answer your question simply, yes, if an NJC pay rise is agreed upon, it would be implemented in Scotland.

Pauline McNeill: We heard evidence from the police service that virtually no more savings can be made. Transformational change and moving to a single service have used up a lot of that room. I think that you said something similar. It sounds like we are hearing comparable evidence from the fire service and police service that there is nowhere else to go.

Do you have concerns that we might lose fire service officers from the front line if there is no satisfactory pay settlement? Do you have any concerns about retaining firefighters in the long run?

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: We always seek to appropriately award our staff, who provide excellent services to communities across Scotland daily. We always seek to retain our staff, who are highly valued by the organisation.

We have similar challenges to Police Scotland in terms of recent changes to pensions, which have led to a number of our staff retiring earlier than we had previously anticipated. One of the other challenges that we face is that, with the changes to the pensions, it is now more difficult to accurately predict when people are likely to retire. Traditionally, people have retired at a certain age or after 30 years' service but that has become a bit more nuanced, so it is difficult to predict retiral rates and that has an impact on workforce planning across the piece.

People leave the organisation outwith retirement but, thankfully, although that occurs, those numbers tend to be fairly low. Normally, most of the people who leave the organisation and take many years of knowledge and experience with

them do so through retirement but that is becoming more difficult to predict and challenging to manage just because of, like Mr Page said, the recent changes to the commutation factors associated with firefighter pension schemes.

The Convener: John Thomson, do you want to comment on that?

John Thomson: It is not on that point. I will pick up on the point that Katy Clark mentioned and give a wee bit of clarity around the figure, which is £138 million. We describe the matter as the suitability of our stations. There is the asset condition of our stations and then their suitability. We have to prioritise based on the asset condition but we also have to consider the suitability of the station for contaminants. We believe that the actual figure for that is £138 million. I could not find it quickly enough in my papers.

The Convener: I will bring in Fulton MacGregor then Russell Findlay to bring our evidence session to a close.

Fulton MacGregor: I think that the sirens that we just heard might have been for the benefit of the committee.

I had a few questions, but some of them have been covered, and I asked a supplementary question earlier. I had a question on the Audit Scotland report and the 14 stations with serious structural safety issues, but colleagues have covered that, so in the interests of time I will move on.

The only question that I have is one about joined-up working that you might have heard me ask the police service in the previous evidence session. If there is a flat cash settlement for all the services—you are all integrated and you all work together—what are your thoughts and planning around how that would pan out?

The police said earlier that, a lot of the time, when other services, including you, and other justice partners struggle, the police are left to pick things up in areas where they would not normally do so. Is that how you see it going? Would it be the police picking things up from you, or would you be picking things up from the police in some areas? Do have any general thoughts on that?

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: I will say two things on that, Mr MacGregor. First, on collaborative working, Mr Page from Police Scotland mentioned earlier the blue-light collaboration board, which sits underneath the reform collaboration group, which was formed back in 2013 when the police and fire reform took place, and also includes the Scottish Ambulance Service. We are considering a host of collaborative opportunities to work with partners, so that we can mutually look to savings that we

might need to make over this period and work collaboratively with one another, whether that is through sharing premises or sharing services for back office functions. We are looking at all those sorts of things.

We believe that the Fire and Rescue Service and our firefighters can do more for communities across Scotland. Members might be aware that we have been in discussions over a number of years with the Fire Brigades Union at a UK level and more recently in Scotland in relation to developing the role of our firefighters in Scotland. We have had fruitful discussions with the Fire Brigades Union, and we have reached a mutually agreeable proposal between the service and the union on what a developed role for firefighters could be.

We believe that, by developing the role of firefighters in relation to the types of emergencies that our firefighters attend and, equally importantly, broadening the preventative role of firefighters—our front-line firefighters, as well as having a response role, have a very important prevention role to play—we can provide additional benefits to communities and a broader range of improved outcomes for communities.

We believe that positivity from that can resonate across the whole of the public service, not just in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service or the justice portfolio, and that investing in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, developing the role of our firefighters, appropriately remunerating them and having terms and conditions that reflect that would be of great benefit to communities and the public sector more broadly.

Fulton MacGregor: I welcome all that. The blue-light collaboration, which you and the police have spoken about, is a fantastic piece of work and should be happening.

It might be that you are not able to look at this, but in relation to budget scrutiny, is part of your analysis and assessment looking at how other services might be cut, or do you have to leave that to the side and not concentrate on it, in case the police get an increase or whatever? Do you sit and say, “The police might be getting cut, and this is how it will impact us”?

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: As I say, we do that through the blue-light collaboration board, and we are looking at around nine thematic areas between us, the police and the Scottish Ambulance Service in relation to how we can collaborate and work together, particularly across our corporate functions. As Mr Page said earlier, it may be that one of the services can make a saving by using the services of another service, but across the piece we can balance that out. We are looking at how we can work together in order

to take a partnership approach to collectively considering the savings that we need to make.

Fulton MacGregor: So it is a work in progress. Thanks very much for that. I have one other quick supplementary question, about the impact of climate change. It came to me as we have been speaking through the course of the committee meeting.

12:30

I am asking about it because, throughout the meeting, I have been getting a sun symbol at the bottom of my tablet screen saying that it is 16°C and, at certain points today, it has said that it is a record temperature for this date. We are in nearly November, and it is 16°C—it has just turned red the now, so the app must be listening to me.

Today may not be the best example, but the summer that we had was scorching. You must have been really busy at that point. Is the impact of climate change filtering into your budget requests to the Scottish Government?

Interim Deputy Chief Officer Stevens: Absolutely. The chief officer talked about our ambitions to build on and expand the role of firefighters in Scotland. Part of that is because there will inevitably be an increased need to respond to climate change. As you say, over the past few years, we have seen one-off incidents of flooding and wildfires becoming much more frequent. We have invested heavily in a wildfire strategy and we have invested in specialist water rescue teams. However, our discussions with the FBU in relation to an expanded role include the need for us to be able to expand that capability across Scotland to meet the challenges that will inevitably come due to climate change.

We are absolutely focused on the impact of climate change but, again, investment is required for us to be able to meet that demand.

Fulton MacGregor: Thanks very much. I know that some of that was referred to earlier as well. Thanks, convener, for allowing me to ask that extra question.

The Convener: Russell Findlay has the last questions.

Russell Findlay: I have two quick and specific questions about capital—one to do with buildings and the other to do with vehicles. You are talking about the need to rebuild 14 buildings at a cost of £70 million. I understand that, right now, there is a building that has gone significantly over budget, going from somewhere in the region of £4 million to something like £14 million—I do not know whether you recognise that and, if you do, whether you think that £70 million for 14 new stations is, therefore, in any way realistic.

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: I will ask John Thomson to talk about the specifics regarding the £70 million cost estimate and how realistic that is for those buildings.

Russell Findlay: First, the overrun on the one that is happening just now—is that recognised?

John Thomson: The cost for McDonald Road was about £15 million. That is not just a fire station; it includes a museum element and it is a wider community facility. That is part and parcel of some of the things that we talked about in relation to the construction inflation cost. There were a number of issues with McDonald Road--

Russell Findlay: It was £4 million initially?

John Thomson: No, the original bill was never £4 million for McDonald Road—not that I am aware of.

Russell Findlay: But approximately—

The Convener: Would it be helpful to follow that up in writing to provide some information?

Russell Findlay: That would be fine, thank you.

On the vehicles question, you have a fleet of electric vehicles—cars. My understanding is that they have not been used as well as they might have been, due to the practicalities of charging and so on. I also see from your Twitter feed that you have just taken possession of an electric fire engine. First, what is the cost of that engine, and secondly, has it been bought primarily for the practical purpose that it can serve or has the decision been significantly influenced by environmental considerations? If so, is it the right vehicle for the job?

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: I will pass over to John Thomson in a moment to speak about the electric vehicle fleet generally. The electric fire appliance is a prototype appliance, although we have purchased it. It has exactly the same operational capabilities as a traditional fire appliance that would have an internal combustion engine but the propulsion mechanism is different.

Clearly, there is a range in terms of how far the appliance can go and the amount of time that it can pump for at an incident and so on, which might be different, but in terms of its front-line operational capabilities, it is the same as a traditional fire appliance.

We were able to procure it with assistance from Transport Scotland and it is very much a prototype to see how that type of technology could work within the fire and rescue sector.

Russell Findlay: Is it in use just now?

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: Not at the moment. Once it is in operational service, it will be

deployed to Cambuslang community fire station. It is not on the run just now; it is being built and is, I think, with our training department at the moment.

Russell Findlay: This might sound a bit left field, but I note from the photograph of it that the appliance has a blue and white saltire on the front of it. If you were in a vehicle and it was coming up behind you, it would look more like a haulage vehicle than a fire engine.

Interim Chief Officer Haggart: That wrap will be removed once the engine goes operational, and it will look like any other fire appliance.

The Convener: John Thomson, did you want to say something?

John Thomson: I just wanted to come back on the figures, convener. The tender price for the electric appliance was £660,000, and we received a £500,000 grant from the Scottish Government in relation to that. We have also received additional grant funding to support the infrastructure; after all, as a fairly significant electric appliance, it requires a higher charge feed.

Russell Findlay: You said that it was 660 grand for a fire engine. How much would a normal one cost?

John Thomson: I think that it is under £500,000.

Russell Findlay: So this appliance costs more, but is not double the price.

John Thomson: That is right.

The Convener: I thank our witnesses for their attendance. Perhaps I can just follow up the earlier question about faulty RAAC panels by asking you to send us some more information on that and on any implications such as the potential closure of stations. That would be very helpful indeed.

We will have a short suspension to allow our witnesses to leave.

12:36

Meeting suspended.

12:40

On resuming—

Correspondence

The Convener: Agenda item 6 is a discussion of recent correspondence that the committee has received. I refer members to paper 5. The clerks have made some suggestions about how we might want to take the various issues forward, but ultimately the decision on what action to take is for us.

I will take each of the letters in turn. With regard to the first letter, which is from Police Scotland and relates to the use of cyberkiosks, do members have anything that they want to raise? If not, are we happy to agree the recommendation that has been made?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The second letter is from the Scottish Prison Service and relates to purposeful activity. Do members have any comments?

Russell Findlay: I note that the letter does not mention the two prisons that are not under SPS control, and I just wondered whether we need to seek the same information from those operators.

The Convener: Do you want to write to them for some clarification?

Russell Findlay: Yes, to Addiewell and Kilmarnock.

The Convener: Okay. Thank you very much.

If members have no other comments, that completes our public business for today. Our next meeting will be on 2 November, when we will continue to take evidence as part of our pre-budget scrutiny process.

As previously agreed, we now move into private session.

12:41

Meeting continued in private until 12:42.

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