



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

Criminal Justice Committee

Wednesday 4 September 2024

Session 6



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CRIMINAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE

27th Meeting 2024, 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)

*Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con)

*Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)

*Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)

*Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)

*Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Colin Brown (Fire Brigades Union)

Dave Crawford (Fire and Rescue Services Association)

Ross Haggart (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service)

Tim Kirk (Fire and Rescue Services Association)

Sarah O'Donnell (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service)

Stuart Stevens (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service)

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

Criminal Justice Committee

Wednesday 4 September 2024

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Audrey Nicoll): Good morning, and welcome to the 27th meeting in 2024 of the Criminal Justice Committee. I hope that everybody had an enjoyable break over summer. We have received no apologies this morning.

First, do members agree to take item 3 of today's business in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

10:00

The Convener: Our focus today is on the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, the current challenges that it faces and the work that is being done as part of the consultation on the future of the service in Scotland. This scrutiny session is a precursor to future work that we will undertake as part of our pre-budget scrutiny later in the year.

I am conscious that today's session focusing on the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is taking place on the same day as the publication of the inquiry report into the tragic fire at Grenfell tower. I am sure that the whole committee will join me in remembering all those who lost their lives in the fire, as well as their families. I pay tribute to the bravery of all the firefighters and other emergency service workers who attended the scene, as well as to all those who have supported the local community since 2017.

I intend to allow about 75 minutes for this session. Our first panel consists of representatives of trade unions. I am very pleased to give a warm welcome to Colin Brown, executive council member for Scotland of the Fire Brigades Union, and, from the Fire and Rescue Services Association, David Crawford, Scottish official, and Tim Kirk, Inverness and north regional representative. Thank you for your written submissions.

As usual, I will start with a general question to set the scene. What do you see as the main challenges that currently face the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service? What are the main things that need to be done to address those challenges?

Colin Brown (Fire Brigades Union): Good morning. I thank the committee for the invitation to give evidence.

I will start by thanking the convener for her recognition of the Grenfell phase 2 report. During your deliberations on the written and verbal evidence that the committee receives, I ask that you maintain your focus on the reality of Grenfell, on the images and statements that we have all seen as a result of the inquiry and on the reality of what happens when political decisions go wrong, when deregulation is allowed to happen and when the underfunding of public services, such as the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, is allowed to get to such chronic levels that fire and rescue services cannot meaningfully respond to such incidents. We lost 72 lives in one incident. Please focus on that during your deliberations. I appreciate that there are budget pressures across the public sector and across Governments, but the focus of all deliberations and political decisions

regarding the funding of fire and rescue services must be on maintaining community, public and firefighter safety.

That said, the convener's question is pertinent, given that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service faced an £800 million black hole in its capital budget last year, and I have learned from recent conversations with senior officials and officers in the service that the figure has grown to £818 million in the space of one year. That is despite the Scottish Government's injection last year of £10 million of capital investment, which has failed to allow the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to stand still in addressing the challenges that it faces with its capital portfolio.

Those challenges include providing dignified facilities for firefighters—for example, by maintaining or introducing decontamination-compliant facilities—across the entire estate. Currently, after attending incidents, firefighters are unable to decontaminate in any meaningful way. Through the course of their work, they get covered in carcinogenic and toxic fire effluents and chemicals, and they have to take that home to their families before they can shower and decontaminate. That is a well-known issue. The FBU funded research that has proven, beyond doubt and beyond scientific question, that it is a fact that firefighters are more likely to contract and die from avoidable cancers than the majority of the population. That is as much of a public health emergency as the asbestos emergency, which was recognised throughout the building industry and similar industries such as the oil sector.

Investment is needed. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service cannot spend its way out of the situation with its current budget. A number of fire stations are beyond repair. We have 14 stations with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete panels. The committee heard evidence from the service on that issue last year. It was estimated that it would cost between £60 million and £70 million to remedy only the stations with RAAC panels. Significant investment and ring-fenced funding are required to protect firefighters who currently have to work around scaffolding that has been in place for years. That is absolutely unacceptable in this day and age. It is unacceptable that firefighters, when they go to work, are unable to shower and to access dignified facilities. That is just the tip of the iceberg—I could spend a full day giving evidence on that issue alone.

Investment is also required to maintain the agreements from the 2022, 2023 and 2024 pay settlements, which introduced additional bandings for the retained duty system and extra maternity leave for our firefighters. The fight for 52 campaign is about allowing women firefighters who are

pregnant to be safely off work for a full year so that they avoid absorbing the carcinogenic chemicals that they encounter during the course of their work and passing them on to their child through breast milk. As far as we are concerned, that is not an unreasonable ask, and it requires minimal investment and support from the Government.

I appreciate that time is short, so I will try to wrap up. In 2019, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and the Fire Brigades Union negotiated a broadened role for the service, but the committee will appreciate that members rejected that because the scope of the work would have been far too great, with firefighters being taken off the front line into social care settings.

In 2022, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and the Fire Brigades Union revisited the issue. The negotiation was done through the national joint council—the only negotiating body—and an agreement in principle was reached. That was agreed to by all committees of the Fire Brigades Union. It was agreed that, should the Scottish Government choose to provide the funding, as it had committed to for numerous years, firefighters would have a contractual responsibility to respond to marauding terrorist attacks, such as the white van attacks that we have seen in London and other areas, and to respond as trauma assistants to the Scottish Ambulance Service during mass-casualty events, such as the Manchester arena attack.

This would not be under an additional function order, but firefighters would also have a contractual responsibility to respond to rope rescues, water rescues and a number of other incident types that are slightly beyond their role, as they do currently under the Fire (Additional Function) (Scotland) Order 2005, and they would be able to respond, alongside the Scottish Ambulance Service as part of a co-response, to emergency medical response incidents. We have evidence of firefighters currently working beyond their role and training scope, but saving lives. I have heard a story in which firefighters responded to a toddler aged two or three who was in arrest and saved the child's life.

The agreement in principle that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and the Fire Brigades Union reached requires investment and funding from the Government. This year, should the Government fail to recognise the socioeconomic benefits for the people of Scotland that can result from firefighters responding to a wider range of incidents—as has been negotiated, with contractual application—that will mark three years of missed opportunities, three years of lost lives that could have been saved and three years of not taking interventions that could have saved the Scottish economy significant money from the public sector purse.

The Convener: Thank you very much. There was a lot in there that, I know, members will be interested in coming back to.

I will move swiftly on and bring in David Crawford to answer the same question.

Dave Crawford (Fire and Rescue Services Association): I do not often agree with a lot of what the FBU says, but Colin Brown made a lot of good points. Fundamentally, the service is in a better state than it has been for a few years—it is looking and doing a lot better than it was when I started 30 years ago—but lots of improvements are still needed in certain areas.

Improvements can be made only through investment. As Colin Brown pointed out, investment is needed to improve properties. In this day and age, some stations do not even have running water, let alone places to put dirty wildfire gear, fire tunics or whatever it is. There needs to be significant input and investment along those lines.

Investment is also needed in recruitment and retention, because the biggest issue, especially for those on call, is how we can recruit and retain experienced firefighters. Especially among our membership, we are losing experienced firefighters who have been working for 20 or 30 years. We are losing more than we are recruiting, so the service has to look at that, which it is, to give it its due. We have good discussions with senior management along those lines.

The infrastructure issues are frustrating for our members and for those on call. I totally agree with the FBU on that. Significant investment is needed. Stations that are not fit for purpose need to be up to standard for professional firefighters in this day and age. That is not happening, but it needs to happen quickly. Good, experienced on-call firefighters, who make up 80 per cent of operational firefighters in Scotland, need to be given the best tools to fight the fires that they face. We are fully behind that.

I know that there is a big gap in the property budget—I think that it is more than £800 million, and it is increasing. It is a lot of money, but we need to find investment from somewhere to bring stations, especially rural on-call stations, back up to a suitable standard for people to work in.

Tim Kirk (Fire and Rescue Services Association): Good morning. As Colin Brown articulated, there is nothing short of a funding emergency for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. We are talking about not tens of millions of pounds but hundreds of millions of pounds. The figure is frightening. Politicians will say that the money is not available, but the Government must invest in a professional fire service. We cannot expect a fire service to be run on a shoestring

budget, as it is now. The service is doing an awful lot of good work in a lot of different areas and, fire crews being fire crews, they want to do the best that they can for their communities, but they do not have the resources or, in some cases, the infrastructure, as has been touched on, to do that. In some cases, fire stations are no more than sheds. Fire crews do not want luxury, but they want and need the tools, equipment and infrastructure to do their jobs safely and to the best of their ability.

As Dave Crawford touched on, we are losing more firefighters than we are recruiting, which is a challenge. The fire service also needs to be more relevant in communities. As Colin Brown mentioned, an expansion of the service's role into other areas—non-traditional fire response areas—will benefit fire stations, communities and the country. Professional firefighters have transferable skills, and there are an awful lot of roles that they can play to deliver benefits right across the country, but they are currently not able to play those roles. It is encouraging that we are at an advanced stage of discussions with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service about those roles, because the service needs and wants to evolve, and we are fully behind that journey.

10:15

The Convener: Before I open up to questions from other members, I will stay on the issue of recruitment, and park the budgetary issues for a moment. You have spoken about the difficulties of recruitment, and I suppose that we all recognise the challenges with recruiting in rural areas, for example. However, you have described a service that is evolving and that we could argue is multidimensional nowadays and so is perhaps more attractive to people and more varied than it was even 10 years ago. What factors are creating obstacles to recruitment? What is preventing the recruitment process from working?

Colin Brown: That issue is faced right across the United Kingdom fire and rescue services. Anywhere where we have what we would traditionally term retained duty system firefighters or what are now termed on-call firefighters—the terms are interchangeable and reflect the same thing—there are significant issues of recruitment and retention.

There are societal factors in that. In the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, the way that people lived and worked meant that they were based in their local community, in the local shop or office, whereas now there is a drag away from communities into large cities such as Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee and Aberdeen. There is the economic flight from rural communities of young people who do not see opportunities in their local communities to advance

their lives and have better lives than their parents had. They move away from rural communities, leaving those areas exposed significantly when it comes to fire and rescue and similar emergency services.

The recruitment and retention issues in Scotland are myriad. There is a vacancy rate of around 30 per cent across the RDS, which at times means that 200 of the 345 RDS pumps that cover 80 per cent of Scotland's land mass are unavailable to respond to emergency incidents and that firefighters cannot engage in the community safety aspects that keep communities safe and away from having incidents in the first place. The very successful home fire safety visit model that has been employed by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has driven down instances of fire, but that is through education. Without those firefighters, that education does not happen in communities.

We have a 10 per cent vacancy rate on average, and, as Dave Crawford and Tim Kirk have said, we are losing firefighters more quickly than we are employing them. It takes three years to become a competent firefighter in all roles. That attrition and churn of people through the system is incredibly expensive for the service, as it trains, equips and then loses firefighters who have come in the door, and then trains and equips more and then loses them, at a rate of around 10 per cent annually. Those challenges are across the board and societal.

Let me ask the committee this. If you knew that you were sending your child to a workplace where they could catch cancer that is entirely avoidable through having shower facilities, procedures and facilities in place in fire stations, would you recommend that job to them? That is the reality right now. There are multiple factors that prevent recruitment and retention in the service, and the health damage and the pay and terms and conditions are part of that. Thankfully, the negotiations that we have done improve that position, but they do not resolve it.

The Convener: Thank you. I will now open up the meeting to questions from members.

Sharon Dowe (South Scotland) (Con): Good morning and thanks for coming. My first question is a query on the budgets. The FBU submission says that the capital budget is increasing by £10.3 million and that the real-term revenue increase is £9.1 million after deducting £4.4 million for the previous year's settlement. The SFRS submission says that the revenue has a cash uplift of £9.5 million after deducting £4.1 million for the previous year's pay settlement. There are slight differences in the figures, but the SFRS submission says that you are still faced with making further savings of approximately £4 million in 2024-25 to offset pressures from staff pay awards and non-pay

inflation. Can you clarify that there was not an actual real-terms increase and that you still had to make cuts?

Colin Brown: On the differences, the service will be able to clarify its figures. The FBU's figures are based on the budget announcement and the work that we did to assess that. I assume that the variation is down to the non-cashables and the like, but the service and its finance team will be able to give more detail on how that breaks down across the service's various budgets.

The service's projections and our projections on the budget have to be based on the 2022 resource spending review, which was due to run until the 2025-26 budget. Although there has been an uplift in the budget in previous years within that timeframe, it cannot be guaranteed, because the indication is still that the RSR is in place. The announcements in Parliament yesterday certainly suggest that there is pressure coming.

The pay increase for firefighters obviously impacts the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's budget but, over the past decade and a half, firefighters have taken a £12,000 decrease in their pay, matched against inflation, so the increases that we negotiated through our national joint council in 2022, 2023 and 2024 have only brought us back to a level where, had pay matched inflation, firefighters would be breaking even.

Sharon Dowe: Dave Crawford, do you want to come in on that?

Dave Crawford: The budget is for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to manage as best it can. As I said, any additional funding is welcomed by not just us but the FBU and the FRSA as a whole, but I do not have figures on capital spending and so on at the moment.

Sharon Dowe: I will keep that question for the next panel.

I have a couple of questions on how well the SFRS is adapting to changing demands through training and equipping staff. As was mentioned earlier, the Grenfell statement is coming out today. Is the SFRS aware of all the sites in Scotland that still have flammable cladding? Are firefighters suitably trained to deal with those fires? Given that 10 high-rise appliances have been cut, do we have the right equipment in those locations to ensure that, if the unthinkable happens, the service is prepared?

Colin Brown: To be frank, my response to all that is no. That is not a criticism of the SFRS. Our training departments and our FBU members work incredibly hard to ensure that all firefighters are trained, equipped and provided with the knowledge to keep themselves safe and to perform their core function. However, the reality is

that the budget for training is stretched thin and the structures that we adhere to in the service prevent dynamic flex when things come through that require additional training for firefighters. For example, lithium-ion batteries are one technology where there have been developments.

On the cladding crisis, the service will be able to let you know the answer to the first part of your question on whether it is aware of all the sites. Without being sarcastic, it is difficult to know what you do not know, but the Scottish Government was provided with a budget to explore and remedy the cladding crisis across Scotland, so I assume that it has acted on that and has at least core-sampled all the buildings that have had cladding put on their external portions.

The SFRS should be able to answer in more detail the question as to the number of sites that still have flammable cladding. However, as we saw with the recent incident in Breadalbane Street, those sites still exist and are covered by a waking watch that is carried out by a questionably trained warden—not a firefighter, but a warden who has a fire watch on a building that can erupt explosively into flames. We saw that happen in Breadalbane Street, we saw it a fortnight ago down south and we saw it in Grenfell.

Those are significant risks. I have to say that, to my mind, the reduction in high-reach cover is a budgetary decision by the service. Those appliances are incredibly expensive to operate and maintain, but the cost of not having them when required is significant. As we have seen in the post-Grenfell environment, other fire and rescue services have invested in higher-reach towers and more high-reach vehicles.

Sharon Dowey: My next question is actually about the increase in electric vehicles and battery storage, which you mentioned. Do firefighters have the necessary equipment and training to deal with fires involving those?

Colin Brown: That is an evolving picture. As new technology comes through, the issue of how to respond to those incidents is a challenge for fire and rescue services globally, and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is investing in training on and understanding of those technologies. In relation to vehicle construction, the jaws of life—the cutting tools and spreading equipment that firefighters use to gain entry to trapped persons in vehicles—do not cut through boron steel in some cases. That is a challenge for which we have to adapt the technology and processes that we use.

The situation is very similar with lithium-ion technology. The Cobra coldcut equipment that is carried on some remote rural appliances across Scotland has the ability to inject into structures and battery cells, but that is an emerging attack

method for fire and rescue personnel to deal with lithium-ion batteries. The large energy battery storage sites that are evolving and being built across Scotland and other parts of the United Kingdom could result in significantly challenging incidents where firefighters might keep a safety cordon and avoid putting water on them to avoid other risks.

The issue is emerging. I make no criticism of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service at this juncture, as far as the training and the move towards understanding those risks goes, but the committee, and certainly the Government in setting budgets, has to understand that, as new risks evolve for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, money has to be spent to respond to those risks with either equipment or training.

The Convener: I want to move things on. We are almost half an hour in, and a number of members still want to come in. If there is time, we will come back to that. Ben Macpherson has a supplementary question.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): As the MSP for Edinburgh Northern and Leith, where Breadalbane Street is, I want to express my gratitude to and admiration for everyone who responded on that night. Edinburgh Northern and Leith is the most densely populated part of Scotland. There are important points to take from that whole scenario about making sure that there is adequate coverage in urban Scotland. My understanding is that the reason why action on Breadalbane Street was taken so swiftly was because the team at McDonald Road, which is not far away, was in McDonald Road that evening, and that included the height appliance and the secondary vehicle.

To expand on some of the things that were said earlier this year and last year, do you want to say a bit more about the importance of height appliances and secondary vehicles being on scene as soon as possible? Although we want our crews to do more and we want to expand their roles day to day, and although the number of fires has decreased because of smoke alarms and other safety features in homes, it strikes me that the most important consideration is to make sure that there is capacity for the times when the risk goes up. We need to ensure that the geographical spread of height appliances and secondary vehicles is not constrained in a way that increases the risk in a manner that means that crews could not get to a situation such as that in Breadalbane Street quickly enough.

For example, I have heard that, when the Ayr station hotel was being attended to, the crew from McDonald Road in my constituency was in Glasgow. I am concerned about what would have happened if the Breadalbane Street fire had

happened that night. It is a hard balance, but is there more that you want to say about that?

Colin Brown: You make an important point, in the sense that the service cannot have high-reach vehicles and coverage in every locality across Scotland, so there is that dynamic response to risks and incidents. However, we have repeatedly made the point that, when we remove high-reach vehicles, we are not removing the risk from height or the chances of incidents or of consecutive or concurrent incidents; we are just removing the ability of firefighters to respond meaningfully to them. That is a very important point.

The reduction in the number of height vehicles was part of a wider strategy by the service to reduce costs and reduce some of the pressures on it, but those risks have not changed across Scotland and neither has the need for those vehicles. As you correctly point out, the fire at the Ayr station hotel, although it was derelict and there was minimal risk to life, required vehicles to be deployed from across Scotland. When the height vehicles are dragged out of the communities that they are stationed in to protect, that leaves a far wider geographical area exposed to risk.

10:30

The risk is the same with the removal of second firefighting appliances or when you reduce the number of firefighters or appliances that protect communities. It is worthy of note that we are a year on from the day when those appliances were removed from the communities of Scotland. They were temporarily removed. Work is on-going but no road map is currently available as to how those vehicles will be brought back into service; 166 firefighter posts were cut at the same time and there is no road map to bring those posts back into the service.

Ben Macpherson: Do you want to say any more about the importance of second vehicles in relieving the initial crews that are on site? That is perhaps worth putting on the public record.

I presume that the FBU is pushing hard at United Kingdom level for the UK Government to step up its funding of fire and rescue services across the UK. Of course, that would have a consequential consideration, particularly in capital budgets, and would significantly contribute to the Scottish Government's capacity to provide more funding up here. I want to hear a bit about what the FBU is doing to push the UK Government to step up and spend more on fire services.

Colin Brown: I will try to be brief, convener.

The Convener: A brief response would be helpful.

Colin Brown: That is something that I am not particularly good at.

On the question about second appliances, there needs to be an understanding of the roles that firefighters perform. One firefighter cannot tackle a fire, because they have to ship water, put up ladders, run hoses and send back communications; you need a team. Our view is that the safe team number for the first appliance on scene is five. There are issues about that across Scotland, and RDS colleagues will be able to give details about the issues that they face.

The second appliance should have at least four firefighters but, if that is delayed, you have issues with water supply. If you are pumping the water that is carried on the back of a fire appliance, you have about six to eight minutes of water supply, and that is not a long time. When you are deploying crews and breathing apparatus, you swallow up personnel very quickly, so the rapid response of that second appliance is almost as important as the first appliance. As the service's data last year showed, the removal of second appliances increased response times for arrival on scene.

On the question about what the FBU is doing at UK level, we are campaigning heavily to get consequential passed through investment from the UK Government into the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. We have a firefighters' manifesto, which I am sure all committee members will have received a copy of—if not, I will be happy to provide that to you and to touch base on its content. There are demands in it for funding and investment in protecting fire and rescue services across the UK, and our campaigning on that is significant.

What we have had from previous iterations of Governments and MPs from Scotland in Westminster is, "Fire is entirely devolved; it's nothing to do with us down here; sort your own business out." That is completely unacceptable, because Scotland's MPs in Westminster should be making the case to ensure that Barnett consequential are created from spending in England and Wales and passed to Scotland to spend on fire.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): For clarification, because perhaps not everybody knows this, is it correct that the FRSA largely represents on-call firefighters, who used to be known more commonly as retained firefighters, whereas the FBU mostly tends to focus on full-time firefighters?

Dave Crawford: We have full-time members, as well.

Russell Findlay: You both have some of each, obviously, but the FRSA mostly represents the

more rural areas of Scotland, whereas the FBU more typically represents the central belt and other urban areas. That is a bit of a crude distinction, but I think that it is more or less fair, and that will dictate my line of questioning.

It was 10 months ago that the FBU produced its “Firestorm” report, which made 50 recommendations. How many of those recommendations has the Scottish Government and/or the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service accepted and, of those, how many have been implemented?

Colin Brown: The Fire Brigades Union represents 80 per cent of the UK’s firefighters and 80 per cent of Scotland’s firefighters, in all duty systems and control rooms, including retained, volunteer and whole-time firefighters. We have an absolute responsibility to represent all our members across all duty systems.

Work is on-going on the “Firestorm” report. We recognise that it is a body of work that will take a number of years, and I do not have the information at hand to say which recommendations have been ticked off.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service treated the “Firestorm” report in the same manner as it would treat a report from His Majesty’s fire service inspectorate in Scotland, giving it the same weighting and credence. The SFRS has set up specific groups to work alongside the FBU to progress the report’s recommendations. To its credit, the SFRS recognised that it was the voices of its staff—its employees—across all duty systems and work groups that were telling it the issues that they saw in the Fire and Rescue Service.

Government issues are far greater. We have had a general response that all matters are an operational responsibility for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to resolve. The Government is very hands-off. However, to pull it back to the budget, without funding, the Scottish Government is entirely responsible for the failure to implement the recommendations of the report.

Russell Findlay: My next question is on your deeply concerning evidence about decontamination facilities and the fact that they are causing demonstrable ill health among your members and possibly causing early deaths. Yesterday, the Government announced £500 million in funding cuts to public services across Scotland. What impact will that have on your quest to get the facilities sorted out?

Colin Brown: It is very stark. The capital risk for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is that it cannot rebuild, replace or upgrade fire and rescue stations across any of its communities. It has done some fantastic work up in Inverness with the

refurbishment of a station that was in desperate need and that is now decon compliant. It worked with firefighters on that station to implement the FBU’s recommendations based on decon research. However, that, again, requires investment. The SFRS believes—and will be able to detail this more fully—that it can do a programme of refurbishment and rebuilding of a number of stations per year.

Russell Findlay: What percentage of your front-line officers do not have those facilities?

Colin Brown: Off the top of my head, I do not know, but I would say that it is the vast majority. Across our RDS estate, probably all our firefighters are struggling to access dignified and decon compliant facilities. There might be 20 firefighters working from a remote rural station with one shower, and firefighters getting decontaminated within an hour of leaving an incident ground will not happen with that number of people going through a one-shower facility.

Russell Findlay: Thank you. I want to ask the FRSA about the wildfire strategy, which I believe has been a work in progress for many years. What stage is that at?

Tim Kirk: The wildfire strategy is potentially a fantastic piece of work from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. It has been in process for five-plus years, and the delays with it are many and varied. Not insignificant among them are the supply chain issues for major equipment. The service has rolled out new wildfire personal protective equipment, which is top-to-toe: boots, tunics, leggings, helmets and gloves. It really is excellent PPE, which allows firefighters to work more safely at large wildfires and not suffer the overheating and heat exhaustion that they previously would have suffered when working in structural fire kit.

The PPE is excellent. However, the equipment is lagging behind, and it is a source of frustration for everyone who deals with large wildfires that we see estate workers with better equipment than we have. We still have backpack sprayers and beaters, which have been around for ever. We see leaf blowers being used effectively by estate workers, and the service has now purchased that equipment because, basically, the land managers have trialled them and proven them to be effective in wildfires.

We are in the process of seeing the training being rolled out for stations. We would have loved that to have been completed years ago but, as has been touched on previously, the training department is understaffed and underresourced, and delivering new training to staff all across Scotland is a sizable undertaking.

Russell Findlay: An issue that affects all of you is vehicle age. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's evidence to us today was that almost one in four vehicles is past the age by which it should have been replaced. There has been an issue with vehicles—specifically, all-terrain vehicles for wildfires that were delivered to you in June 2023. There have been all sorts of concerns about their suitability and safety, and they are undergoing modifications. I understand that huge sums of money were spent on them but that they are still not in use. Is that correct?

Tim Kirk: That is correct. Ten all-terrain vehicles have been purchased by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, and they will be located strategically across Scotland. I believe that the first couple of vehicles have been released to the training department to build the training package to deliver out to stations.

Russell Findlay: Is it not wildfire season now?

Tim Kirk: Yes, it is.

Russell Findlay: So, it will be next year at the earliest—two years after delivery—before they are really put into use.

Tim Kirk: It is fair to make the assessment that it will be two years after the SFRS receives the vehicles before they will see active service.

The Convener: Rona Mackay has a very quick supplementary question on that.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Yes, it is supplementary to Russell Findlay's line of questioning. It is about the decontamination issues, which I am very concerned about. It was shocking to hear what was said. Given the reality of the budget—we do not need to go over the cuts and all that again—how would the union react to the possibility of thinking outside the box and sharing premises? I am thinking about a large local authority building in my constituency, which is vastly underused. It is modern and could perhaps be adapted. Is that an option that could be considered in order to get decent conditions?

Colin Brown: The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has put forward a business case to the Government for community resilience hubs, which takes the conversation back to very remote and rural communities and islands communities. I believe that that is the best way forward. It might be that we merge into one area two stations that have struggled to create a single crew. However, if we have a bolt-on hub where police might be able to share part of the facility, and the ambulance service, doctors' surgery and community outreach team could all share the facility, we could drive down the overall cost of rent, heating, electricity and building costs. It might also resolve

recruitment issues in our RDS structures; people might be drawn to the hub and get interested and say, "Well, I could be a retained firefighter; I could give those hours". There are many benefits to that approach.

In larger communities and cities, it might be more challenging, simply because the investment to refurb a building that has not been built for that purpose would cause considerable challenges—think about the size of the fire appliances that need to go into such buildings.

In addition, before we start sharing facilities with other organisations, we need to ensure that the facilities are safe for firefighters to come into for decon, because we do not want to expose peripheral workers who are sharing our facilities. The benefits are obvious for anyone to see, but the cost and the risk of doing it on the cheap is—

Rona Mackay: Thank you for that—I just wondered whether that was something to consider, in principle.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Good morning. I have two questions on the same theme. I am trying to establish what progress has been made in the past two or three years. My first question is on decontamination. I think that we are all familiar with the report. We debated it in Parliament in Katy Clark's members' business debate and the minister made some commitments. What progress has there been since then? I will need to put the same question to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service itself, but can you say what progress has been made?

Colin Brown: There has been progress, and I thank you and Katy Clark for the debate in Parliament. It raised the issue at the level that it is required to be assessed at.

Progress has been slow, but that is not necessarily the fault of any one party. Faced with the budget pressures that it has, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has to try to make decisions within a cost envelope. We recognise that.

10:45

The work of a specified and committed decontamination group has been slow in the sense that, every time it looks at an issue, it exposes another issue. We need to train our firefighters to understand decon—simple things like not putting your gloves in your helmet. It is the obvious place to put them when you are carrying them around, but your gloves touch everything, your helmet touches your skin, so that is a direct route for carcinogens to pass through. Even the most basic training of firefighters requires time and investment from training staff, which again has a

cost because they are not engaged in other activities.

Building refurb requires the investment and the design and the work to be done. On an annualised budget, it is very difficult for the service to project building projects that can take two to three years from start to finish. All those issues are recognised but progress is slow because it is almost like looking for the starting point on resolving part one when there are so many parts that need to be resolved. Work is being done, but it is not going to be fixed overnight.

Pauline McNeill: I will put the question to the next panel because I am interested to know exactly what progress has been made, but thank you for that.

Secondly, on the same theme, the discussions that you are having with the Scottish Government on extending the role seem to be interesting and helpful. You said that there have been three years of missed opportunity, but has any progress been made at all? Are there on-going talks with the Government on extending the role?

Colin Brown: The shortest answer I can give you is no. A business case was provided by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service with a supporting letter and statement from the FBU and, as I say, it has sat for almost three years with no progress being made. We receive assurances from the Minister for Victims and Community Safety that the Scottish Government still wants the work to proceed and still wants to do it, but it has no money. We are talking about minimal investment in the service to achieve the societal shifts that we believe we can make. The short answer therefore is that there has been no progress and no formal conversations are taking place with the Government, despite the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012 specifically stating that the Government wants the work to continue.

Pauline McNeill: Is there any point in having further discussions without any money on the table?

Colin Brown: No.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I apologise to the witnesses but I will also be talking about decontamination. As Colin Brown said, there is a lot to cover, but I think that your opening statements about decontamination leave us as politicians and committee members in a position where that issue simply cannot be ignored because it sounds very serious indeed.

I do not think I was in for Katy Clark's members' debate, so some of what I want to ask might have been covered there, if briefly. You said that there

was scientific evidence, or that it was beyond scientific evidence—something to that effect—that firefighters were at risk because of some of the chemicals that they deal with. Can you expand on that a bit so that the committee can have an understanding on the record of what that might look like?

Colin Brown: Yes, of course. The Fire Brigades Union commissioned Professor Anna Stec from the University of Central Lancashire to do the research. She is a world-renowned scientist in fire toxicants. It was in response to global evidence that firefighters contract avoidable cancers at a rate far exceeding that of the normal population. In some cases they are four times or six times more likely to get cancers and get them at a much younger age, to the extent that when they go to their doctors with symptoms, the doctor does not test for the cancers because the person is far too young and healthy and works in an environment where their fitness is measured. Doctors do not test for cancer because they just cannot imagine that someone of that age will get that cancer.

The research is now overwhelming and the entire UK, as a nation, is decades behind other countries. The FBU's research has been translated into multiple languages. I think that it has been adopted by the Polish Government as best practice, but we are still lagging behind. To its credit, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service supports the work that we have done on that and wants to invest in it, but is, as I have covered, struggling with other issues.

I point the member to the FBU's dedicated mini-site on decon. All the research papers are there. There was very good evidence available from Scottish firefighters because the way that health records are recorded in Scotland is different from how it is done in other parts of the UK. However, it has taken the FBU to issue letters to our members to take to their general practitioners to have the coding put against them that their employment as a firefighter is in a high-risk, high-exposure environment so that those tests for cancer will be undertaken should they present to their doctors with symptoms.

Fulton MacGregor: If I am picking it up right, it is right to say that a real mitigation to the risks that you are talking about is access to showering facilities immediately after attending a fire or an incident. Am I also picking up correctly that some fire stations have those facilities and that they are used but some do not so it is almost a bit of a postcode lottery situation? Is that accurate?

Colin Brown: Absolutely. The resolution to a lot of the issue lies in firefighter behaviour. We need to teach firefighters that dirty kit will kill them rather than being the old badge of honour—if you are dirty, you have been working hard.

It also requires an understanding about firefighters being removed. The first team into a fire tends to be exposed to the most carcinogenic chemicals. They are in the smoke and fighting the fire. Getting them off the incident ground rapidly so that they can decontaminate is a priority for us, but because resources have been stripped back—1,200 firefighters in the past 10 to 12 years—there are fewer firefighters to relieve the first firefighters, to allow them to go and decontaminate within that hour. That has a snowball effect, where those firefighters, even if they had the facilities, cannot be released from an incident ground rapidly enough to decontaminate in what we say is best practice because the incident is on-going.

Fulton MacGregor: Replacing facilities alone would not be enough. Further education and other factors, such as relief, are also important. Has a business case been made about how those improvements can be implemented?

Colin Brown: Yes, there certainly is broad understanding between the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and the FBU and a dedicated decontamination group is looking at how to do this stuff.

The facilities are a major factor because, if you relieve a firefighter from an incident ground and send them back to a station where they cannot get a shower, it is pointless. Research produced by Anna Stec swabbed firefighters' cars and their children's bedrooms and found carcinogenic chemicals, which could only have come from fires, in firefighters' children's bedrooms. That is the reality. Facilities are very important, but the structure around that to relieve firefighters rapidly from incident grounds and give them access to those facilities, alongside the education of firefighters and changing their behaviours so that they understand the risk, is equally important.

Fulton MacGregor: Thank you. I will come to Dave Crawford and Tim Kirk in a minute.

There are obviously quite a lot of things in the mix there and, as you have heard and accept, budgets are extremely tight and we are still in an austerity phase but we are talking about people's health. If there was one thing that could get sorted to improve that whole situation for firefighters' health, what do you think it would be? What is your one ask?

Colin Brown: I will be honest with you. The research is so alarming that it is difficult to say that one thing will change this overnight or be significant. All the issues need to be addressed.

Firefighter behaviour is an easy fix by getting them to understand at every opportunity the risks they expose themselves to. They understand that, when they go into a fire, it is hot, they will get burnt, and they need to be safe, but they have to

also understand that post-incident effect where they are still absorbing carcinogenic chemicals into their body. It is not respiratory; it is dermal a lot of the time. They soaking this in through their skin and their PPE. Getting firefighters trained and really dialling in on that is a significant factor, but it is not the only factor and it is not going to solve the problems.

Fulton MacGregor: Thank you. Dave Crawford and Tim Kirk, just quickly, because I know that I probably do not have much time left for questioning, do you have any thoughts from your organisation's perspective on the decontamination issue?

Dave Crawford: I agree with Colin Brown. The education of the firefighters has to be paramount here. I have been in it for 30 years so I know that when you are on call, the last thing you want to do when you come home at 3 o'clock in the morning after a long day or a long shout is get into a shower and change your kit. You want to get home as quickly as you can.

I commend the FBU and Scottish Fire and Rescue for the work they have done on this. We will do anything that we can to support the work through the education of our members and even non-members and the FBU members. We will all work together to do this because firefighter safety is such a big topic at the moment and is a priority for the rep bodies and the services. We will support any education and training that we can because it is a big issue at the moment.

Tim Kirk: To add to what Dave Crawford said, the scale of this issue is quite mind-blowing. In urban environments, fire stations are relatively close to each other and, broadly speaking, the facilities are better in cities than they are in rural areas.

However, if you have, for example, a large wildfire, such as those we had in the Highlands last year, and hundreds of firefighters are attending, some of them are travelling an hour and a half to two hours to the fire in the first place, which means that they are travelling that same time going back in kit that is filthy dirty and dangerous to them.

The service will need hub stations. It is not realistic to have every single fire station at the highest standard, but we need a facility where there is a hub station that every firefighter can attend within the hour to decontaminate, and then go from there back to their home stations and their homes. That will require a spider's web of decontamination stations all across Scotland, the mainland and the islands.

That gives you an idea of the scale that we are looking at. It is not just that we need an extra shower in this station or that station. We need to

totally review and reinvest. Again, unfortunately, it comes down to finance, but we need that investment for firefighter safety to be equitable across all of Scotland.

The Convener: I am going to bring in Katy Clark. I should say that we have a bit of time in hand, so if members want to come in with very brief questions, they should indicate as much to me. I know that Russell Findlay would like come in again, but I will take Katy Clark first.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): The evidence we have heard is extremely alarming. Unfortunately, I think that most members are already aware of many of these issues, largely due to the lobbying that has been done, particularly by the FBU, which has done a huge amount of work in this Parliament on the issue. It has, in particular, brought to parliamentarians' attention the risks of the toxins that firefighters are exposed to.

It seems absolutely clear to me that the fire service is in breach of its duty of care to firefighters and, from the evidence that we have heard today, it is the exception that adequate decontamination facilities are available. The evidence about Inverness is interesting, because I think that most committee members will have been to fire stations and seen the poor decontamination facilities that are available. It is also alarming that, when you speak to firefighters, they will tell you that they look to the FBU guidance and that we still are not in the position of having proper and thorough guidance available. As a result, simple steps might not be taken by every firefighter.

In other situations, we would be closing down such facilities if they did not meet the minimum requirement. It cannot be acceptable to have perhaps dozens of firefighters relying on one shower after an incident. Have you given any thought to emergency responses that can be made to bring in other resources, perhaps not in fire stations that are built, to ensure that, when there are incidents, firefighters have adequate decontamination and that they are not having to rely on baby wipes? How can we as a society respond to ensure that, until we get adequate facilities, firefighters are still able to decontaminate?

I will ask Colin Brown to come in first.

11:00

Colin Brown: Yes, those conversations are happening. I will make only very limited criticism of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, because, since we made it aware of this issue, it has been nothing but supportive and exemplary in its attempts to resolve the many layers of this problem. However, this is happening against a

backdrop of competing priorities. Do we send an emergency response to an incident, do we maintain a fire station within a local community or do we close that and retrofit a station to provide decon facilities? Ultimately, all the issues come down to financing for the service, not to some desire not to change this situation.

That said, the National Fire Chiefs Council previously resisted such moves and, at UK level, the evidence continues to be resisted by the Government. The new Government might have a different view, but the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council has refused to accept the empirical evidence produced by the science and the scientists on this matter.

That is a challenge, because if the bodies that assess disability payments and compensation payments for firefighters contracting cancer in their work are denying this, why would Government and legislators recognise it? It creates a cycle of required investment and recognition that they have a responsibility for this. This is a significant challenge at all levels for all Governments across the UK, which have wilfully remained ignorant of this issue.

As for your question about alternatives, we could look at processes with the service. That is not something that I have personally been involved in, but the decon group might have had such conversations about shower facilities being transported out. Again, though, these things have to be purchased and put in stations; they have to be put at a strategic location to respond to the risks; they have to be serviced and maintained; and they have to have a water supply. You can see how these layers build up on what, in theory, seems a very simple fix.

Fundamentally, the service must be given the financial headroom to be able to make meaningful progress on this stuff and to speak to us and the experts who have done this research, as it has been doing, to resolve the crisis where it can afford to do so.

Katy Clark: Do the other witnesses want to respond?

Dave Crawford: You said that the firefighters look to the FBU, but the FBU does not represent every firefighter in Scotland. That is why we are here.

Katy Clark: I understand.

Dave Crawford: I just wanted to make that point. Our members certainly would not be looking to the FBU. They might look at what it is doing, and we would fully support them in that, but you have to remember that we have members in the fire service, too.

As Tim Kirk pointed out, we need strategic or hub stations where rural on-call firefighters, in particular, can go to get washed, use the facilities, get new or cleaner kit or PPE, and then return to their own station. The issue for on-call at the moment is timescale; when decontaminated kit gets put away for cleaning, it leaves only one set for on-call firefighters. If they are involved in another incident, that kit has to go away for cleaning, too, and we could be talking about three or four weeks before it returns. If both sets of kit go, that person is basically off the run, which could end up putting the station off the run.

After all, as we have pointed out, we are struggling to man retained and on-call stations, especially during the day, and to get those firefighters out the door. If kit has to go away, that is another issue, because we need to replace it as quickly as possible so that we can get that appliance back on the run.

Katy Clark: Convener, I was not going to ask another question, but I would just point out that industrial injuries are obviously now a devolved matter. Perhaps the committee could get more information on some of the issues that have been raised in that respect.

The Convener: Thank you very much. Colin Brown, did you want to come back in quickly?

Colin Brown: I just want to make a couple of brief points. First, I have to put on record my disappointment that the FRSA is not pointing its members towards the research. This research is not specifically for FBU members; it is for firefighters to keep themselves safe at work.

As for PPE, with our lobbying of the service and our work on the contaminants group, we have reached a position where the service has made millions of pounds of investment in additional PPE, in recognition of the issues that Dave Crawford has just raised and to try to ensure that firefighters are not holding on to dirty kit that should be getting laundered. That is another example of the service responding to our evidence.

Russell Findlay: I just want to clarify something that Tim Kirk said. Mr Kirk, you were talking about wildfires and firefighters potentially having to drive an hour and a half to get to decontamination facilities. Surely they will be using their own vehicle. Is that correct?

Tim Kirk: I am sorry if I misrepresented that. I was talking about firefighters travelling in fire appliances for an hour and a half to two hours to get to an incident and then the same back.

Russell Findlay: Okay.

I have another question that might apply to all of you. Given the dire and dangerous conditions and the lack of decontamination facilities—issues that

have been known about for quite some time now—is there any likelihood of legal action being taken? Is that being considered?

Colin Brown: It is not an avenue that we are exploring right now. Our members might end up taking personal injury cases, but we believe that we need to focus on getting money invested in changing facilities instead of potentially putting financial penalties on the service for the failure to do these things quickly enough. That is actually counterintuitive. We would rather the service held that money and was able to invest it.

Russell Findlay: I have another quick question. I understand that the SFRS was created 11 years ago and that there were eight legacy brigades. Are the terms and conditions of employment all universal now? Do they go Scotland wide?

Colin Brown: No.

Russell Findlay: Why is that?

Colin Brown: I will answer that if I can. There was a stumbling block; the terms and conditions for every firefighter across the entire UK are negotiated through our national joint council for fire and rescue services. We adhere to our grey book, which is the scheme of conditions for firefighters on all duty systems. The service sought to introduce elements—the detail is very complex and the committee will not have time to dial into all of it—that were below the collectively bargained and agreed terms and conditions; there was a failure to agree and, for a number of reasons, the issue has never been resolved.

The positive aspect is that the working groups established on the back of the 2022-23 pay settlement agreed to look at retaining fees and bandwidths for RDS members. That has now been implemented and will come into force on 1 January next year. It is believed that that is a route through the sticking point, because it makes a change to the scheme of conditions in the grey book for firefighters. Negotiations between the FBU and the SFRS are live right now to resolve that sticking point and to harmonise terms and conditions.

Russell Findlay: It is not just about the money, then—it is about employment rights and different workplace issues. Right now, there are still eight separate deals in place.

Colin Brown: To be frank, I think that there are possibly more than eight. Again, though, that takes us into the detail of specific contracts.

Russell Findlay: You represent members in different parts of the country, and if they have an issue, that issue might be different in more than eight ways. That sounds pretty complex. Why can a simple Scotland-wide agreement not be achieved?

Colin Brown: To be blunt, I think that that is a question that the SFRS should be able to answer. As far as the FBU is concerned, the bottom line is the grey book scheme and conditions. In our view, the attempt to bring forward elements below the grey book conditions could not be supported by the FBU, but I am confident that the issue will be resolved in the near future.

Russell Findlay: I see that Tim Kirk wants to come in.

Tim Kirk: Just for clarity, the FRSA has full negotiation rights with the SFRS for all on-call firefighters and, like our FBU colleagues, we are in negotiations with the SFRS to agree and push forward the RDS terms and conditions. We hope that that will be completed shortly.

As an add-on to that, though, we need to agree the volunteer duty system terms and conditions at pace, too. As the service evolves its strategic service review programme process, there might well be options further down the line for different types of duty systems in different stations that are currently working an RDS or a volunteer duty system. It is absolutely vital that the service and the rep bodies agree the RDS and the VDS terms and conditions as quickly as possible, so that when these proposals come forward, fire stations and fire crews will know exactly what is on offer to allow them to make informed decisions and to ensure that this is not just something that might happen in the future.

The Convener: Thank you very much. If no more members want to come in, I will finish off with a question about partnerships and collaboration, which we have touched on during this session. I know that the SFRS has been working for many years in collaboration with partners, particularly on engagement with vulnerable individuals, home safety and so on. I am very interested in the proposals around expanding that into working with the national health service and the Scottish Ambulance Service. I am interested to hear a bit more about what that might look like down the line, and also about partnerships where you would prefer there to be some clear water, such as with Police Scotland.

Colin Brown: I will address those in reverse order, if that is okay. The answer to the question on the partnerships and collaborations that may be more challenging for us is quite short. Police Scotland is a fantastic organisation; its officers do amazing work across the communities of Scotland. The communities that are sometimes hard to reach, certainly for Police Scotland, are easier to reach for firefighters because of the difference between a humanitarian service and a law enforcement service. The suspicion that sometimes comes from some of the harder-to-

reach communities does not have an effect on firefighters, who maintain a positive position in society.

That is an example of where collaborations may become more challenging. We have experience of that from fire and rescue services down south, which have changed their governance model to a police, fire and crime commissioner model. The pressure on police budgets sucks budget out of the fire and rescue services, so there are a number of factors there. To set the committee at ease, that governance model has not been mooted for Scotland, but we see that that collaboration is causing issues, and it is a concern.

On our collaboration with partners in the Scottish Ambulance Service or the NHS, my view is that there is limitless potential with some of that. Certainly, the expanded safe and well visit, which will form part of the agreement that we reach with the Scottish service, should the Government fund it, will allow us to signpost to organisations to a far greater level. It would allow firefighters to be trained to recognise and understand a much wider range of societal issues.

We have a member who speaks very openly and very well about the horrendous domestic abuse that she suffered at the hands of a former partner. She speaks to the fact that if firefighters had come into her home to do a home fire safety visit and fit a smoke detector and had the knowledge and skills to be able to identify issues and engage sensitively with her, she may have been saved years of abuse.

This is not about firefighters saying, "We are not doing it unless we get paid." It is about firefighters saying, "We want to be trained, equipped and remunerated adequately for taking on additional roles." With regard to partnership with the NHS and the Scottish Ambulance Service, I touched on one incident where a child's life was saved. Such incidents are mirrored across Scotland.

Again, firefighters at times work beyond their contractual responsibility, but because they are, at their very core, humanitarian, they respond to incidents. They work beyond their role, but at times, because there is not a defined co-response model right now, they are engaged at such incidents for countless hours waiting for a response from the Scottish Ambulance Service, which—I am not here to make its case—is also chronically underresourced.

Dealing with those issues could start to resolve some of the crisis in the Scottish Ambulance Service. We can get firefighters, who are in every community in Scotland right now, to respond to incidents at times when the Scottish Ambulance Service has increasing pressure and is not able to

respond within eight minutes, like the Fire and Rescue Service can.

The Convener: That is very interesting. I will bring in Dave Crawford and Tim Kirk to wind things up.

Dave Crawford: Rural areas are difficult, especially for the police, the Scottish Ambulance Service or the fire service. Partnership working is ideal. The fire service is there and can respond in communities quite quickly, whereas the Ambulance Service is struggling in rural areas. You do not get timescales if you ask for an ambulance.

On broadening the role, I think that our members and non-members are crying out for change. They have lost the unwanted fire alarm signals policy that came in in July last year. They are losing incidents as a result of that, and they want to fill that gap with something else along the lines of partnership working with the Ambulance Service for slips, falls and out-of-hospital cardiac arrests. They are desperate to do it, which is why the work on terms and conditions needs to be done and finished as quickly as possible.

11:15

On home fire safety visits, with regard to on-call working, it is very difficult, because certain people like to do those things and certain people do not. For a rural community, the fire station is not seen as just a fire station. It is the hub of the community in some places. Stations have open days for the elderly and vulnerable, who come in for cups of tea in the winter and stuff like that.

Partnership working, such as with the police, is a great idea across the boards. Going into vulnerable houses for home fire safety visits is one area where we need more training for on-call work, because we get very little information on the houses that we are attending. We need to work closely with local authorities, especially if it is a house that the police might be aware of. We need to educate the police and local authorities to get that information across, because we are basically putting on-call firefighters into houses that could potentially be red flags. I say yes to partnership working. On-call workers are calling out for it and have done for many years.

The Convener: Thank you. Would you like to add anything before we finish, Tim?

Tim Kirk: I will keep it brief, because I am conscious of the time, but I will add to what Colin Brown and Dave Crawford have said. Partnership working is something that the SFRS encourages. We fully support that, and we want to see that developed.

We hope that the conclusion of the RDS terms and conditions will allow a further discussion about a broadening of the role for out-of-hospital cardiac arrests and non-serious medical emergencies. In rural areas, a fire station is almost certainly closer to a medical emergency than an ambulance is. We understand how stretched the NHS is and how thin on the ground ambulances are.

We have a fantastic resource in firefighters all across the country, who are passionate and highly trained in trauma care to deliver urgent interventions that can often prevent somebody ending up in hospital. If we can get to the point where firefighters are providing that preventative action, that will have a knock-on effect, with fewer ambulances parked outside hospitals and fewer beds blocked. We fully support partnership working, particularly with the NHS, and we will do all that we can to promote that.

The Convener: Thank you very much indeed. The session has been insightful and informative, and it has given us a lot to think about. Thank you again for your time this morning. We will have a short suspension to allow for a changeover of witnesses.

11:17

Meeting suspended.

11:24

On resuming—

The Convener: Our second panel consists of senior representatives of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. I am very pleased to welcome back Ross Haggart, chief officer; Stuart Stevens, deputy chief officer; and Sarah O'Donnell, director of finance and contractual services.

I intend to allow around 75 minutes for this session. As ever, I will start with a general question to open up the discussion. I will bring in Ross Haggart to begin with, and then Stuart Stevens and Sarah O'Donnell. What do you see as the main challenges that are facing the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and what actions and reforms are you planning to undertake to address them?

Ross Haggart (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service): Good morning. Convener, you mentioned at the start of the previous evidence session with the representative bodies that today sees the publication of the Grenfell phase 2 report, and I echo your words. The thoughts of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service remain with the victims and the families of Grenfell every day, but particularly today. The report that is being published today is going to create a lot of work for the fire and rescue sector and the SFRS. Although

we have not seen it yet, please be assured that we will scrutinise it in detail and work with relevant partners to ensure that any recommendations are fully implemented and the lessons are learned in Scotland.

Thank you for the opportunity, as always, to come and speak to you. I also thank you for hearing from the representative bodies earlier. It is really important for the committee to hear from our staff representative bodies, so that was really welcome as well.

On the challenges, I will bring in Stuart Stevens and Sarah O'Donnell to talk about some specific areas of work that we are doing, but essentially we face a changing risk profile across Scotland. Risks are continuing to change both from a societal perspective, with the risks that exist in different groups in society, and as a result of climate change. We will probably speak later about some of the work that we are doing as a result of climate change, particularly with the increased prevalence of wildfire and increased instances of flooding. Those things bring a real challenge to us.

We need to make sure that we have a service delivery model for a modern fire and rescue service that meets the changing risk profile in Scotland. A lot of our infrastructure—you heard quite a lot from the representative bodies regarding the challenges with some of it—was built for risks that existed decades ago. Risks may have moved on, so it is incumbent on us to ensure that we have the right resources in the right places at the right times to meet contemporary risks pan-Scotland.

Our priority will always be the safety of our firefighters as they, in turn, ensure that communities are safe. A lot of our challenges and priorities are to do with supporting firefighters' safety as they, in turn, make sure that communities are as safe as they can be. We have a lot of work on-going to make improvements to training. Covid had a bit of an impact on our training of our personnel, so we have a real focus on training at the moment. We have had quite a lot of churn in our personnel due to changes to pension regulations and things like that, so we have brought a lot of new people into the organisation and they have required training and development as more experienced firefighters have left the organisation.

You heard from the previous panel about the risk of fire contaminants. Again, that is a challenge for us. We can answer any specific questions about what we are doing as an organisation in that regard and where we still need to make some further progress. You also heard about the retention and recruitment challenges that we have, particularly in the on-call service that largely covers more rural and remote parts of Scotland.

Our on-call staff do a fantastic job day to day in protecting communities, but we ask a lot of them and it is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit and retain on-call firefighters, who serve approximately 85 per cent of the land mass of Scotland. That is a considerable challenge for us. We can talk about some of the work that we are doing to make improvements in the on-call service.

11:30

The biggest challenge that we face is probably the challenge with our capital backlog. You heard about that earlier from the FBU and the FRSA. As our written submission states—I am sure that we will talk about this—we have a significant backlog in relation to our capital, which essentially covers our estate of 356 fire stations across Scotland, our vehicles, our equipment, personal protective equipment, and information and communications technology. To be perfectly honest, we do not like to talk about the overall capital backlog figure because we recognise that it is insurmountable, but we are talking about a figure in excess of £800 million. We realise that that is an unrealistic figure. However, we believe that we require increased and sustained investment in our capital allocation so that we can overcome some of the challenges that we have, particularly in relation to our estate. Fourteen stations still have RAAC roofing panels; there is a lack of dignified facilities across large numbers of our fire stations; and there is the issue of contaminants, which I mentioned. We can talk about the work that we have done, but we still have some estate challenges to address in order to support our keeping our firefighters safe from contaminants.

Before I hand over to Sarah O'Donnell to talk about some of the financial matters and then to Stuart Stevens to talk about the service delivery work that we are doing, I note that we recognise that there are financial challenges across the whole of the public sector, but we believe that, as an organisation, we have proved that we can deliver reform and keep communities safe while doing that. We have also enabled significant financial savings to be created through reform, but we believe that we need to continue to modernise as an organisation. We recognise that we need to do that, but it will require some further on-going investment in the service.

The Convener: Thank you. Without further ado, I will bring in Sarah O'Donnell and then Stuart Stevens.

Sarah O'Donnell (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service): Good morning. On the financial position, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has a strong track record of financial management and we have delivered significant savings since the formation in

2013, both in our approach to front-line service delivery and in consolidating and improving our support functions.

More recently, as we have heard, we have had to make difficult decisions in order to live within budget settlements that were outstripped, basically, by inflationary pressures and new demands. The committee heard about that in the previous evidence session, and also, significantly, about the asset infrastructure on which we rely to deliver our services. That requires significant investment to address long-standing issues with our buildings and respond to new requirements as they become apparent to us, and equally to respond to opportunities. In both cases, that will support both the community and firefighter safety.

For 2024-25, we have had budget increases—I can answer questions about what they are—across both resource and capital. They are very welcome. However, the significant issues that we have spoken about remain.

As we look ahead, longer-term financial planning is challenging with single-year budgets. We do not have scope to hold reserves, and we are not alone in that. As an organisation, staff costs account for 80 per cent of our running costs, and 80 per cent of that money is spent on operational personnel. Any funding gap that the service finds itself with would, ultimately, materially reduce the number of people that we can afford to employ, which would clearly impact on the service that we can deliver, particularly in the short term. That is outlined in some detail in our submission. I can say more about that if it would be helpful.

As an alternative, we believe that there is an opportunity to invest in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service in order to meet changing community risks, improve longer-term sustainability and support wider public service reform, which we recognise will be necessary to strengthen Scotland's public finances into the future.

Stuart Stevens (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service): Good morning. We have a very ambitious vision for SFRS, which would see us deliver a sustainable, modern and technologically advanced fire and rescue service that is fit to meet the challenges of Scotland's future and which continues to place prevention at the heart of what we do. To deliver that, we have created the strategic service review programme, or SSRP, which is a long-term change programme that aims to address the strategic challenges while maximising organisational capacity in order to reinvest in areas such as prevention, training and technology.

The service has been incredibly successful in delivering prevention initiatives and interventions,

which, allied with our trusted presence in communities, puts us in a very strong position to support our broad range of partners in improving community safety, building resilience and preparing Scotland to deal with the challenges of the future, particularly the impact of climate change and an ageing population. Through our SSRP, we want to address the significant challenges with our estate, which we have heard much about this morning, and build on our work in response to the risk that is associated with contaminants. We are committed to providing the facilities that our firefighters and staff deserve, which, through effective strategic collaboration, can also be shared with a broad range of partners.

The success of SFRS is undoubtedly down to our staff, and we are committed to investing in the delivery of training to ensure that they have the best possible training and assets to carry out their roles with the highest standards and indeed with pride. We are committed to ensure that SFRS is more representative of the communities that we serve and that we attract the best talent to the organisation with a clear focus on leadership development and ensuring that we have the right culture for everyone. Fundamentally, we believe that, with continued investment, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service can do more for the people of Scotland, and particularly the most vulnerable in our communities.

The Convener: Thank you. Stuart, you touched on advances in technology. I suppose that good information technology networks sit at the heart of any public body that is functioning well. Will you provide a bit more detail on that aspect of the review work?

Stuart Stevens: Certainly. The fire industry moves on at pace all the time and there is new equipment available, such as breathing apparatus sets that are much more technologically advanced. That is the most important piece of equipment that our firefighters use and we want to ensure that they have the best equipment. This year, we have invested heavily in digital fireground radios and we are rolling those out at the moment. That will achieve 100 per cent communications for all our firefighters, the importance of which we have heard about from staff and through the "Firestorm" report. We also want to look at some high-reach technology—that was covered earlier this morning—and other things such as drones.

The Home Office is managing a comprehensive programme on the emergency services mobile communications platform and we are a pathfinder organisation as part of that. We have had investment to upgrade all our appliances to be digitally enabled and, essentially, wi-fi enabled, which allows us to provide information in real time to the fireground and allows the fireground to

communicate back. We are making real advances in ICT and communications, but we want to continue to build on that.

The Convener: I know that that is a rolling piece of work, but are there timescales for its completion?

Stuart Stevens: Sarah O'Donnell may be able to comment on that.

Sarah O'Donnell: The Home Office-led emergency services mobile communications programme is a long-term programme. The timescales have certainly been extended in recent years, or over the period of the programme to date. Currently, it is looking to complete in around 2029, which is quite some time into the future. However, as Stuart Stevens said, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is working as a pathfinder to bring in the devices as quickly as possible, using a data-first approach. We have also invested from within our capital programme to begin to bring on some in-cab technology sooner than that, again to upgrade the operational intelligence that our firefighters have at their fingertips in order to enable them to do their jobs as well as possible and to keep them as safe as possible.

The Convener: Thank you—that was very helpful.

I will now open up the discussion by bringing in Katy Clark.

Katy Clark: In the previous session, we heard about the refurbishment work that was carried out in Inverness. I want to ask about decontamination. We were told that the station in Inverness is considered to be decontamination compliant. What percentage of the estate is not currently compliant? How many facilities or stations are we talking about?

Ross Haggart: Sarah O'Donnell can give an overview of the assessment of our estate that we have undertaken, and I can provide some detail, along with Stuart Stevens, on what we are doing on contaminant control generally.

Sarah O'Donnell: In relation to what percentage of our estate is deemed to be fit for purpose with regard to contaminant control, we have done an overall assessment of the condition and suitability of the estate. "Suitability" covers contaminant control, as well as the availability of dignified facilities and the general suitability of storage areas, the garaging of vehicles and so on. According to the assessment, which has been carried out relative to our standard station design, 77 per cent of facilities are not compliant with the suitability standard. That will continue to evolve as our understanding and development of standards around contaminant control, in particular,

progress. At this stage, 77 per cent do not meet the current suitability standard.

Ross Haggart: I will start by commending the FBU for the work that it has done with Professor Anna Stec of the University of Central Lancashire to bring the issue of contaminants to the fore. I also acknowledge the work that has been done by MSPs, including members around this table, and the debates that have been held in Parliament to bring the issue to the fore, which we are hugely grateful for.

As the committee heard from Colin Brown of the FBU, we have a dedicated contaminants group that works very closely with the FBU on the issue of contaminants. Indeed, we work closely with the representative bodies on a number of issues.

With regard to where we are with contaminants, that group has done a lot of work. We now have a standard operating procedure that will shortly be deployed across the organisation, which will guide our staff on different levels of contaminants and what to do in that regard. We are in the process of investing £3.2 million this year to deal with the issue of contaminants. That is over and above the work that we are doing on our estate. That money is being invested predominantly to enable us to procure additional personal protective equipment that will be located across Scotland in strategic holding areas.

Earlier, you heard from the FRSA about contaminated kit. We will have stocks of kit available so that firefighters will be able to disrobe from their contaminated PPE at the incident ground. They will be able to bag it up at the incident ground. There are contaminant wipes available on all our appliances that they can decontaminate themselves with. As our staff know from their experience with more traditional chemical-type contaminants, if they remove their clothing and wash themselves down with wipes, that removes a lot of the contaminants.

We are working very closely with the National Fire Chiefs Council to understand what is going on at a UK level. We are also supporting the research that is being undertaken by the Health and Safety Executive to test fire kit that has been subjected to smoky conditions so that it can understand that issue.

In addition, we have started to use pre-emptive questions in our medicals, so that when firefighters go for their routine medical, which happens every three years, they are asked some questions about markers for cancer. We also took part in a UK-wide trial that involved some of our firefighters trialling health screening questions. That was supported by an investment of £56,000 from the Scottish Government. The purpose of that was to look at a future health screening programme for

firefighters that enables the early detection of cancer.

There is a lot going on. We continue to work with the FBU. However, as Sarah O'Donnell has already highlighted, we currently have a big issue with our estate. That relates to the important final part of the process, whereby firefighters can go back to the station and shower properly before they go home to their families. That aspect needs a bit of work and investment.

Finally, we had the privilege of being able to visit Inverness a few months ago. Our service delivery committee was in Inverness and we saw the facilities there. That was made possible by investment that we made in the infrastructure at Inverness station when we refurbished it. More importantly, firefighters on the ground were able to determine what worked for them locally and to come up with arrangements in the station that enable them to go from a dirty area to a shower and then into a clean area. Those arrangements were very much determined by them.

We are using that learning from our firefighters in Inverness to inform what we are doing at a national level—in other words, we are building from the ground up as well as through top-down investment.

11:45

Katy Clark: I want to pick up on the additional £3.2 million for kit that you referred to. Over the past year, firefighters at a number of stations have told me that, basically, they have to put contaminated kit on again. Will that additional resource ensure that firefighters have access to clean kit, which I understand has, historically, not been the case? Is that correct? Is it the case that they will have access to clean kit? Is that in place now?

Ross Haggart: All our firefighters already have two sets of personal issue PPE. When that is contaminated, the level of cleaning that is necessary will depend on the level of contamination. At the moment, if their kit is heavily contaminated, they bag it up and it goes away for specialist cleaning. However, they only have those two sets of kit. There will be strategically located caches of PPE, so that when those two kits have both been used, they can access fresh kit. The facility for firefighters to send their kit away for cleaning is already in place.

Katy Clark: I understand that, but is that provision now in place or will that—

Ross Haggart: The additional kit is being procured at the moment as part of this year's financial—

Katy Clark: So you will be able to give us an update on that in due course.

Ross Haggart: Yes. The additional kit is being procured as part of this year's capital budget. We are also providing airing units in stations so that when firefighters come back from incidents, they can air their kit.

Katy Clark: So, in your view, the £3.2 million is adequate to ensure that we should be in a position in which access to clean kit will no longer be an issue. Is that what you are saying?

Ross Haggart: No. The £3.2 million is being spent specifically on additional PPE, so that firefighters have access to further PPE, should they use their existing two sets and those have gone away for cleaning.

Katy Clark: What I am trying to find out is whether we will now have safe systems of work, at least in relation to that aspect, or whether there is more to be done. You now have the resource. The policy is that people should be able to access clean kit immediately if their own kit has been contaminated, but whether you have been able to implement that policy fully is a slightly different issue. Firefighters tell me that they might attend a number of incidents in a week, so their kit might be contaminated a number of times. They might go to another incident with kit that has already been contaminated. As I understand it, they are having to put dirty equipment back on.

Ross Haggart: That funding will enhance their access to PPE, but we still have a significant issue with our estate.

Katy Clark: I appreciate that.

Ross Haggart: As far as our ability to deploy our standard operating procedure is concerned, what we have at the moment is sufficient to deal with that part of the process—to undertake the immediate on-scene decontamination, bag up the kit and send it away to a specialist laundry. However, we still have an estate that does not enable firefighters to go back to a station that has proper zoning, whereby firefighters can go to a dirty area, shower within an hour and move to a clean area. There is still a need for significant investment in our estate to bring it up to a modern standard, not just in relation to dealing with contaminants, but also with regard to the provision of dignified facilities.

For example, when we refurbished the station in Inverness, we looked at all the issues that we needed to resolve, including the issue of contaminants and that of dignified facilities. We are talking about a significant investment. As our submission says, when it comes to the estate, there is a significant backlog—we are talking about figures in excess of £400 million. The

immediate measures that we are putting in place this year will enable us to deploy our standard operating procedure but will not deal with the broader issues that we face, which are largely linked to our estate.

Katy Clark: I appreciate that we do not have much time, convener. I suspect that other members will pick up some of those issues. However, it would be helpful if you could address the issue of the provision of guidance to firefighters.

The Convener: I am happy for you to ask about that.

Katy Clark: Thank you. There are a lot of what have been called “behaviours”. Very clear guidance needs to be given to firefighters on the best possible practice to minimise risk. Perhaps Stuart Stevens could outline what work has been done on that.

Stuart Stevens: It was really pleasing to hear Colin Brown talk about the behavioural and cultural aspects around decontamination. The issue of facilities is a challenge and PPE requires to be provided. As the chief said, the PPE issue has been resolved. Detailed procedures and policies have been put in place to manage people’s behaviours, the culture around decontamination and the approach to it. Everybody buys into what we are trying to achieve with that. We are very open minded about other mitigations we could put in place, such as demountable shower units. The contaminants group is considering that type of work at the moment.

Earlier, I mentioned technology, which the convener asked me about. Part of what we are doing at the moment is working with academia to do research to see whether industry can come up with something to help us to identify when contamination has taken place and to what extent. We are working with CivTech to come up with a wearable device for firefighters that will enable them to identify the level of contamination. Obviously, that will strengthen the policies. A multipronged approach involving the provision of equipment, facilities and guidance has been put in place to manage decontamination.

Katy Clark: Has that guidance been circulated to firefighters or is it still with the working group?

Stuart Stevens: The standard operating procedure was trialled in one of our areas. That was successful and the standard operating procedure is currently in the process of being rolled out. You made a point about the work that the FBU has done in Inverness. The standard operating procedure is heavily influenced by that work, which is exceptional, as we saw at first hand. We are working in partnership on this and

the standard operating procedure is currently being rolled out.

Rona Mackay: I want to ask—this question is possibly for Ross Haggart—about the false alarm issues that you have to contend with. The figures for 2022 to 2023 show that the service was called out to 56,000 false alarms. What impact does that have on your resources? I realise that raising a false alarm is a crime. I am not sure whether you would know what the impact of that is in relation to dealing with the police and so on.

Ross Haggart: I will make a distinction between false alarms and their settings. We have done a lot of work on false alarms in non-domestic premises. We still respond to every actuation of a fire alarm in domestic premises and we immediately send the full weight of response. Last July, we implemented a new policy for non-domestic premises whereby we call challenge. That is not for sleeping-risk premises, but for offices, shops and suchlike. We call challenge and, if there are no immediate signs of fire, we do not respond to that incident.

Rona Mackay: Will you explain what call challenge is?

Ross Haggart: When a call goes into our control room, we will ask the caller specific questions about whether they have checked whether there is a fire or any signs of fire and things like that. If there are no signs of fire in those premises, we do not send a response.

Previously, we had thousands of calls that led to thousands of unnecessary blue-light journeys. Responding under blue-light conditions are a hazard for our firefighters, a hazard for other road users and it has environmental impacts. It also disrupts firefighters from undertaking other essential work, including community safety work and training, and it could have diverted them away from a real emergency.

We still respond to sleeping-risk premises such as care homes, hospitals and hotels. The policy has been extremely successful, and we now attend 52 fewer false alarm calls to non-domestic premises daily. Every day, our crews are not getting unnecessarily turned out 52 times a day, so whatever work they are doing is not being disrupted and they are not creating unnecessary hazards for communities. We very much see the policy as a success.

We engaged extensively with business owners to make sure that they were ready for that change. We have plans for a second phase, which is subject to our upgrading the mobilising systems in our control rooms, which would enable us to have different types of attendances at different times of day. The intention with that next phase is to stagger the response to sleeping-risk premises so

that we do not send a full response during the day when people are up and about and things like that. The change to our approach has had a massively positive impact on the organisation.

Rona Mackay: That certainly is progress. On the call challenges, if it is found to be clearly a false alarm, what about criminalisation? Do you pick that up at all, or do you just leave it? There is a law against making such calls, and I am trying to find out what the level of—

Ross Haggart: The responsibility for responding to fire alarm actuations in non-domestic premises rests with the duty holder in those premises. It is their responsibility to manage their fire alarm and to investigate whether there is a fire in response to that. Following a call challenge, if the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service does not mobilise, other than carrying out normal routine fire safety auditing activity, we would not follow that up.

However, we would follow that up, if, for example, we have to mobilise to a sleeping-risk premises that persistently has false alarms. We would pick that up with the premises, to understand whether there is anything that we can do, and to work with them, to try to reduce that.

Rona Mackay: That is interesting. Thanks for that.

I will move on to Stuart Stevens. You spoke about your review programme. The nature of the fire service is changing, as are the demands that are being placed on it. You mentioned that you have been called out to fewer fires, but you provide other services, too. Do you have a timescale for the review programme? It all sounds very forward thinking and ambitious.

Stuart Stevens: Yes. We are putting in place a long-term change programme. Historically, the fire service has had generational change, in which there has been a big bang followed by a period of nothing much happening. We want to ingrain a culture of continuous change in the organisation in order to continue to meet risks and demands across society. We think that this will be a 10 to 15-year programme, particularly as much of what we anticipate doing will require on-going capital investment for us to make changes, particularly to our operational footprint and stations, and to meet the challenges around decontamination and dignified facilities.

Rona Mackay: I have a very basic question on something that has popped into my head. Is there a minimum age at which you can be a firefighter or apply to be in the fire service?

Stuart Stevens: Eighteen.

Rona Mackay: How long would training take for an 18-year-old coming from school?

Stuart Stevens: To become a firefighter?

Rona Mackay: Yes.

Stuart Stevens: It is a 14-week programme to train to become a firefighter and it is a 14-week programme for our operational control staff. There is a slightly different approach for our on-call staff. They have primary employment responsibilities as well, so the programme is modularised.

Rona Mackay: Presumably, they would be out with more senior staff initially, because 14 weeks does not sound like a long time.

Stuart Stevens: They are in development for a three-year period. I think that one of my colleagues said this morning that there is around a three-year development period before staff are deemed competent. People across the organisation are always learning and developing. They are absolutely supported and mentored from the minute that—

Rona Mackay: They come into the service.

Stuart Stevens: —they arrive on their watches or at their stations.

Rona Mackay: Okay. Thank you.

Sharon Dowey: We heard earlier from the FBU about its “Firestorm” report. It was quite good that it said that you gave it the same weighting as you would a report from the HM fire service inspectorate in Scotland.

In April 2024, the SFRS published a three-year delivery plan covering 2024-25 to 2026-27, and, in December 2021, it published its long-term vision for the next 10 years. Do you have an action plan with tasks and timescales for their completion? We have heard about long-term plans in response to an earlier question. What progress has been made, and how much engagement and support are you getting from the Scottish Government?

Ross Haggart: I will start on the “Firestorm” report, and then I will talk about our strategic planning landscape. As you heard from Colin Brown earlier, we took the “Firestorm” report extremely seriously. The report, which was published last October, made a number of recommendations. Some were for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, some were for Government and some were for the national joint council, which deals with terms and conditions of employment for uniformed staff UK-wide.

12:00

In response to the recommendations that were aimed at the SFRS, we developed an action plan, which was tabled at our service delivery committee in, I think, June, and is now in the

public domain. We have put out a series of statements about where we are with all that work.

As Colin Brown mentioned, a lot of that is long-term work. A lot of work that we were doing with the Fire Brigades Union covers things that we have already talked about, such as decontamination. Ultimately, 1,500 FBU members—1,500 members of our staff—contributed to that report. We recognised a lot of themes in it from work that we were doing.

We visit stations frequently, and what was in the report was very similar to the feedback that we were receiving, so we knew what was important to our firefighters. It was really important for us to take on board the report and its recommendations, and to work very closely with the FBU to progress those key areas.

On our strategic planning landscape, you are right to say that we put in place our long-term vision two or three years ago, which is an overarching vision for the next 10 years of the organisation. We did that because we are mandated in legislation to provide a strategic plan every three years. The Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012 requires us to produce a three-year strategic plan. Underneath that, we develop our annual operating plan, which lays out the individual actions and projects that we will undertake annually to meet the outcomes of our strategic plan.

The strategic plan is very much lined up with the Scottish Government's fire and rescue framework for Scotland. The Scottish Government sets the fire and rescue framework for Scotland, we write our strategic plan that demonstrates how, as an organisation, we will meet the asks of the framework document and we have an annual operating plan of specific actions and projects.

Over and above that, we also have some longer-term projects that we manage, and we have a robust portfolio office in the organisation so that we can manage change projects. Stuart Stevens spoke about the strategic service review programme earlier. That is a big programme of work that will be managed through our significant change portfolio.

Sitting alongside all that, we also have a very robust performance management framework that we update on a three-yearly cycle to tie in with our new strategic plan. That enables all stakeholders to be able to see, including our board—as an executive, we are held to account by our board—the performance of the organisation. We have clear performance metrics that go along with our strategic plan so that any stakeholder, including our board, can see how we are performing against what we set out to do in our strategic plan.

Sharon Dowey: How much engagement do you have with the Scottish Government on that?

Ross Haggart: We engage extensively with the Government as the strategic plan is being developed. The three-yearly plan must be signed off by the Minister for Victims and Community Safety, after which it is laid before Parliament. It is very much for the SFRS board to approve our annual operating plan, but Government is kept sighted on what our plans are annually.

Sharon Dowey: Do you generally meet all your targets, or is there slippage? If the latter, do those then become targets for the following year? I am asking that because we have been talking about budgetary constraints.

Ross Haggart: It is more the latter. Our quarter 1 and latest performance report went to our board last week, I think. Clearly, with a number of performance indicators, there are areas of good performance and areas for improvement, but, generally speaking, the performance across the first quarter was very positive.

On our annual operating plan, we set ambitious expectations at the start of the year. The board challenges us as to whether we were being overly ambitious. We spoke about the challenges that we face as an organisation, and you heard from the earlier panel about those challenges. The number of challenges that we face means that we have quite a lot of work to do.

Generally speaking, we have very busy agendas that we need to work through, and none of that work can get completely taken out of our plans. However, we set ourselves quite challenging tasks, and we sometimes see slippage, simply because we tend to be a bit optimistic about meeting those challenges. If things come along that we are not expecting, sometimes the timescales for achieving things can slip.

Sharon Dowey: What are the timescales? I am wondering about the £800 million that you said that you needed for the capital budget. Is there a lot of slippage when it comes to dealing with stations that do not have running water for example?

Ross Haggart: That is a separate piece of work. We develop a three-year capital programme, which runs alongside our strategic planning processes. Sarah O'Donnell can talk about how that works.

Sarah O'Donnell: We will have an annual capital allocation, but we will seek to set out a three-year capital programme because some projects, particularly some of those that we have spoken about this morning, such as the rebuilding and the reconfiguration of a fire station, are not

one-year projects. We cannot commence them at the start of year 1 and complete them by the end of it.

We will typically set out a three-year investment programme with a view to spending the allocation that we get, and we have to make various assumptions about what we will get in future years. That is necessary to plan for those long-term works, particularly property investment works. An example in the current year is that we are working to develop our new mobilising system. That long-term project will span more than one financial year. Taking that approach is important.

If we encounter slippage during the year, which inevitably will happen, we work in quite an agile manner to reallocate the funding across some of our other key priorities. We have a £43 million capital allocation but an £800 million backlog of work that requires an estimated spend of £80 million a year. There are certainly plenty of other important priorities that we can put that money into to ensure that we are fully investing the capital funds that we have been given, and we have typically always done that.

We work really hard to ensure that we are using the money that is available to us, because we recognise how important that is for the backlog that we face.

Sharon Dowey: I have a quick question, convener.

The Convener: It will need to be very quick.

Sharon Dowey: I will come back in later, then.

The Convener: I will come back to you.

Ben Macpherson: I will go back to some of the points that were made at the beginning about the 21st century and the changing risk profile. You also talked about societal and climate issues. Do you have further comments about the geographic aspect? What strikes me about the challenge of providing 24-hours-a-day coverage across the country is that the population is shifting, as well. That cuts across all statutory services.

More broadly, there is our collective challenge in Scotland in the public sector, because of the projected 85 per cent population growth in the Lothians and depopulation in the west and north of the country. How do you factor those population shifts into your planning?

Ross Haggart: We are a national fire and rescue service and because Scotland is such a diverse nation we have unique challenges. Underpinning all our planning work at the moment is what we call our community risk index model, which looks at risk on a pan-Scotland basis from a fire and rescue perspective. It takes five years' worth of historical incident data from the Scottish

Fire and Rescue Service, it takes population information from the census and from products such as Acorn, and it looks at the built environment and other risks, including the risks that we spoke about—wildfire risks and flooding risks. That gives us a really accurate pan-Scotland picture of risk that enables us to determine an appropriate resource deployment to meet the risk profile.

However, you are right to say that we cannot just focus on the areas of higher risk. If we look solely at the areas of higher risk, particularly from an operational incident perspective, we see that risk tends to follow people: we tend to find that the higher-risk areas are in the more populated parts of the country. However, it is still clearly incumbent upon us to provide a fire and rescue service across the whole of Scotland.

You heard earlier from the FBU and the FRSA about some of the particular challenges that we have in remote and rural parts of Scotland: they might have very low population density, but there is still a population and risk for which we need to have resources in place. Quite often some of our resources, because of geography, need to be located in very remote rural parts of the country, which exacerbates the recruitment and retention challenges that we have for on-call firefighters, because there is a very small population—and sometimes one that is getting even smaller—that we can recruit from.

As part of the strategic service review programme, we need also to look at how we ensure, when we know that we have all those challenges within on-call areas in particular, that we continue to provide a resilient fire and rescue service across the very remote rural geographies of Scotland. We are actively looking at the stuff that the FRSA spoke about, in particular on hub-and-spoke models, in our strategic service review programme. I do not know whether Stuart Stevens wants to add anything.

Ben Macpherson: I want briefly to make sure that I was absolutely clear in that first question. I appreciate that there is a need to maintain and, in certain circumstances, to improve coverage in more rural and remote areas and in areas where there are population-decrease challenges. However, the east of the country, where the population is growing significantly and, as I said, 85 per cent of Scotland's projected population growth will be in the Lothians, will require an increase in capacity in certain areas.

Ross Haggart: Of course. That shifting of demographics comes into our planning. We have 14 local senior officers who manage our service delivery arrangements pan-Scotland. They are well tied in with local community planning partnerships and things like that, so they

understand where there is growth in populations and where there are potentially greater risks being created in different populations. That all forms part of our planning.

That is one of the reasons why we need to continually look at our service delivery footprint. We have a station infrastructure that is decades old and we might have some resources in places where risks no longer exist, so we need to rebalance that and ensure that we move our resources about so that they tie in with contemporary risk and how it will develop in the future.

Stuart Stevens: To strengthen the point that the chief has made, I note that when we consider options for change we also factor in local authorities' future planning for housing provision. We have sight of that and it forms part of the decision making around where population might be in the future. That is a consideration.

Ben Macpherson: The other point that I mentioned was 24-hours-a-day coverage. From memory of the statistics, although they showed that around 20 per cent of calls are at night, that is within a period of eight hours, which is a third of the day. To me, that emphasises the challenge and need to make sure that you have adequate resource ready for deployment at such points in the day. There might be fewer calls, but the need will be just as acute.

Stuart Stevens: Provision of resilience is among the factors that we consider: we need to make sure that we have adequate resources to respond at different times of day. As you rightly point out, the demand curve changes significantly through the night, but we need to make sure that we can resource incidents when they happen. We are looking at various models to support that.

Russell Findlay: Thank you, and happy imminent retirement. This is the last time Ross Haggart needs to come in here—so you can say what you want. Just saying. [*Laughter.*]

There is a number in your submission to the committee—I know that some of the numbers are quite hard to quantify—that says that from the service being created 11 years ago the total savings are projected to reach over £900 million by 2027-28, which is almost £1 billion.

12:15

A moment ago, you said that the capital backlog has been calculated to be in the region of £800 million. I know that you are doing great work on the decontamination issue, which is urgent and very important. Can you give us any idea of when every firefighter in Scotland will have access to sufficient decontamination measures?

Ross Haggart: I will bring Sarah O'Donnell in to talk about those figures in a bit more detail.

However, on the immediacy of the stuff that we are doing this year on contaminants, as I mentioned to Ms Clark earlier, a standard operating procedure that will give clear guidance to personnel, additional access to personal protective equipment and things like that will all be provided this year. However, that is very much the first step in ensuring that we have a consistent base. On the capital backlog and enabling firefighters to go back to stations that have clean zones and dirty zones, we are talking decades, given the amount of capital allocation that we currently get.

Russell Findlay: Is there no target date?

Ross Haggart: No. In effect, as Sarah O'Donnell explained, we have a three-year capital programme and within that we will bring forward the projects that we will undertake. To build a new fire station could take three years, for example, so we can commit legally to only a certain amount of projects at a particular time, so we do it in a three-year programme. We do not have a "By year X everything within our estate will be resolved" target. We also have the strategic service review programme going on—

Russell Findlay: Using your expertise, when do you expect it to happen?

Ross Haggart: Through the strategic service review programme, we might put forward for public consultation changes regarding some of our locations; we might not have 356 locations, going forward. I add that caveat.

However, given the facts that in our estate alone we have in excess of £400 million of backlog, and that we have a £43 million capital allocation this year, which does not just go on our estate—it goes on equipment, PPE, ICT and appliances—it will take decades for us to have an estate that is fit for a modern fire and rescue service. That is, as Colin Brown said, what our people deserve.

Russell Findlay: You mentioned earlier that there are recruitment difficulties, particularly for on-call firefighters. Do you have the up-to-date numbers for the levels of staffing?

Ross Haggart: I do not have those figures to hand, but you are talking pan-Scotland, for which firefighter vacancies in on-call stations will be in the hundreds.

Russell Findlay: Can you give an approximate percentage?

Ross Haggart: I do not want to pluck figures out of the air. I am more than happy to write to the committee with details of that, so that I do not give inaccurate information today.

Russell Findlay: I want to quickly ask about the wildfire strategy. We heard from the earlier witnesses that the strategy document has been five-plus years in the making. Is that how it should be? When is that likely to be completed?

Ross Haggart: I will bring in Stuart Stevens on the detail of that. I am not sure of the timescales from its first inception. I do not think that it was five years ago that the strategic leadership team approved the wildfire strategy. Within the strategy, we have different tiers of stations. All our firefighters across Scotland can respond to wildfire incidents and, over and above that, in particular strategic locations, we have tier 2 and tier 3 stations that have increased capability.

I will pass over to Stuart for the detail.

Stuart Stevens: The strategy has been in development for about the past three years. First and foremost, we will complete the roll-out of the strategy this year. For the 10 tier 3 stations, the training was completed in June this year. Of the tier 1 stations, for 18 out of the 24 stations, the training is either completed or scheduled, and the training for the remaining six is still to be scheduled.

The all-terrain vehicle training that Mr Findlay touched on will start on 21 October this year. There were some challenges with the all-terrain vehicles, but that was primarily due to the vehicles that are required to tow them. That has been caught up in supply chain issues and is completely outwith the control of the service. Some slight modifications were required to those vehicles, but the vehicles were identified by subject matter experts, supported through a user intelligence group, of which both the FRSA and the FBU were part. Those vehicles are now in place and training will be rolled out from October.

All the other equipment that Tim Kirk talked about—leaf blowers, fogging units and so on—is all here and has been really well received, as is the personal protective equipment.

Russell Findlay: I was going to ask about the ATVs for wildfires, because you took delivery of those last year and a minister posed for a photograph in one of them this year, but they will not be in action until next year. They have been sitting in a shed somewhere for two years. Is that a problem for the people who are trying to deal with wildfires?

Stuart Stevens: We have still been dealing with wildfires effectively. Those vehicles will allow us to be more effective but, more importantly, they remove the physiological strain on firefighters, because dealing with wildfires is incredibly challenging. The equipment that we have bought allows us to make quicker interventions. Although we have had some of those vehicles in service for

a period of time, we have not had the ability to roll them out because of the supply chain issues associated with other vehicles.

Russell Findlay: Are you confident that those vehicles will be deployed fully and that they are safe?

Stuart Stevens: Yes.

Russell Findlay: Okay. Thank you.

Stuart Stevens: Sorry, convener, but could I go back to a previous point about the estate?

The Convener: Of course.

Stuart Stevens: The chief covered the challenge that we face with the estate. To use Colin Brown's words, we cannot spend our way out of that. It requires a number of approaches. There is additional capital funding, which we welcome, but the situation also requires us to change the operational footprint and look at other innovative ways of delivering our services, particularly with a public sector reform approach. Sharing of buildings between partner agencies—between blue light services—is one way that we can tackle the capital backlog collectively across the public sector.

Pauline McNeill: Good afternoon. I have a few questions. On that last point about the sharing of buildings, which has been mentioned before, the Scottish Ambulance Service has been mentioned, but are you thinking about police control rooms as well?

Stuart Stevens: We are not thinking about control rooms.

Pauline McNeill: Sorry, I mean police services or police stations.

Stuart Stevens: In our whole-time building establishment, we now have, I think, 64 stations where we share facilities. That is primarily with the Scottish Ambulance Service, but we also have community safety wardens and other partners in some of our stations. The rural resilience hub business case proposal is modular in nature, so it is pretty much open to anybody in the public sector who wants to get involved, where there is a need to provide Scottish Ambulance Service, fire service or NHS facilities or drop-in centres to support people. It is a public sector approach to providing an estate.

Pauline McNeill: That is helpful, and it makes sense. I do not know how practical it is to incorporate police stations into that model, given the need, in some cases, for detention facilities and so on.

You have answered a lot of questions about decontamination and the three-year capital programme, and you have said that it will be

decades before the service is fit for purpose. I have noted all that. In relation to decontamination, is there a staged plan for the roll-out as the capital becomes available? Do you know where you would start and where you will roll out from? Is the work done to that extent, albeit that you will not be able to do it for some time?

Ross Haggart: Is that about the investment in our estate specifically?

Pauline McNeill: We know that there are hundreds of stations where there is a lack of the proper shower facilities, and that it will take a long time to get round them all. Is there a phased plan? Should the money become available, would you be able to say that you would roll it out here and then here and so on, so that all the places that are deficient would be covered in time? Does that make sense?

Ross Haggart: Yes. I will pass over to Sarah O'Donnell, but before I do there are two fundamental things, which Sarah will speak to. There is our existing station infrastructure. On that, we need to bear in mind that we still have the issue of RAAC panelling in 14 of our stations, which is one of our biggest priorities in our capital programme. There is the existing estate and replacing or refurbishing the existing estate.

We also have proposals with the Scottish Government for rural resilience hubs in more remote rural parts of Scotland, which Sarah will speak to as well. We see that as a really innovative and excellent solution to some of the challenges that not only we face but that our public sector partners face.

Sarah O'Donnell: In our capital programme for the current financial year, approximately £10 million is allocated to addressing very specific fire station requirements. Those cover the deficiencies in terms of RAAC panels as well as addressing dignified facilities and contaminant control. That involves either significant refurbishment or reconfiguration, or, in some cases, rebuilding the fire station. Obviously, we are working closely through the strategic service review programme to ensure that we channel that investment in the most appropriate places as we continue to work through that.

In our three-year capital programme, there are other projects that are indicated as being the next ones that will come online. Part of that is about looking at purchasing sites in cases where we will have to relocate. For example, that might be where the site on which a current station is built is not large enough to accommodate all the new requirements and so on. That is all in the plan and in progress.

On the community resilience hubs, we have submitted a business case to Government for a

programme of investment in those. To go back to the backlog figure of approximately £0.5 billion within the estate, a significant proportion of that relates to the remote rural and island estate. The community resilience hub project is an attempt to do something different on that, because we recognise that we need to do something different rather than rebuild each of those places as they stand.

We have spoken about the hub-and-spoke model. That is giving us investment in all the right facilities—the dignified decontamination facilities—but not in replicating those absolutely everywhere. We are connecting to a range of satellite stations that will be able to use those facilities.

We are absolutely doing that in partnership. We are actively looking to develop partnership opportunities and have initiated some work on that. We have a pilot project on the island of Skye within our existing capital programme, because we are required to replace the Portree fire station, which is affected by RAAC panelling and the other issues. We also have a fire station in Uig, which is on land that is leased, and there is a challenge to vacate that. We want to work with those two stations and that model to develop a pilot project around the community resilience hub.

We have engaged with the Scottish Futures Trust and with Hub North Scotland to begin to carry out a place-based review to identify suitable partners that could come together with us in the project to develop an exemplar community resilience hub. We want to really test that. We are open to all partners, and to being as creative as possible.

We see that as an opportunity to drive public service reform and to have more joined-up public services, while at the same time addressing all the challenges that we have in our estate and maximising the value from the investment that the public is making in local communities. It is also an opportunity to significantly address some of the backlog in the estate, which is a significant figure in the overall £800 million.

Pauline McNeill: That would, however, cover only a proportion of the stations that are deficient. Albeit that you cannot do it within three years, is there a long-term plan for every station in every area that is required to be compliant? Let us say that you had another three years and you got another £10 million, would you know where that would be spent? That is what I am asking.

12:30

Sarah O'Donnell: On the £800 million figure, we have said that, if we got £80 million a year for 10 years and we were able to resource it—there are all the challenges with that—we would be able

to take account of the on-going deterioration in buildings as time passes. There is the backlog, but there is also what is happening at the moment and what will happen over the 10-year period. We have bundled that together and said that, if we had £80 million a year for 10 years, that would enable us to bring all our existing asset base up to the standard that it should be at.

Notwithstanding that, we are working on other solutions. We are working through the SSRP on whether we have the right asset base, and obviously new technology is coming on stream all the time. There is always a possibility that the assets that we require increase, rather than being rationalised. However, as we stand with the existing asset base, we are looking at a 10-year programme at £80 million a year, and that is indicative. We recognise the challenges, and we are working with partners and others to do other things.

Pauline McNeill: Can you furnish the committee with exactly what you are going to do in those three years? You have set out some of that to the committee. I ask because, for those who are working in a station and do not know at what point they will have the new facilities, it would be helpful to at least be transparent about that. I can understand why, as you say, you have to look at the priority and that it is not easy because a number of stations are not compliant. We know that. It would be helpful to have some transparency about where stations are in the programme for the next 10 years. It would be helpful if you could furnish the committee with information on who is on the list for the three years.

Sarah O'Donnell: That is in our published capital programme, but I can certainly have that sent through to the committee to circulate to members.

Pauline McNeill: That would be really helpful.

My second question, which I asked the previous panel, is about the extension of the role of firefighters, which I think is interesting. I commend everybody who has been involved in that. To me, it is very forward thinking, because so much is changing in society and that is not just about budget pressures; it is the world in general. I am clear that there is no money to enact that extended role but, if you had money tomorrow, how quickly could you make progress on that?

Ross Haggart: I will come in, and Stuart Stevens might want to add some details. The Fire Brigades Union told you earlier that it is committed to developing the role of firefighters and we are equally committed to that. We believe that our firefighters are extremely well-trained and well-equipped and they are within local communities.

We fundamentally believe that they can do more for the communities across Scotland. Colin Brown outlined some of the additional emergency response roles and prevention roles that we could undertake. We are extremely committed to that as an organisation.

Colin outlined that there have been attempts over a few years to get us to a position in which we can try to make that happen. Two years ago, in summer 2022, we had negotiations with the Fire Brigades Union, under the auspices of the national joint council, which is the negotiating body for terms and conditions for the UK fire and rescue services, albeit that those were specific Scottish negotiations to look at what a developed role would look like and entail and, importantly, what the associated terms and conditions would look like. I am a firm believer that, if we ask our firefighters to take on more responsibilities, it is only right and proper that that should be reflected in their terms and conditions and remuneration.

Two summers ago, we got to a position where we had an in-principle agreement with the Fire Brigades Union. That went to the FBU UK national executive council and the Scottish regional committee, both of which were content that, if it became a firm offer, they would recommend that their members accept. However, clearly, we could only put that forward as a formal offer if it was underpinned by appropriate funding. We therefore submitted a business case to the Scottish Government in about November 2022.

As I said, we understand the financial pressures that the Government is under, but we believe—and independent studies have been done on this—that, by investing in the Fire and Rescue Service to broaden the role of firefighters, multiple economic benefits come back. For example, for every £1 that is invested in developing the role of a firefighter, the economy benefits to the tune of between approximately £6 and £14, depending on the extent to which the role has been developed. Based on the studies and our proposals, we think that we would be at the higher end of that rate of return rather than the lower end. Therefore, although it would require investment, there are clear economic benefits from doing so.

On the timescale, as we spoke about in the previous session and very briefly earlier today, training of our firefighters is extremely important. We are doing a lot of work at the moment to train our firefighters to ensure that their existing capabilities remain current. We set out in the business case an approximately two-year programme whereby we would, on a needs basis, start training our personnel relatively quickly where we think that we could add greatest value. For example, that would relate to emergency medical response with the Scottish Ambulance Service.

On a prioritised basis, we would start to train our personnel very quickly. They have some pretty advanced emergency medical equipment, and we would supplement that with additional training. We would have a rolling programme that we think would take approximately two years to fully implement on a pan-Scotland basis. However, it would be done incrementally and based on needs.

Pauline McNeill: So, with funding, and with an incremental approach over time, it is good to go, so to speak.

Ross Haggart: Yes. We did a lot of work previously with the Scottish Ambulance Service. We had a paramedic seconded to start developing training packages and things like that. We have done quite a lot of preparatory work. It would be disingenuous of me not to highlight the fact that the negotiations that we undertook are now two years old, so we would clearly want to refresh that, and I am sure that the Fire Brigades Union would want to refresh those conversations as well.

However, given that we had an in-principle agreement two years ago, from a service perspective, I think that we could get that back up and running fairly quickly, although we would need to formally do that again. Some further discussions would be required, but we would be in a reasonable position if we got funding. We expect to understand our budget for next year during December of this year. If we got an indication in December of this year that we would receive funding from 1 April next year, I see no reason why we could not start to implement that approach very early on in the next financial year.

Pauline McNeill: Do you have any idea at all of what amount of money we are talking about to kick that off? I presume that it is tens of millions.

Ross Haggart: Yes. We understand that there are sensitivities, because we are talking about people's terms and conditions and stuff like that. The FBU submission highlights the Scottish Parliament information centre's figure of, I think, £57 million, which is the amount by which our cost base has reduced since reform. The money that we would require to make this a reality would be considerably less than the £57 million that the FBU has cited in its submission.

Pauline McNeill: That is helpful, because in the context of how you and the FBU have presented this, it is not a lot of money to get considerably more change for the better.

Ross Haggart: Can I ask Stuart Stevens to come in, convener?

The Convener: If he is brief, because we have to bring things to a close.

Stuart Stevens: I will be extremely brief. It is a very important point. The Auditor General has

pointed out the need to focus on prevention, and we see the broadened role as an absolute means to do that. As I said in my opening statement, we are trusted within communities, and the preventative activity that we have done has been really successful, with accidental dwelling fires and casualties at an all-time low.

We think that we can apply that to issues such as domestic violence, dementia awareness, social isolation, drugs and alcohol, falls prevention and boosting community resilience and preparedness, particularly in a post-pandemic era. We think that we can do a lot more from a preventative perspective.

The Convener: I will now close this session. It has been very informative and helpful. Thank you for your time this morning.

I ask members to note that we meet again next Wednesday from 9.30, when we will focus on policing and mental health. We will hear from staff associations, the chief constable and senior representatives of the Scottish Police Authority.

12:40

Meeting continued in private until 13:03.

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