



House of Commons

Committee of Public Accounts

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# **Northern Ireland: The management of industrial sickness absence**

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**Fiftieth Report of  
Session 2003–04**





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Session 2003–04**

*Report, together with formal minutes,  
oral and written evidence*

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## The Committee of Public Accounts

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Powers of the Committee of Public Accounts are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 148. These are available on the Internet via [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk).

### Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at <http://www.parliament.uk/pac>. A list of Reports of the Committee in the present Session is at the back of this volume.

### Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee is Nick Wright (Clerk), Christine Randall (Committee Assistant), Leslie Young (Committee Assistant), Ronnie Jefferson (Secretary), and Luke Robinson (Media Officer).

### Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk, Committee of Public Accounts, House of Commons, 7 Millbank, London SW1P 3JA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 5708; the Committee’s email address is [pubaccom@parliament.uk](mailto:pubaccom@parliament.uk).

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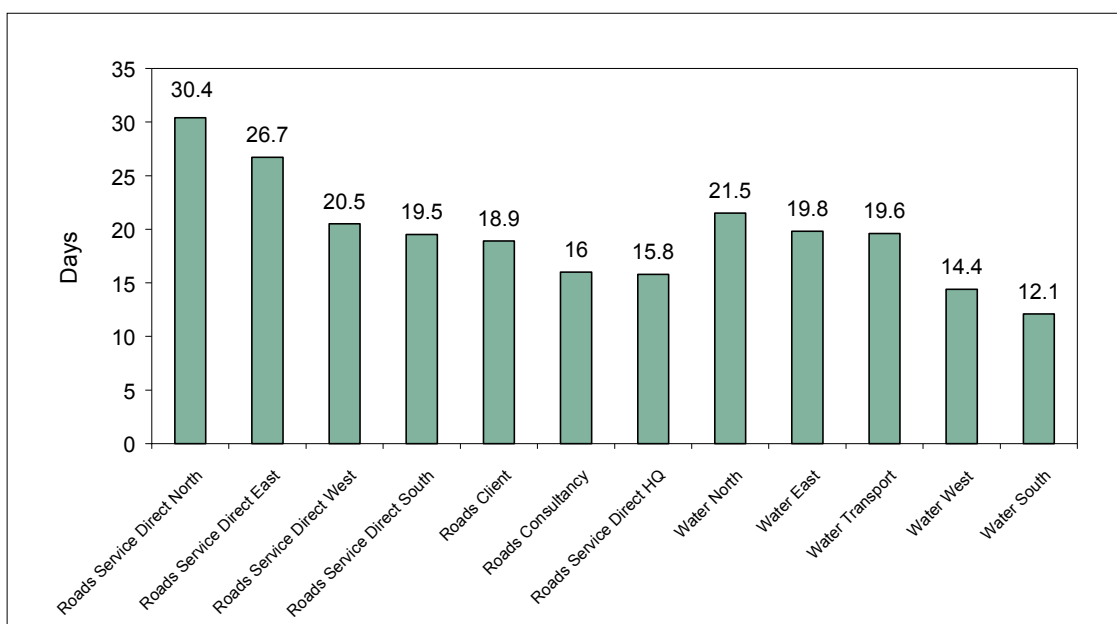
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## Summary

Any effective regime to manage human resources in the public sector must achieve a proper balance between support for staff during genuine periods of ill health and the potential abuse of sick leave as a form of absenteeism. Industrial civil servants in Northern Ireland have levels of sickness absence which are amongst the highest in the United Kingdom. The Department for Regional Development (DRD) is the major employer of industrials in the Northern Ireland Civil Service, with some 2000 employees in its two Executive Agencies: Roads Service and Water Service. These workers took an average of 20 days per employee in 2001–2002 as compared with 12 days for industrial civil servants in Great Britain and in some parts of Roads Service levels were as high as 30 days per employee.

**Figure 1: Average working days absence per employee 2001–2002**



On the basis of a Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General,<sup>1</sup> the Committee took evidence from the Department, Roads Service and Water Service on three main issues:

- The levels and cost of sickness absence;
- The reasons for high levels of sickness absence; and
- How the management of sickness absence can be improved.

<sup>1</sup> C&AG's Report, *Department for Regional Development: Management of Industrial Sickness Absence* (HC 736)

As a result of our examination, we drew the following main conclusions:

**High levels of absence are attributable primarily to a failure to manage the problem**

- There is no convincing explanation as to why levels of absence among industrial workers in the Northern Ireland Civil Service should be so much higher than their counterparts elsewhere in the United Kingdom, other than the acknowledged absence of any effective management of the problem. It is likely that the lack of intervention over a long period of time has created a culture of absenteeism. We expect to see this tackled as a priority

**Good policies and procedures were in place but were not applied**

- Policies and procedures to manage absence conformed very well to the best practice guidelines laid down in the 1998 Cabinet Office report, but there was a consistent and widespread failure to implement them. This is cause for concern in itself, but where such a fundamental failure is possible in one area of management, this may indicate a wider cultural problem and there may be similar failures in other areas. It is important that the operation of policies and procedures in other key areas are reviewed to ensure that they are being applied fully and effectively.

**Senior management did not intervene at a strategic level to address the problem**

- Absence statistics were reported to senior management but no action was taken. The lack of targets for absence reduction and the fact that management information was either poor or non-existent is symptomatic of a failure at senior level in both the Department and the Agencies to recognise that there was a problem which required their intervention.

**Action taken since the C&AG's Report has produced measurable improvements**

- The Department of Regional Development has accepted and implemented all of the C&AG's recommendations. Management information has been improved, targets have been set and steps taken to ensure that procedures are being applied more effectively. This has resulted in significant reductions in the levels of absence in both Agencies. This is convincing evidence to support the conclusion that management failure was the main cause of high absence levels. We welcome this positive response and expect the Department to ensure that progress is maintained.



# Conclusions and recommendations

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## The levels and cost of sickness absence

1. Since the C&AG's Report absence levels have reduced from 20 to 17 days per employee, however, three working weeks per person is still disgracefully high and a huge step change in the management of absence is required to reduce this to an acceptable level.
2. The direct cost of absence is estimated at £2 million a year but this does not take into account indirect costs such as overtime or loss of productivity. It is likely that the full cost of absence is closer to twice the level of direct costs
3. The level of medical retirements in the DRD industrial workforce is three times higher than the United Kingdom average, generating very significant additional costs. The Department is confident that the rigorous application of inefficiency procedures which was absent in the past will reduce the level of medical retirements, but no targets have been set. We expect specific time-linked targets to be set in line with comparable public sector organisations

## The reasons for high levels of sickness absence

4. Procedures for the management of sickness absence in both Agencies complied for the most part with best practice, but were not applied effectively. Senior management failed to address this issue until after it was highlighted by the C&AG's investigation. There is no convincing evidence that either the health of the workforce or the security situation in Northern Ireland has had any significant effect on absence levels and given that recent action to apply procedures more rigorously has produced a measurable reduction, we would conclude that high levels of absence are attributable to a failure to manage the problem.
5. It is disturbing that all levels of management had failed to implement established policies and procedures and we are concerned that if this is possible in one area of management, there may be equally serious problems in other areas. We think it important that the Department, Roads Service and Water Service should review the operation of policies and procedures in other key areas of management to assure themselves that these are being fully and effectively applied.

## How management of sickness absence can be improved

6. Management information available, particularly in Roads Service, was limited and inaccurate but information systems have since been improved. Both Agencies should make full use of this enhanced capability to inform strategy, facilitate management and monitor effectiveness. We recommend that further analysis of the main causes of absence is carried out, to determine if workplace incidents are a significant cause of absence and whether any change is required to health and safety procedures.
7. The most significant departure from best practice was the lack of realistic targets for absence reduction and targets have since been set in line with Cabinet Office

recommendations. We recommend that these are regularly reviewed in the light of the improved management information now available to ensure that they are as testing as possible while being realistically achievable. To introduce motivation to the reduction of absence, we further recommend that individual targets are set and tied into personal objectives for all levels of management.

**8.** Procedures need to be improved in the following key areas:

- action should be taken in response to all breaches of trigger points;
- inefficiency procedures should be progressed with an appropriate sense of determination and rigour;
- return to work interviews should be carried out for every absence, the outcome should be formally recorded and line managers should be trained in how to conduct them effectively;
- more effective use should be made of Occupational Health Service to shorten the time taken to resolve cases involving long term illness; and
- better use should be made of pre-employment checks and probationary periods to reduce the risk of recruiting people who are likely to be poor attenders.

# 1 The levels and cost of sickness absence

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1. In 2001–2002 almost 40,000 working days were lost due to sickness absence in Roads Service and Water Service. This is an average of 20 days per employee or almost 9% of available working days. This compares with an average of 12 days in the industrial Civil Service in Great Britain and comparisons with a range of public and private sector organisations in Northern Ireland and Great Britain indicate that both Agencies are at the higher end of the range.<sup>2</sup> Benchmarking undertaken by Water and Roads Services confirms this, indicating much lower levels of absence in comparable organisations.<sup>3</sup> Absence has reduced somewhat since the C&AG's Report, to an average of 17 days per employee in 2003–2004, however, at over three working weeks per person, this is still disgracefully high and clearly a huge step change in the management of absence is required to reduce this to an acceptable level.<sup>4</sup>

2. The C&AG has estimated that sickness absence in Water and Roads Services is costing around £2 million a year in direct costs alone and reducing absence to the same level as the industrial Civil Service in Great Britain could save £840,000 a year. These estimates do not take into account indirect costs such as overtime, staff time spent in the management of absence or loss of productivity and the Cabinet Office suggested that the damage caused through sickness absence is closer to twice the level indicated by direct costs alone.<sup>5</sup>

3. We were told that the level of medical retirements in the Northern Ireland Civil Service is comparable to the rest of the United Kingdom at around five retirements each year per 1000 employees.<sup>6</sup> In contrast the DRD industrial workforce, with 34 retirements in 2001–2002 among only 2000 staff, has a rate which is three times higher and which has risen steadily in recent years to a point where medical retirements account for 60% of all retirements<sup>7</sup>. Medical retirements generate very significant additional costs to the taxpayer because pensions are paid earlier than normal and at enhanced rates. The Department of Finance and Personnel estimate that additional costs of £17.6 million were accrued due to medical retirements in the Northern Ireland Civil Service in 2003–2004 alone.<sup>8</sup>

4. It is simply not credible that levels of medical retirement are so much higher among DRD industrials than the rest of the population. It seems more likely that the very lucrative retirement package available, coupled with very poorly applied controls over sickness absence, have created a situation in which early retirement on medical grounds is becoming the norm rather than the exception. It may also be the case that medical retirement is being used inappropriately to get rid of bad attenders rather than pursuing dismissal on grounds of inefficiency.<sup>9</sup> This is expensive both in its own right, due to the

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2 C&AG's Report, paras 1.1, 1.8 and Figure 4

3 *ibid*, para 1.6; Qq 6, 46–47, 135; Ev 20

4 Qq 41–43

5 C&AG's Report, paras 1.12–1.15

6 Q 156

7 C&AG's Report, para 4.22

8 *ibid*, para 4.23; Q 133; Ev 20

9 Q 156

high cost of medical retirement and because of the incentive it provides to take long periods of sickness absence.

5. The Department is confident that rigorous application of inefficiency procedures which was absent in the past will result in a reduction in the level of medical retirements in future and there is some indication that this is beginning to happen. However, it is indicative of the Department's failure to address the whole issue of absence seriously, that it does not know what an acceptable level of medical retirements would be or when it could be achieved.<sup>10</sup> We recommend that the Department establishes specific time limited targets for reducing medical retirements in line with comparable public sector organisations.

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<sup>10</sup> Qq 17–24, 33

## 2 The reasons for high levels of sickness absence

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6. The C&AG's Report examined procedures for the management of sickness absence in both Water Service and Roads Service and found that while these complied for the most part with best practice, they were not applied effectively.<sup>11</sup> Since the C&AG's Report, both Agencies have taken action to apply the procedures more rigorously. This has resulted in measurable reductions in absence and would strongly suggest that the failure of management to apply procedures has been the major cause of high levels of absence.<sup>12</sup>

7. The Accounting Officer suggested that the workforce in Northern Ireland is less healthy than in other parts of the United Kingdom and that this is a factor in higher levels of absence. We are not convinced by this argument and there appear to be conflicting statistics available. However, even if this were the case, it would not explain the extent of the difference between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, it would appear that the security situation in Northern Ireland has not contributed significantly to sickness absence in Roads Service and Water Service.<sup>14</sup>

8. In the absence of any convincing mitigating factors we would conclude that the high levels of sickness absence in these organisations are attributable simply to a failure to manage the problem. Clearly if procedures had been properly applied from the start, or if senior management had acted earlier to address the problem, high levels of absence could have been avoided.<sup>15</sup> It is also likely that this lack of management action over a long period has created a perception within the workforce, that the abuse of sickness absence provision is acceptable and may have created a culture of absenteeism which will be difficult to reverse.<sup>16</sup>

9. The Department had implemented all 26 of the C&AG's recommendations between publication of his report and appearing before this Committee.<sup>17</sup> We welcome this positive response. However, we are concerned that there was no effective internal mechanism to generate action in this area and we are left with the impression that had the C&AG not reported, no action would have been taken.<sup>18</sup> We note the Accounting Officer's assurance that some work was going on to address the problem of absence prior to the publication of the C&AG's Report, but we would state clearly that it is not good enough for departments to take action to protect value for money only when they become the subject of an investigation by the C&AG. Accounting Officers have a responsibility to ensure the

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11 C&AG's Report, paras 3.8, 4.1, 4.32; Q 3

12 Qq 15–16, 26–28, 143–145; Ev 16

13 Qq 3–4, 8–9, 71; Ev 16

14 Qq 37–39

15 Qq 63–67

16 Qq 40–43, 77–78, 81–83

17 Ev 16

18 Qq 15, 35–36, 76

efficient and effective use of resources under their control and should assure themselves that systems and procedures put in place to achieve this are working effectively.

10. In this case, good policies and procedures were in place, but all levels of management from the top down had ignored them. This is very worrying and in an organisation where established policies and procedures can be ignored to this degree in one area, there may be equally serious problems in other areas of management. Our concerns on this point were not lessened by the fact that the Accounting Officer could give no explanation for the widespread failure to apply procedures and had not considered the possibility of a wider systemic failure or a cultural problem within the management system.<sup>19</sup> We recommend therefore, that DRD, Roads Service and Water Service review the operation of policies and procedures in other key areas of management to assure themselves that these are being fully and effectively applied.

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19 Qq 124–129

## 3 How the management of sickness absence can be improved

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11. The C&AG found a lack of reliable management information in both Roads and Water Services. Roads Service in particular could produce no meaningful analysis beyond basic absence data and information systems operated by both Agencies included data which was extremely inaccurate when compared with source documents.<sup>20</sup> Both Agencies have since reviewed their base data and improved its accuracy and Roads Service has introduced a new industrial personnel management system which allows action to be targeted at key problem areas such as long term absence.<sup>21</sup>

12. Good information on the extent, causes and patterns of sickness absence is essential to provide a basis for its effective management. It is not surprising therefore that in the absence of such information, management of absence has been so ineffectual. Again, this is indicative of a broader systemic failure to recognise that there was a serious problem. Both Agencies should make full use of their improved management information capability to inform future strategy, improve routine management and monitor the effectiveness of policies and procedures.

13. The main recorded causes of absence in Water Service in 2000–2001 were “injury, accident or assault” and “musculoskeletal” disorders. These are categories of illness which are consistent with poor health and safety protection of a manual workforce.<sup>22</sup> We recommend that both Agencies carry out further analysis of these absences to determine if significant numbers are due to workplace incidents and whether any change is required to the implementation of health and safety procedures.

14. The most significant departure from best practice in both Agencies was in the use of targets as a means of reducing sickness absence levels. Water Service had set no targets while Roads Service had set an “aspirational” target which the C&AG considered to be unrealistic and therefore of limited use in securing improvements in performance.<sup>23</sup> Both Agencies have since set targets. Water Service aims to reduce absence by 30% by 2006–2007 and Roads Service aims to achieve a 40% reduction within five years.<sup>24</sup>

15. The lack of absence reduction targets is a very telling omission, again indicating a basic failure at senior management level in both the Agencies and the Department, to recognise that there was a problem. The fact that the 1998 Cabinet Office good practice report was not copied to the Agencies is not a legitimate excuse for their failure to set targets but it is indicative of a most disturbing failure at Departmental level, to recognise the significance of the problem.<sup>25</sup>

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20 C&AG's Report, paras 2.4, 2.16

21 Qq 102–110

22 C&AG's Report, para 2.14; Qq 122–123

23 C&AG's Report, paras 3.10–3.12; Qq 93–94

24 Qq 12–13, 147; Ev 17

25 Qq 44–46

16. Current targets are consistent with the indicative levels suggested in the Cabinet Office report, however, levels of absence in Roads and Water are very high compared with the GB levels examined by the Cabinet Office and we consider that more ambitious reductions may be achievable. We recommend that targets are regularly reviewed in light of the improved management information now available and to ensure that they are as testing as possible while still being realistically achievable.

17. Given that good procedures were already in place, but no one felt moved to put them into practice, it is of vital importance that genuine motivation is introduced into any future initiative to reduce absence. Targets have a role to play in this.<sup>26</sup> We are encouraged to see that targets have been set within the context of the Departmental Business Plan but more could be done to encourage ownership and accountability. We recommend that individual targets, consistent with existing global targets, should be set and tied into personal objectives for appropriate levels of management.

18. A further systemic failure has been the absence of effective links between human resource professionals and line managers responsible for the management of individual staff. Both Agencies have since established central personnel units with the intention of providing improved communication and support for individual managers and to ensure better consistency in the application of procedures.<sup>27</sup>

19. The provision of more meaningful management information, the setting of testing but realistic targets and the establishment of more effective human resource functions to support line managers, will provide a better framework for the implementation of absence management procedures. The implementation of the procedures themselves also needs to be improved in certain key areas.

20. **Action should be taken in response to all breaches of trigger points.** The Cabinet Office report recommends the use of trigger points to alert management when an individual's absence requires some form of action. Both Agencies have systems of this kind in place based on the number of spells and length of absence, but these have been ignored in many cases, such as the example of a Roads Service employee who had 64 days absence in 17 spells between September 1998 and January 2002 without any management intervention.<sup>28</sup> Response to triggers has been improved recently, with Roads Service issuing warnings in response to 66% of breaches in the past year.<sup>29</sup>

21. **Procedures to dismiss staff on grounds of inefficiency should be progressed with an appropriate sense of determination and rigour.** The C&AG found that procedures to deal with persistent absence were taking in excess of 30 months to progress from an initial trigger to dismissal due to the issue of repeated warnings and failure to move on to the next stage in the process. Endless streams of warning letters were issued, but nothing was done to enforce them. The application of procedures has since improved and warnings now stay in force for two years so that a further breach of triggers within this period prompts a move

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26 Qq 137, 146–147

27 Qq 119–121

28 C&AG's Report, paras 4.2–4.3, 4.6

29 *ibid*, paras 4.2–4.3; Qq 15–16



to the next stage in the process. This has shortened the process to a little more than 12 months.<sup>30</sup>

**22. Return to work interviews should be carried out for every absence, the outcome should be formally recorded and line managers should be trained in how to conduct them effectively.** Return to work interviews are widely recognised as the single most effective measure in managing sickness absence and their use has been strongly endorsed by the Cabinet Office report. Both Agencies had a policy of undertaking return to work interviews but no records were kept and it was not possible to determine the extent of their use in practice. We were told that they are now mandatory in Roads Service, with a compliance rate of 94% and all line managers in both Roads and Water Services have been trained in their use.<sup>31</sup>

**23. More effective use should be made of Occupational Health Service to shorten the time taken to resolve cases involving long term illness.** OHS provides a medical advisory service and both Agencies have trigger points of 20 days absence for referral. In practice there have been delays in referrals well beyond 20 days and further delays, sometimes lasting years, before definitive outcomes were achieved in terms of return to work, dismissal or medical retirement. It may not be appropriate to refer all cases after 20 days but this is a reasonable indicative timescale and the three to six months referred to by the Water Service Chief Executive is far too long to delay action. It is generally recognised that the longer a person is absent, the less likely they are to make a successful return to work. If there is a genuine long-term health concern therefore, it should be addressed at the earliest opportunity.

**24.** Both Agencies should review their policies for dealing with absences where there is no foreseeable possibility of a return to work and in doing so, should bear in mind that the responsibility for the management of these cases rests firmly with them, not with OHS whose role is primarily to advise. A more proactive approach needs to be taken to reduce the length of time taken to resolve these cases. The practice of simply referring cases to OHS and allowing absences to run on for several years with no intervention and no firm prospect of resolution is not acceptable.<sup>32</sup>

**25. Better use should be made of pre-employment checks and probationary periods to reduce the risk of recruiting people who are likely to be poor attendees.** In both Agencies new recruits are subject to a probationary period of one year during which time various aspects of performance, including attendance, are assessed. As in other areas, this valuable control has been ignored and employees with unacceptable attendance have been confirmed in post and have continued to take excessive sick leave. Since the C&AG's Report, revised triggers have been set requiring a management response to every absence, and of 80 staff employed by Roads Service last year two have had their contracts terminated.<sup>33</sup>

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30 C&AG's Report, paras 4.7–4.8; Qq 85, 92, 97–99, 153–155

31 C&AG's Report, 4.9–4.12; Qq 130–131

32 C&AG's Report, paras 4.17–4.20; Qq 73–74, 111–118

33 C&AG's Report, paras 4.25–4.29; Qq 61, 72

## General conclusion

26. We find it totally unacceptable that taxpayers should be expected to fund the disgraceful level of absence which has been allowed to build up in the Roads and Water Services. We are also very critical of management who failed to implement their own procedures and did little or nothing to address the problem until it became the subject of a report to Parliament. We commend the prompt and comprehensive action taken to implement the C&AG's recommendations but we will expect the Memorandum of Response to demonstrate a continuing commitment to improvement and the basis for the delivery of a step change in the management of this area. We would like the Northern Ireland Audit Office to monitor progress towards this goal and report back to us.

# Formal minutes

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**Tuesday 2 November 2004**

Members present:

Mr Edward Leigh, in the Chair

Mr Richard Allan  
Mr Richard Bacon  
Mr David Curry

Mr Brian Jenkins  
Mr Gerry Steinberg

The Committee deliberated.

Draft Report (Northern Ireland: The management of industrial sickness absence), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 26 read and agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations read and agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Fiftieth Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chairman do make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That the provisions of Standing Order No. 134 (Select Committees (Reports)) be applied to the Report.

[Adjourned until Wednesday 3 November at 3.30pm]

## Witnesses

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**Wednesday 28 April 2004**

*Page*

**Mr Stephen Quinn, Mr David Sterling**, Northern Ireland Department for Regional Development (DRDNI), **Dr Malcolm McKibbin**, DRDNI Roads Service, and **Ms Katharine Bryan**, DRDNI Water Service

Ev 1

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