VERBATIM NOTES OF THE THIRTY-FIRST MEETING OF THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE APPOINTED TO ENQUIRE INTO AND REPORT ON LOCAL AUTHORITIES, SERVICE COMMISSIONS AND STATUTORY AUTHORITIES (INCLUDING THE THA) HELD IN THE A.N.R. ROBINSON MEETING ROOM (EAST), LEVEL 9, TOWER D, INTERNATIONAL WATERFRONT CENTRE, #1A WRIGHTSON ROAD, PORT OF SPAIN, ON WEDNESDAY, MARCH 27, 2019 AT 10.15 A.M.

PRESENT

Dr. Varma Deyalsingh	Chairman
Ms. Ramona Ramdial	Vice-Chairman
Mrs. Jennifer Baptiste-Primus	Member
Mr. Nigel De Freitas	Member
Ms. Khadijah Ameen	Member
Mr. Esmond Forde	Member
Mr. Julien Ogilvie	Secretary
Ms. Khisha Peterkin	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Terriann Baker	Graduate Research Assistant

ABSENT

Mr. Darryl Smith	Member
Dr. Lovell Francis	Member

MINISTRY OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Mr. Raymond Seepaul	Deputy Permanent Secretary
Ms. Esther Pilgrim-Soanes	Director, Finance and Accounts

COUVA/TABAQUITE/TALPARO REGIONAL CORPORATION

Mr. Henry Awong	Chairman
Ms. Satragie Maharaj	Chief Executive Officer
Mr. Farzana Girwar	Secretary

SANGRE GRANDE REGIONAL CORPORATION

Mr. Martin Terry Rondon	Chairman
Mrs. Ann Hosein	Chief Executive Officer (Ag.)
Ms. Vedawatie Sookoo	Financial Officer

TUNAPUNA/PIARCO REGIONAL CORPORATION

Mrs. Betty Ramdass-Ali	Chief Executive Officer
Mr. Clayton Burnette	Chief Financial Officer
Ms. Onika Myers Haynes	Vice Chairman

Mr. Chairman: Good morning, members. Morning, I welcome you to the Thirty-First Meeting of the Joint Select Committee on the Local Authorities, Service Commissions and Statutory Authorities (including the THA). This is the Committee's third public hearing pursuant to its enquiry into financial oversight and financial management within municipal corporations. I advise persons here the session is being recorded for subsequent broadcast, and on this occasion I welcome you members from the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation, Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation, and Sangre Grande Regional Corporation. At this stage, I warmly welcome you, and I would like members to please introduce themselves.

Mr. Ogilvie: Officials.

Mr. Chairman:—officials to introduce yourselves starting with the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government.

[*Introductions made*]

Mr. Chairman: Would members from the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation officials introduce themselves?

[*Introductions made*]

Mr. Chairman: Would officials of the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation now introduce themselves?

[*Introductions made*]

Mr. Chairman: Would officials of the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation now introduce themselves?

[*Introductions made*]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you all for your presence here this morning, and I am Dr. Varma Deyalsingh, I am the Chairman of this Committee, and I would like members of my Committee to now introduce yourselves, starting with my Vice-Chair.

[*Members of the Committee introduce themselves*]

Mr. Chairman: So, thank you for being here again, and I would remind everyone present that the purpose, the objective of this enquiry is to examine the role of the line Ministry and executive management of the municipal corporations in promoting and facilitating accountability and transparency in the operations of the municipal corporations. Also to assist the internal control systems within the municipal corporations, and lastly, to examine the proposed local government reform initiatives associated with the management of finances with municipal corporations.

We have been inundated with news of irregular practices that occur in certain regional corporations, and even there is an oversight looking into the functioning of the corporations. And even though there are laws in place and there are checks and balances there, there are still gaps, there are still failures. We are still hearing things in the news coming to the forefront that things are not right. And, at least this enquiry is to really help us to help you to at least ensure that there is a more transparent process occurring in your corporations, because at the end of the day any sort of corruption, any sort of mismanagement of funds, it is the persons out there in your constituencies, in your areas will suffer. So, this is really to help us to help you to get something in place that we can go forward.

At this stage I would like the chief officials to make opening remarks, but please in the essence of time, we are hoping that we would not exceed two minutes. So I would like to start with Mr. Raymond Seepaul, Deputy Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government.

Mr. Seepaul: Thank you, Chairman, I just want to first of all apologize for the absence of my seniors, Permanent Secretaries, who are unavoidably absent. One of the reasons for that being that the Ministry was only notified of this meeting at 1.00 p.m. yesterday. Notwithstanding that, Mr. Chairman, the Ministry looks at these sessions as being critical, and I want to endorse what you said a while ago. We see the role of the Ministry as being critical to ensuring the efficient and transparent operations as it relates to local governance. And we welcome these sessions, and we trust, and it is our hope that it will redound to the benefit of not just the Ministry, but by extension, the stakeholders that we serve.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Would Mr. Henry Awong, Chairman of the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation give us opening remarks.

Mr. Awong: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I actually look forward to the session and for our meaningful discussion. Ultimately, I hope it leads to better systems for the corporation. I am looking forward also for the opportunity to highlight some of the shortcomings of the regional corporation as it relates to financial matters and so on. So, I do look forward for the session ahead.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Would Mr. Martin Terry Rondon, Chairman of the

Sangre Grande Regional Corporation give us some remarks?

Mr. Rondon: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Sangre Grande Regional Corporation, we are responsible for an area of 898 square kilometres, we are 41 communities, eight electoral districts, and a workforce of 655. And I am here today, we are looking forward to carry the region forward together with my CEO and the Financial Officer. So, I am looking forward today that we can have some positive ideas coming out from this Committee.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you, Sir. Would Ms. Onika Myers Haynes, Vice-Chairman of the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation give us some opening remarks.

Ms. Haynes: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Let me first apologize for the absence of my chairman Mr. Paul Leacock. He is presently out of the country. Now, Mr. Chairman, on behalf of the corporation and council we thank the Committee for the invitation extended to us here today. Mr. Chairman, our council at the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation believes in good governance and value for money. However, Mr. Chairman, we note there are challenges within our corporation and other local government bodies and municipalities throughout Trinidad, and hence, Mr. Chairman, the need for local government reform. And we believe with this reform it would aid us in strengthening our internal mechanisms with respect to finance which is at the helm. Mr. Chairman, in conclusion I hope that whatever recommendations that are made by this Committee, it becomes part of policy, and not only policy on paper, but policy that comes to life. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Well, we share your same hope, and I am optimistic that this also would not just be a paper document but could see some sort of operating mechanism. And, as you mentioned the local reform legislation would be here soon, and we already have the procurement legislation and about to put it in place and tie in the loose ends. So, things are looking in the future, you know, bright in the sense that if we can get the legislation in place and operationalize properly, we can at least service, a better service to our members who live in our areas in the communities.

At this stage, I would like to start the question to the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Corporation, and I would like to direct a question to members of this corporation. Your submissions outlined for measures for securing cash, cheques and other financial documents which you itemized on page 15 of your response you had given us. A response to question 20 which we had given you, that during the tenure of the current council have there been any instances of missing cheques? Could I direct this to probably the Chief Executive Officer, Ms. Maharaj?

Ms. Maharaj: Chair, through the Chair, since my inception at the corporation, which is just one year ago, I have never received any report of missing cheques.

Ms. Ameen: Chairman, one of the first questions I would like, we have been treating with corporations for some time now, and one of the first questions I would like to ask before we put them to task, so to speak, is with regard to their capacity. And one of the main things we have been identifying is that some corporations are operating with and some are operating without the relevant staff for their financial department, their accounting unit, and so this morning, Chairman, I want to ask each of these corporations whether they have on staff a corporate—a financial officer, a chief financial officer? And those who do not, could probably indicate what the challenges are, and how you are coping without? What short-term mechanisms you have put in place to have the duties of the

Financial Officer carried out? So anyone could start, but I would like to get a response from each corporation with regard to the tenure of your Financial Officer.

Ms. Maharaj: Through the Chair, Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo has a financial officer. That officer has been present for the past four and a half years. However, she is unable to be present here today.

Ms. Haynes: Mr. Chairman, through the Chair, at Tunapuna/Piarco, we also have a financial officer who directly supervises the accounting section, and directly under him there is an Accountant II and an Accountant I.

Mrs. Hosein: Mr. Chairman, the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation does have a financial officer who assumed duty there from the 3rd of January, 2018, to present.

Mr. Forde: Just as a follow-up onto that, but directed to the Ministry. When we were last here on the 13th of February, we were informed by your Ministry that there was an ad, a vacancy ad for financial officers, for comptrollers in the newspapers. Well, from the 13th to now, we are probably just about six weeks, any update in terms of at least how many applications were received, or if you all have shortlisted? A little thing, just to follow up on that question, because we know the issues that we have with the municipalities with regard to these senior positions of financial comptrollers, treasurers, officers, et cetera.

Mr. Seepaul: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would be happy to update the Committee on this particular issue. Vacancies existed at Chaguanas, Penal/Debe and San Juan/Laventille since the time when we last would have met. Interviews were carried out, and offers were issued to the successful candidates. Two of these candidates are due to begin work next week, and the third individual is currently out of the country and will assume duties in May.

Mr. Forde: Excellent. I think, you know, the Ministry should be complimented based on—because this is our third session, and if from then to now at least we are seeing some headway we would like to compliment you all. I mean, compliments should be given where compliment is due, and again to continue the momentum to ensure that these other municipalities are given, you know, the necessary financial officers.

Mr. Chairman: Yes, if these corporations have shortcomings then again you will have to ensure that those gaps are also filled, those posts are filled.

Mr. Seepaul: Mr. Chairman, let me take the opportunity to also inform the Committee that the Ministry has been very proactive. We recognize that there are a number of shortcomings, particularly in this area and in other areas as well, so under the leadership of our esteemed Director of Finance and Accounts, we have established a forum for financial officers, which is held on the second Monday of every month. And this forum really brings everyone together to address inefficiencies, and to ensure that there is a standardized approach towards accounting at the corporations.

Mr. Forde: Thank you, Chair.

Ms. Ameen: This is excellent. Chairman, I want to go a little further. Almost each of the corporations who have come before us have expressed that they have issues with staffing within the unit, so while the corporations present today have financial officers, for example, in the report submitted by Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo, there is a breakdown of the staff, and in the accounting department, but you see a number of areas where there are checkers or daily paid officers carrying out the duties of—where monthly paid officers should be, and there are positions that are insufficiently staffed, because it is by responsibility such as payroll, vote book, cheque preparation, and so on. Two things I want to ask: What is the challenge with filling those positions with the required monthly paid officers?—one. And secondly, if the regional corporations, if arrangements can be made for more daily-paid staff suitably qualified to fill those positions as—well, they would be checkers, or any officer that you would recommend, any position you would recommend?

Mr. Seepaul: Mr. Chairman and member of the Committee raising this concern, yes, this is a reality, however, over the last six weeks the Ministry would have met with the Service Commissions Department with respect to addressing the filling of vacancies. So that process is ongoing. We are happy to say that feedback received from the Director of Personnel Administration has been very positive. However, in the interim, and I mean this is one of the issues that is being addressed by our DFA at the forum, in that we are trying to ensure that responsible monthly paid officers are placed on critical schedules in the accounting units of these corporations in accordance with the Exchequer and Audit Act. The reality, again, because of short staffing is that at these units we will have to engage the services of daily-rated officers who are more than likely checkers, because life has to go on at the corporations. However, we look at placing them in very low-risk schedules.

Mr. Chairman: Are there any training sessions for those accounting staff?

Mr. Seepaul: This formal training for accounting staff really resides at the corporation. I know that the corporation would have been allocated funds under that particular Vote. However, the Ministry, again, is trying to take the lead to ensure that not just members of the accounting unit, but members in general, officers in general at the corporations are trained, and a lot of this training is going to take place at the respective forum.

Ms. Ameen: Can you provide the template, the information, or they just have to come up with it on their own? Because you spoke earlier about standardizing practices at the regional corporation where financial regulation is concerned, does the Ministry or the Director of Finance and Accounts, for example, provide the information or the content for the training of these officers in the regional corporation?

Mr. Seepaul: Could I ask Ms. Pilgrim?

Ms. Pilgrim-Soanes: Chair, members, part of the forum is to standardize, as we said. So, we are providing templates with respect to the training. We have requested the Comptroller to train our members. We are still waiting on a response with that, but in the meantime we at the Ministry, when we assemble for the forum, bringing the issues to the table so that we could have, moving forward into reform, we could be on the same page.

Mr. Chairman: I would like to ask the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation: Are the training sessions that would be carded for the accounting staff in 2019—is the allocation of $50,000 sufficient to cover the cost of the intended training?

Ms. Maharaj: What had happened from since my inception, and looking at the training that was done, some training was done in 2017. However, that $50,000 allocated is not only for the accounting unit, but for the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation staff in general.

Mr. Chairman: I would like to recognize the Vice-Chairman and followed by member Baptiste-Primus.

Ms. Ramdial: Thank you. To the CEO of the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation, we noted in your submissions that your annual financial statements for the period 2006 to 2018 are outstanding, when are you expecting to bring up-to-date these annual financial statements?

Ms. Maharaj: Through the Chair, that is an area that emphasis was placed on at my inception there because I recognized that no financial statements were completed since 2005. However, it appeared to be a long-inherited problem because what I noticed, the continuity of financial officers from that period was not always filled, and what I recognized from discussions with the present financial officer, she experienced some challenges in terms of the staffing, the training, and also she was bogged down to the operational duties, day-to-day operational duties at Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation. I was able to assign two individuals to assist her directly with putting information together with the hope to start these financial statements. Also, a Note was forwarded to council for us to hire someone. So, at present that is before the council for consideration.

Ms. Ramdial: Just a follow-up. And the information to complete these statements, do you have the information from 2006?

Ms. Maharaj: Well, this is what we are trying to put together at this point in time. As I said, since I am there emphasis was placed, and we have someone—one member of staff that we try to train to work on bank reconciliation statements and some other documents. Meanwhile, we are trying to retrieve information from the vault, so we can start working on those statements.

Mr. Chairman: Is your corporation, you know—did your corporation have any sort of a legal matter going on with any CEOs, or any former workers presently?

Ms. Maharaj: Through the Chair, there is a matter that was reported to the Fraud Squad, and at the present time it is being investigated by the relevant authority; two public officers, a contract worker and a daily-paid employee were involved in that matter.

Mr. Chairman: Could you give me a general description of what had transpired there? Because, remember it is a matter for court so we have to just be—in general, general ideas?

Ms. Maharaj: Okay, two cheques were prepared in a total of approximately $150,000, and these cheques were prepared for two development projects in 2015, and it was alleged that the works were completed at the time of the preparation of the cheques.

Mr. Chairman: And were the works completed?

Ms. Maharaj: The works were not completed at the time. It was alleged that it was completed at the time when the cheques were prepared.

Mr. Chairman: And when did this matter occur?

Ms. Maharaj: This matter occurred in 2015.

Mr. Chairman: 2015, so therefore, since then, you know you had alarm bells ringing, something may be wrong, and yet still your financial statements were 2005, so I think something should have—

Ms. Maharaj: 2006.

Mr. Chairman:—2006, something should have mobilized the corporation to, you know, expedite some sort of a review of the system. But it was not done. But I want to ask the Ministry officials here now: Mr. Seepaul, how come, you know—corporations are allowed to have such tardy statements forthcoming. I mean, why is there something not in place to say, "Hey, after a year if you do not do something, we are coming to see, coming in to audit you"? What mechanism is in place that could prevent certain things like this from happening?

10.45 a.m.

Mr. Seepaul: Mr. Chairman, in all fairness I cannot give account for what would have happened under the stewardship of our current Permanent Secretary. However, reference is made to the establishment of the forum and based on what would have transpired at the last two hearings involving other corporations the preparation of the financial statements is top on the list of issues that is being currently addressed so that what I am saying is that the Ministry is now taking the necessary measures to ensure that corporations come up to scratch. Any further details I would be happy to refer to my colleague.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Thank you kindly, Mr. Chairman. Just as an addendum to what member Ramdial left off with regard to the controls, the outstanding financial statements, I want to suggest and this is to the CEO of Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation. The outstanding financial statements covers the period 2006 to 2018. That is a huge backlog that you have there. While you make attempts to clear the backlog you pay attention to the current. So you are looking at clearing up your backlog but you are making sure that your book for the current period up-to-date. I want to advise on that.

Secondly, Mr. Raymond Seepaul you indicated that at the Ministry the Permanent Secretary would have acted in collaboration with your director of finance and accounts, implemented what is called Financial Officers Forum. I think that is very commendable, but what I am concerned about, those corporations where there are no financial officers, which level of staff is represented at this forum or is it only for financial officers?

Mr. Seepaul: Mr. Chair, of course, I would have indicated that there are currently three corporations that do not have financial officers on their staff at the moment. At the forum and under relevant meetings for example, the Accountant II would represent the corporation.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Mr. Chairman, my questions will be directed to either the Chairman of Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation or the CEO. Your submission indicated that administration implemented several controls to enhance financial oversight, including strengthening of staff complement; and that would be on page 3 of your response to the Committee. Could you share with this Committee how the staff complement was strengthened to enhance the corporation's internal checks and balances?

Ms. Maharaj: Through the Chair, we received six new Clerk I's from the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, just approximately about six weeks ago. About six weeks ago we received six new Clerk I's from the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government. However, four members were placed in the Accounts Department. For the strengthening of staff, one went to the payroll department—the payroll section. We assigned one on Vote Book—two Vote Books we assigned two persons and another is presently working along with the cheque staff.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: I gathered these are six—you used the term "new". New in the sense of new to Couva or new to the public service?

Ms. Maharaj: Through the Chair, new to the public service.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: So then there would be need for some kind of orientation programme before literally throwing them out to swim.

Ms. Maharaj: Well, the training was done and is still ongoing by the financial officer.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: My second question would be, your submission acknowledge the corporations need for its own internal audit. I refer to pages 3 and 4 of your submission. Against that background, could you share with this

Committee what representations have the corporation made to the line Ministry in terms of the establishment of your own internal audit unit? And that question could be applicable to the rest of the corporations here if you do not have an internal audit unit.

Ms. Maharaj: Through the Chair, as I said, again it is by inception. I have recognized some weaknesses and there is where I place emphasis. Coming from—experiencing a corporation with an internal audit, I saw the need to have an internal audit at Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation. What I observed was happening is that when we want an audit done or executed on any document or project we would have to write the line Ministry to get their internal audit on board to come to the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation to conduct such audit. And in light of that I did have some discussion with the PS, verbal discussions, and I was advised that they are seeking to engage the corporations to have their own internal audit.

However, in January internal audit members were sent to the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation for one month. And in light of that the PS did have discussions with me that she sent them with an agenda and I was also to work along with them to request whatever work that I wanted. And arising out of that I am presently preparing a report to send to the Ministry with all my recommendations for the internal audit.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Thank you. Mr. Chairman, and the other corporations who are here.

Mr. Chairman: One thing I would like to find out though, the suggestion was made for you to have your own internal audit unit but you have applied to the Ministry and they have sent an internal audit unit for you. At the end of the day what would transpire? Would we have an audit unit being sent from the Ministry or would you have your own internal unit?

Ms. Maharaj: Mr. Chairman, what is happening, as I said, I had the verbal discussion and I was advised that they are engaging the corporations to establish their own internal audit with the assistance of the line Ministry. So, apparently what I gathered, it is a test in terms of the Ministry sending the internal auditors staff to work for one full month and arising out of that I have to submit a report as she requested with all the recommendations as to why we need the unit at the corporations.

Mr. Chairman: Mr. Raymond Seepaul, I would like to enquire, what is the policy of the Ministry? Do they send an internal audit unit to each—do they audit each corporation separately or is it the sense now that you want them to have their own unit? I mean, the oversight of the Ministry I think is important. So could you give us an idea what is the—

Mr. Seepaul: Mr. Chair, before I respond to your question, this whole issue of the absence of auditing units at the corporations has been a great cause for concern having served as a CEO previous to this dispensation. This has been highlighted to the Ministry. We would have engaged in discussion with PMCD. We would have also expressed our concerns to the Service Commissions Department and I know that efforts were being made through a Cabinet Note to address this matter.

However, in the interim and again only recently, and I say in making reference to maybe about two or three months ago, the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government has its internal audit team. This team, I mean, of course, is efficient in itself, but what our Permanent Secretary, the Accounting Officer, has done is strategized the operations of this auditing unit so that it can place closer attention to—in terms of addressing the many concerns experienced at the corporations.

Previously the auditing unit, their responsibility was basically to address critical matters as they would have arisen. Some of these functions included the auditing of financial statements, the auditing of arrears and matters more of a technical nature. However, because of the numerous concerns arising from the corporations, what the PS has decided is that she would form teams and these teams would be sent out to corporations on a sort of circuit manner and they would pay attention to the matters that require attention over the period of a month. So the corporations would be given—under the circumstances the corporations would be able to have a lot of their matters addressed over this period of time.

Mr. Chairman: Well, this lack of financial statements that was forthcoming from this corporation, would your team give assistance in getting their books in order? And if so, is there a timeline that would be given to the public to say, well they are going to get those accounting statements at a particular time to see what is going on.

Ms. Pilgrim-Soanes: With respect to Couva, Chair, we are looking from 2006. Couva has asked the Ministry to source to see if we can get the information because we need the information to prepare the statement. Thus far we were able to get some information from 2010, 2012 and 2013. So you have from 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2014 that we are yet to find. We may have to go to Trade Zone where we have our records. But they need to get the information and the information, we do not have all the information at present to assist them in order for them to prepare the financial statement.

Mr. Chairman: So therefore, it is highly dependent on the corporation to prepare their statements that they took years since 2006 not forthcoming. Is there any way you could encourage them to expedite this being the line Ministry?

Ms. Pilgrim-Soanes: We decided in that forum we will work with them but we need to get, Chair, we need to get the information. Without the information, when it comes to the audit it will be a query. So we need to get the information in order to prepare the financial statements and that is the problem, the information.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: I just wanted to end my own by making just this simple statement. Just to reinforce to the acting DPS, Deputy Permanent Secretary and the director, an audit unit is critical for these corporations. It acts as an oversight over the financial operations of the corporations. And if these audit units are not put in place then the systems would not be improved because they would continue to have gaps in the operations. Thank you.

Mr. De Freitas: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to find out more about the process because we are hearing for the morning thus far, and this was the same issue when we had the hearing previous with other corporations, that there are issues with financial statements, there are issues with getting information, there is no auditing unit to have oversight and so forth. So if the Ministry is supposed to receive particular documentation from the corporations and years are rolling by, they are not getting it, what is the Ministry supposed to do at that point? You were supposed to get financial statement for 2005, it does not come; 2006 goes by, nothing; 2007. So the Ministry does not do anything at that point in time?

I mean, the Ministry is saying here today we supposed to get the information from the corporations but if you do not get it from '06, '07, '08, '09, '10, '11, does the Ministry not stand up and say, or come down on the corporation and try to enforce that rule? Because what we are discovering here is allegations abound, corporation in corporation and the Ministry does not have information by way of financial statements, there is no auditing going on. There is a correlation that is happening there.

Can the Ministry explain to me why all of these years are passing and they are not enforcing that these statements come in? I understand where the corporations are indicating that they do not have the bodies to do some of these procedures. But it cannot be just left like that for years to run. So what does the Ministry do at that point? Because you are getting that feedback that says, the corporation cannot do this for this reason and it cannot just be left to run, because you are creating a scenario where allegations are going to keep popping up and corruption can take place.

Mr. Chairman: I am hearing the Ministry saying that it is really the corporation that has to give the information—to be forthcoming with the information. [*Crosstalk*] And the corporation is not forthcoming. So therefore something has to be in place.

Ms. Ameen: Chairman—

Mr. Chairman: Yes?

Ms. Ameen: Chairman, just for the record, we started of this issue with Couva but just for the record I want to get the last date, the records for Tunapuna and for Sangre Grande. What is the last updated financial report that you have submitted? And I am asking this Chair so we could deal with all the corporations across the board and the issues that take place.

Mr. Chairman: I agree. But before we go into there, hold your answers. I would like the Ministry to respond to Mr. De Freitas' questions.

Mr. Seepaul: I will be happy to. Before I respond to the concern itself, it should be brought to the knowledge of the Committee that according to the Exchequer and Audit Act, any accounting officer has to be supported by an auditing unit. Since the establishment of the corporations through the Municipal Corporations Act, corporations were not outfitted with auditing units. That being so, and of course I would want to, again, agree with the member for making this observation. It is a fair one and unfortunately I know my current accounting officer cannot give any reason as to why these things were not done. That is why the Ministry did not exercise oversight over this particular operation.

However, it is now being done, it is now being addressed. And I also want to add that it has been heavily emphasized as we are in the process of legislative amendment of the Act where the auditing unit is seen as critical to the operations of the corporations.

Ms. Ameen: Can the PS give us a time frame as to when this exercise might be completed?

Mr. Seepaul: Could you be a little more specific?

Ms. Ameen: Specifically with regard to Couva, because they have been disadvantaged since 2006, but for all the corporations, but specifically Couva.

Ms. Pilgrim-Soanes: With respect to Couva and maybe even to all the other corporations, my information is that the staffing at the higher level, that we are addressing at this point in time, was a factor in the non-production of the financial statements. So what the member mentioned earlier on, the structure where it has checkers in the accounting unit, it is beyond their capacity. They cannot produce a financial statement. It is not an appropriation account, you need balance sheet. Yes, Sir.

Mr. De Freitas: We understand that because we have been hearing that over and over again in relation to not having the bodies to produce critical information. So let me just give you an example of where my mind is at. You are driving a vehicle and you are hearing a knocking sound. You know that knocking sound is coming from, let us say one of the wheels. If you leave it the wheel is going to fall off, the car is going to crash. You understand where I am coming from? So the issues that you are raising, as valid as they may be, are critical.

Let me go further. The initiative that is forthcoming by way of Local Government Reform is a great initiative in the sense that it is supposed to help the corporations by giving them more responsibility to better serve their people. And what we are hearing is that there are critical issues in these corporations that I am hoping and praying must be solved before you get to that level. You do not want to go in to that level with these kind of issues. So I am asking, what can the Ministry do to solve these things? Is it that you need to speak to, I think it is the DPO or CPO and reiterate to them how critical this is?—so that they can fill the body so that the corporations can get the information and do their reports and bring them up to speed. Is that something that you can give an assurance here today, not just to the Committee but to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago so that Local Government Reform can be successful?

Mr. Seepaul: I would want to not just give an assurance but mention that the process has already begun. I would have indicated earlier that we have had dialogue with the agencies responsible for hiring, inclusive of the CPO, Service Commission and, of course, the PMCD.

As far as the concerns are expressed pertaining to preparation of financial documents, our director is addressing that. Unfortunately, I am unable to give a timeline as far as the completion of the exercise that the different corporations are concerned. But what I am also assuring the Committee is that the people who are being employed as financial officers, they are well qualified to prepare these documents. So, yes, these matters are being addressed currently.

Mr. Chairman: So you are saying that the corporations already have officers in place who could have given those reports?

Mr. Seepaul: At present the financial officers at the corporations are qualified with their ACCA qualifications and this will enable them to be competent to prepare these documents.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Mr. Chairman, permit me. Mr. DPS, one of the concerns of this Committee and I am sure member Ramdial and myself are on the same page with that, has the Ministry submitted any representations to the Chief Personnel Officer for a review of the remuneration package of the financial officers? Because it is all well and good to say, "Well we are dealing with it and we have bought on board three or four new financial officers", but it is whether or not those financial officers would stay in the job because they carry a high value and when you look at the remuneration package the possibility of retaining them at the various corporations at that salary, I mean, is something that is worrying.

So, have you all made submissions to the CPO justifying the increase in the remuneration package? An ACCA graduate commands $30,000/$35,000 out there. There is a dearth of highly qualified ACCA trained persons and the director of finance would be well aware of that.

Mr. Seepaul: My response, an emphatic yes. At our last session, for example, this matter was raised when our Permanent Secretary, Mrs. Jennifer Daniel, was present and she would have provided a similar response. Having come from a background of the CPO she understands these challenges. And what I would want to say is that recently we would have—the Ministry would have communicated with the CPO's office expressing our concern over remuneration issues.

Ms. Ramdial: Mr. Seepaul in addition to that, the remuneration issue, is, you mentioned earlier that the Act—I may be wrong but you need correct me, does the Act stipulate that every corporation and borough create their own auditing team or—no. [*Crosstalk*] Okay, so that has to come from the Ministry? [*Crosstalk*] They can contract out the services. Okay. But in the new Local Government Reform is that not something worth considering, where you give the local corporations the autonomy to get their own team of auditors in-house there?

Mr. Seepaul: Again, there is—I do not want to comment much on the amendment process, but I know that the—as I indicated earlier, the establishment of an auditing unit at the corporation, the reform exercise is seen as very, very, critical and it is included in the amended legislation.

Mr. Forde: Mr. Chairman, I am sitting here and again, you know we are now at 11.11 a.m., coincidentally, and you know we are still on Couva and I am from the Tunapuna/Piarco region and I am not even able to get a question to my CEO from the Tunapuna/Piarco region. But simply, before we move on, we were told by, I think from Princes Town's Chairman, when he was here—and, I think it was Chaguanas, that they outsourced auditing firms in order to do their financial statements and to bring it up-to-date. If we talking about from 2006 was that ever considered, chairman? CEO you said you came in only a year now but the chairman has been there for quite a while. Was that ever considered to outsource?

Mr. Awong: It was considered on many occasions and as the CEO indicated right now before the Council, there is a request to hire a person to assist the financial officer now. So it was considered, but funding has always been a challenge with regard to some of those things.

Mr. Forde: But you see, according to my colleague, Mr. De Freitas, it is critical. Because we do not know what has been going on from 2006 to present in Couva. I remember reading a newspaper where, I think it was Couva, where there was an allegation of some corruption and some this and a whole series of pictures and individuals—

Ms. Ameen: "Nah", that was San Juan/Laventille.

Mr. Forde: You sure about that?

Ms. Ameen: Yes.

Mr. Forde: Positive?

Ms. Ameen: Yes.

Mr. Forde: All right. But again, we do not want to know that that situation can be happening in Couva and we are not aware of what is going on. 2006 is a long time, you know.

Mr. Awong: I am fully agreeing with you, member, and as the CEO has indicated we are trying to deal with the matter. It is affecting us more than just by producing a financial statement too, because there are funds sitting in a bank that we cannot utilize because these statements are not yet prepared, what we call Unspent Balances. It would be in the interest of the Council that we can access those funds to do the work for the people who we are elected to do and to represent. So there are funds in the bank, CEO, that we cannot access.

Mr. Forde: And that only shows therefore, let us expedite it in order to ensure that you get the funds to be used. Anyhow, Mr. Chairman—

Mr. Chairman: In the interest of time what I would like to go on to is the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation. I think Ms. Ameen had asked a question and also before—

Mr. Forde: No, Mr. Chairman, hold on, sorry, eh. But rather than just go on to Sangre Grande, could we identify the question and could we get it across the board because the time is running, so that if we could get the particular question and then a quick synopsis from Grande, from TPRC—

Mr. Chairman: Following up on the question that Ms. Ameen had asked and we put it on hold—we follow through with Sangre Grande.

Mrs. Hosein: Mr. Chairman, the last financial statement at the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation was the 2013 financial statement.

Mr. Chairman: So if you are able to do it in 2013, what is—your corporation, I mean, "what system your corporation has" that Couva does not have? Do you have full financial auditors or staff? So "how come" you are getting this done with your limited staff? This is what I would like find out. What level of staffing you have that—have you outsourced to get your books in order or are you using your present staff you have there?

11.15 a.m.

Ms. Hosein: Mr. Chairman, no, the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation has not outsourced any staff to complete the statements, but we are currently using our present staff.

Mr. Chairman: So therefore, why—do you have—you see, I am trying to compare why one corporation can do it and the other one cannot do it, and this is why I am getting a little—yeah. You all did not outsource at all, eh?

Mrs. Hosein: No.

Mr. Chairman: Good.

Ms. Ameen: And Tunapuna.

Mr. Chairman: Tunapuna, could you give us an idea of the statements also?

Mrs. Ramdass-Ali: Chairman, through the Chair, we have completed up to 2015 and we have a first draft up to 2016. We have been audited by the Auditor General's Department up to 2010 so far. What I would like to say is that we have been fortunate enough to have a financial officer who has—I think it is his third two-year contract. So he has been consistently with the corporation. So that is one aspect of it. The other is that we are also fortunate, one of our checkers, she is partially qualified at ACCA as well, so he has that support. So that has helped us.

Ms. Ameen: Chairman, there is a matter that we touched on before we dealt with the outstanding financial statements and it has to do with the payment of contracts for development programmes at the end of the financial year. And there was a matter in Couva Corporation a couple of years ago and I remember there was an investigation. The CEO was transferred, I think, but it has to do with the fact that sometimes when it comes towards the end of the financial year and development programmes are ongoing, in order to not lose the money before the end of the financial year, corporations would print a cheque but not issue it to the contractor until the work is completed. With the situation in Couva it came to the attention of all corporations that such practice was incorrect. How are you treating, going forward, with ensuring that corporations do not lose the money before, if the work is not completed by the end of the financial year for their Development Programme?

Mr. Awong: That situation was dealing, not with the Development Programme, but recurrent expenditure, because in Development Programme once you issue the contract you can hold—the contract could roll over into the next financial year. But it is under your recurrent expenditure that that situation happens.

Ms. Ameen: So CEO, have guidelines been issued to all CEO—sorry, from the deputy PS: Have guidelines been issued to all CEOs with regard to that practice? Because it is something that used to take place in several corporations.

Mr. Seepaul: Chair, I believe that the most competent person to provide a response would be my colleague on my right.

Ms. Pilgrim-Soanes: You mentioned we would lose the money, but it is not lost because it will go into "unspent". But the first warrant that is issued from the Minister of Finance will tell you, you need to clear your commitments from the previous year. So it is just a matter of using the allocation in your current fiscal period.

Ms. Ramdial: To the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation. In your submissions you stated that the Chief Executive Officer's Special Committee has been established to review the Public Procurement and Disposal of Property (Amdt.) Act, 2016. Who are the members of this committee? And upon the full proclamation of this Act, is it envisaged that a procurement unit will be created?

Mrs. Hosein: Mr. Chairman, my answer to the question: the members of the committee are the corporate secretary, the financial officer, the engineer and surveying officer, at this point in time, Ma'am. At the end of the term of this committee it is expected that a number of key deliverables would be undertaken and one would be to establish the corporation's portfolio and procurement strategies.

Ms. Ramdial: So can we safely say you may be the first corporation to set up the procurement unit?

Mrs. Hosein: Ma'am, Mr. Chairman, I want to say that the first draft of our guidelines for the procurement unit would be established, let us say—we have a deadline of, let us say, a three-month period to develop that first draft.

Ms. Ramdial: What about the Tunapuna Regional Corporation? Any consideration for this procurement unit?

Mrs. Ramdass-Ali: Through the Chair, may I respond? Okay. So we have also set up an internal committee. We have the financial officer, the administrative officer II, our tenders clerk, our engineering and survey officer and myself. Unfortunately, at this point in time, we do not have a corporate secretary. He would have moved on from the 1st of March. So we are awaiting a corporate secretory from the Ministry. So we are also reviewing the legislation. We are trying internally in terms of putting together a unit. I know that is also one of the requirements, so we are trying to move in that direction. One of our concerns, of course, is going to be staffing and the post of the procurement officer itself.

Ms. Ramdial: All right. And what about the Couva Corporation, are you in the process of also setting up a procurement unit?

Ms. Maharaj: We are not in the process of setting up the unit at this time, but, however, the tenders unit is functional. We have involved the corporate secretary to review the legislation and the present procedures that we use at this time. We are also seeking training and, as my colleague said, staffing would be a matter of concern because we require professional staffing for that unit.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Chairman, just to piggyback again, and to all the corporations. Well, I heard that Couva is not yet on board with it, but with regard to Sangre Grande and Tunapuna, what about the relevant training in procurement? Have the members of the committee itself, or any identified members of staff have been targeted for training?

Mrs. Ramdass-Ali: So may I respond? There are programmes offered by the

Public Service Academy. We have responded to the advertisement in terms of recommending personnel. However, no member of our staff has been selected for that training yet—in terms of yet—yeah.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Mr. Chairman, based on the response given by the CEO of the Tunapuna Corporation, may I impress upon our Deputy Permanent Secretary, Mr.Seepaul, for the Ministry to make an intervention at the level of the academy to ensure that persons from each corporation, that they have at least one person in on that training? It is critical. Corporations will be given, under Local Government Reform, the authority to run its own business, and therefore, building capacity is important.

Ms. Ameen: Chair, I want to move on to another area. Chairman, regional corporations are responsible, to some extent, for policies of their own. They have certain responsibilities when it comes to finances and running their own business, such as hiring of contract staff, and so on. One thing, though, the councillors and chairmen, their salaries and allowances are determined by the Salaries Review Commission and not by the corporations themselves. There have been instances where a council could decide to increase a particular allowance or give a particular allowance to councillors. This is a matter of concern to me. No matter the amount, I think that is improper. And I want to ask the councils present if you are aware, or if you have situations where councillors are being provided with allowances outside of the Salaries Review Commission's guidelines.

Mr. Rondon: I would like to answer that question. Not in Sangre Grande. Not in Sangre Grande. Never happens. For my 25 years there, never happens, and under my watch will never happen.

Mr. Chairman: And what about the other corporations?

Mr. Awong: I want to reiterate the same thing as my colleague in Sangre Grande. I have never seen that happen at the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation. I am certain it is not going to happen under my watch also.

Mr. Chairman: And Tunapuna, could you give us—

Ms. Haynes: Mr. Chairman, through you, not that I am aware of in Tunapuna/Piarco.

Ms. Ameen: Chairman, well, actually, one of the situations is in a council that is not present, but one is in Tunapuna/Piarco region with regard to telephone allowances. So if any of the officers have the information with regard to that they could provide the committee with it, or if not, if you need time to submit it at a later date. It is a matter that I am very concerned about, Chairman, a matter that I intend to raise with the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, and a practice that is improper.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Mr. Chairman, may I enquire from my colleague, are councillors not entitled to a telephone, a cellular, as councillors?

Ms. Ameen: Part of their allowance includes a telephone allowance, but there are instances where, by council resolution, the amount of the allowance could be increased, or has been increased. Or, for example, they could decide that they are on a corporate plan, for example, and the corporation pays the corporate plan. The payment per councillor is not supposed to exceed your telephone allowance. Also, the corporation should not be paying your telephone bill while you receive your telephone allowance as part of your salary and allowances. So the telephone allowance is really supposed to go towards the cost of your bill, but if the corporation is paying the bill while you are receiving—or while the councillor is receiving the allowance, then they are being given the allowance twice.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: It is called unfair enrichment.

Mr. Chairman: So I think we can get the answers in writing from your corporation—any answer. I would like to recognize Member Forde also.

Mr. Forde: Members, Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation, you submitted in your Appendix 3 under the Rates for Compacter Services, you identified the various electoral districts and you itemized the various contractors, and then you have the daily rate per pay. Now, those contractors are presently on a month-to-month basis?

Ms. Haynes: Yes.

Mr. Forde: Right, they are still present on a month-to-month. Now, you did not give us a total figure. You just gave us an individual breakdown. All right? Now, I would presume it is an exorbitant fee that we pay for scavenging services in Tunapuna/Piarco. So, through you, Mr. Chair, to the financial officer, or the CEO, what is the total figure for sanitation collection in the Tunapuna/Piarco region, please? You do not have to be exact, but a ballpark figure. We should be able to have a ballpark.

Mrs. Ramdass-Ali: Through the Chair, I do not have a monthly figure for you in total, but what I could give you is our allocation for the financial year. It is approximately $53 million.

Mr. Forde: $53 million for sanitation.

Mrs. Ramdass-Ali: Yes.

Mr. Forde: Right. How would you rate—and, again, other CEOs and other chairmen, please note, I just want to get a quick figure from each one of you all on the question as we go. How would you rate both your compactor services and your regular open-tray truck service within your region, on a scale of one to 10? You talk about $53 million for the year. Right? So I want to get the figure from each corporation and how would you rate it. Madam CEO, scale of one to 10. Or if you want to give: "Very good; good; satisfactory; poor." Give me an idea.

Mrs. Ramdass-Ali: Through the Chair, that is quite a difficult question. We have some areas where we have a commendable service. We have other areas where we have challenges. So it is a little difficult for me to give you a rating in terms of that, because—to balance it off.

Mr. Forde: All right. For example, on the same Appendix 3, there is 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10. There is one particular contractor here that controls 10 regions out of a region of 16—that particular region. You have the document before you. Could you identify if you are satisfied with that service in that particular region? And that includes the area of Tunapuna, Auzonville, Tunapuna, St. Augustine, Mount St. Benedict, Tunapuna market, things like that.

Mrs. Ramdass-Ali: We have complaints from time to time. Generally, I believe we have a satisfactory service, generally. I could ask the Vice Chairman to speak on that because she would be, more or less, closer to the communities.

Ms. Ameen: Just to share—the point of this question we have asked before, is that some corporations identify, although they have the funds, because of the unsatisfactory service and because of the fact that regional corporations do not decide who provides the service, you may have one contractor providing unsatisfactory service for quite a number of years and you have no say in the selection of a contractor when their contract is up. So which is why we try to get to the corporations' level of satisfaction with their contractors so that recommendations could be made with regard to the policy surrounding the procurement of contractors and the monitoring of contractors.

Ms. Haynes: Mr. Chairman, through you, for Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation, on a scale I will say, fair.

Mr. Forde: And you all operate three days now, a week?

Ms. Haynes: Yes, for both compacter and open tray. Mr. Chairman, we have had serious challenges as it relates to bulk-waste collection and the open-tray service. Pinto, if I may pinpoint certain areas, we have the Pinto area; we have areas like Maturita; areas in Five Rivers; St. Helena, where we have had significant challenges as it relates to, especially the open-tray service. Mr. Chairman, we have in place, as you all know, coming from Tunapuna—we have checkers who supervise the collection as well as FOS, and, again, there are some challenges in this area also. So we are not completely satisfied at all, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Forde: Now, there are provisions for prorated payment in terms of: poor; satisfactory, and where the checkers will send in information. Are there instances where you all have short paid contractors?

Ms. Haynes: Yes, Mr. Chairman, there are instances.

Mr. Forde: Right. And that is evident.

Ms. Haynes: Yes, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Forde: All right, cool. Couva, what is your allocation on a yearly basis for sanitation?

Mr. Awong: We have listed here on our submission as $81,600—

Mr. Forde: Okay. Just a correction. It is prorated, not short paid, but it happens. Couva?

Mr. Awong: Listed in our submission, our daily—per day is $81,624 per day. If we work out the maths that is quite a tidy sum also. My CEO is prompting me to say, eight, satisfactory, but I want to say, seven. Presently we are having some issues with regard to some contractors, namely one, due to the fact that contractors are still operating on a 2013 contract arrangement with SWMCOL and we are operating now on a month by month contract. Some contractors have made demands that we need to up the price. If a contractor does not pick up garbage in front of one home and you do not pay him for that one home, it is only $1.46 per home.

Mr. Forde: When you break it down.

Mr. Awong: When you break it down, $1.46 per home. So if you short-pay him for that one home, it is just $1.46. He could take that loss.

Mr. Forde: Tell me something, Mr. Chairman. Do the municipalities have authority, if they are on a month-to-month contract, could a recommendation be made to the Ministry to terminate that particular contractor if you are not satisfied with their performance?

Mr. Awong: Yes, we can.

Mr. Forde: Yes, you can. Right. Sangre Grande, please, your figure and how you rate your—

Mr. Rondon: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My figure is $15 million for the year and my rating is good. And the reason why I am saying, "good", is that of proper supervision we have with our checkers and I instruct my councillors to be on the lookout for these garbage collectors in order that the people that we represent, you know, are served properly.

Mr. Forde: Thank you. Mr. Chairman, could I just go through my three questions and I will close off, so I would not come back? Right. Unspent Balances: we heard about Unspent Balances earlier. We would not like to know Unspent Balances are returned to the particular Ministry, right? In terms of your last year figure, the last financial year, what are the various figures for the last financial year? And were you able to receive—to get back any of those figures? We could start with Couva?

Ms. Maharaj: Through the Chair, at this time, I cannot comment on that figure.

Mr. Forde: Because of your same situation.

Ms. Maharaj: Because of my situation.

Mr. Chairman: If you could send it to us in writing, we would appreciate it—all corporations.

Mr. Forde: All right. We would get that in writing. Okay, fine. In terms of registration of new contractors, especially from 2015—why I am saying that is because as the Member of Parliament for the Tunapuna constituency, a lot of contractors have come in to me with regard to Tunapuna/Piarco, but we would like to get it across the board with all the municipalities. We understand that in the Tunapuna/Piarco I can safely say no new registration took place with contractors. Is it the same thing with Couva? Is it the same thing with Sangre Grande? Have you all registered any new contractors for paving, for building bridges, for retaining walls, drainage, and so on? Any new contractors you all have registered from 2015 to now?

Mr. Rondon: At Sangre Grande, yes.

Mr. Forde: Yes, you all have done. Could you provide that list for us, please?

Mr. Rondon: We will.

Mr. Forde: Couva?

Ms. Maharaj: Through the Chair, none was done at the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation.

Mr. Forde: Could you identify what was the reason? Could you identify a reason or reasons why?

Ms. Maharaj: The last list we have for approval from the Ministry was 2015.

Mr. Forde: And Tunapuna/Piarco?

Mrs. Ramdass-Ali: The same for Tunapuna/Piarco, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Forde: Provide those lists. Well, we got that information. With regard to Local Government Reform, I just want to make a statement based on it. We are anticipating this Local Government Reform. It is being branded about that it is going to change things. Local Government Reform will deal with operations, will deal with guidelines, will deal with policies, will deal with systems; how the job ought to be done. I do not think Local Government Reform is dealing with the human resource aspect of it. I could talk for Tunapuna/Piarco. I spent five years there. Out of those five years I was two years as the chairman. Unless attitudes of the employees are changed, we will be "spinning top in mud". We will be.

So let us not say Local Government Reform is going to change how the municipalities are going to operate. No, it is not—unless. Because we still come to work for 7.00 a.m. in Tunapuna/Piarco. I am on the road every day, and by nine o'clock—I do not know. The same thing goes on in Couva; the same thing. Give me a little gist, Couva; give me a little gist, Sangre Grande. What goes on in Couva with regard to employment? We tried to introduce, when Ms. Ameen was the Chairman back then, to introduce disposable toilets at the various locations to carry them to 11 o'clock. The union was fighting. I mean, unless we make that human resource management change, all the reform we "talking bout" would come to zilch. So Grande, give me a little feedback in terms of the reform and in terms of the attitude of what is going on in your area, quickly.

Mr. Rondon: In Sangre Grande, our problem is the union. You know, we have workers coming 7.00 a.m., quarter past 7.00 they want to leave, and when you cut their pay, they run to the union and the union comes in. The attitude—there is an attitude running through, I think, Trinidad and Tobago, with their work ethic, and that is costing us a lot in Sangre Grande. So we are calling in the union and we want to have a conversation with the union where the work ethic of our employees is concerned.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Chairman, permit me, to the Chairman, and it is based on my 30-odd years in the arena of industrial relations. I would like to ask each corporation in responding to Member Forde's question, what are the negotiated hours of work for the corporation workers? Because it is all well and good for us to sit here and say, well, they should be working up to X time, but it is the hours of work that they are required. Is it they work from 6.00 a.m. to 10.00? 7.00 a.m. to 11.00? And if they leave at nine o'clock, it means that they are running away? I would like that established, Mr. Chairman. What are the hours of work of the daily-paid personnel in the corporations? I know monthly-paid officers, in accordance with the Public Service Commission Regulations, are required to work from 8.00 a.m. to 4.15 p.m., Monday to Thursday, and 8.00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m. on Friday. What are the hours of work of the daily-paid staff?

Ms. Ameen: Or if they work by task.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Yes.

Mr. Rondon: Well, at the corporation there are two types of workers: the LHA, local health department, they are from 7.00 a.m. to 9.00 and the construction gang is from 7.00 a.m. to 11.00; 11.00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m. and 12.00 p.m. to 4.00. Monthly paid: 7.00 a.m. to 12.00; 1.00 p.m. to 4.00.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Sorry, my Mr. Chairman, to Sangre Grande Regional Corporation's chairman. I am sorry. Those hours do not apply to monthly-paid staff. Monthly-paid staff work 8.00 a.m. to 4.15 p.m.; they are required to, Monday to Thursday. So that would apply to another set of daily-paid workers, I suspect. So that, Mr. Chairman, could we be advised, those workers who have to work from 7.00 a.m. to 9.00, what time do they report for duty on average; what time do they leave? Those who are in construction who are required to work 7.00 a.m. to 11.00 and 12.00 p.m. to 4.00, what are their hours of work? Are they giving a fair day's work for a fair day's pay?

Mr. Rondon: You will have some giving you a fair day's work for a fair day's pay and the others, not at all.

Mr. Chairman: The other corporations, I think, would have to put an input also? Tunapuna?

Ms. Haynes: Mr. Chairman, at Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation, we are guided by the collective agreement and it is 7.00 a.m. to 4.00p.m. with one hour lunch. But because of the workers who work outside of the corporation in the field, we have made an internal arrangement at least from 7.00 a.m. to 12.00 noon. In terms of value for money, it is the view of council, we are not getting that at this point in time.

Mr. Chairman: Could I get the input from Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo?

Mr. Awong: Mr. Chairman, we, too, operate with the same system with regard to the collective agreement. However, I am of the view that the task schedule for daily-rated workers needs to be reviewed and I will say why. We move from brush cutlassing now with a swiper to whacker. Most workers now have a whacker, which they bought on their own, I must add. So recently I was going through the progress report of the corporation and I realized in the report that—that is a monthly document that is presented to the council—that a particular team of six workers take seven days to cut a recreation ground with whacker. So when I work out the maths, it worked out to 42 tasks on that grounds. Seven by six is 42. And I questioned it. I was told that the grounds really have 14 tasks if you were swipering. So you move from swiper now to whackers, and the supervisor is indicating that they cannot increase the task but that is what the task schedule says—I think it is a lot and a half, or something like that, when you work it out.

So we need to review the task schedule. If you are doing that and workers have to be compensated for using their whacker, you move from a labourer to a small equipment operator which is a different rate. So you are talking reclassification, for the CPO and the union and whoever has to get involved, to review the task schedule for us to effectively supervise and manage the workers on the outside.

11.45 p.m.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Or to move away from the task?

Mr. Awong: Right. But then the question comes in again, as the member indicated, you have to provide washrooms and change rooms and stuff, lunch rooms and so on for workers because then the union will question those things.

Ms. Ameen: Chairman, I want to agree with member and this Chairman, with regard to the tasks for corporation workers. We have advanced tremendously from the days of swiper and brushing cutlass, and even where road patching and other tasks are concerned we have small equipment now doing road patching, we have machines mixing cement, we have whackers, and so on, with cutting grass, and small equipment that would assist in doing the work quicker, and the truth is that with the same amount of time you can cover a bigger area with all of those tasks—road patching, cutting of grass and so on.

I want to ask the Deputy Permanent Secretary, with regard to a policy guideline—because the unions tend to jump in to defend their workers, and a lot of times to defend them on the wrong things. They defend them to do the least work as possible sometimes for the most amount of pay as possible, and if we have to deal with the productivity in our country, the time has come for a revision of the policy, a revision of tasks for the regional corporation workers. Can the Deputy Permanent Secretary provide some guidelines for all corporations that even the unions could take a lead from with regard to that?

Mr. Chairman: I would like that in writing because we are trying to get back to the scope and I think member has a question here.

Ms. Ramdial: Thank you, and this is for Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation. Now, in your submission you stated that there have been instances of fraudulent activities or financial crimes during the last five years. With respect to the attempts made to cash 11 cheques valued in excess of $3 million, has the corporation identified the department and employees who may have assisted in issuing these fraudulent cheques, and what specific measures have been implemented to detect and deter further instances of fraud within the corporation?

Mrs. Ramdass-Ali: Through the Chair, in that particular instance, that would have been where persons—external parties—would have presented cheques to our bankers, which is the Republic Bank Limited, Tunapuna, West Branch. None of the cheques were encashed however. There were investigations by the Fraud Squad. Now, there was another incident, which is a smaller incident. It would be there in your notes as well. In 2016 as well, smaller amounts were attempted to be encashed in Republic Bank branches throughout the country and even in Tobago. Four persons were arrested and that matter is presently before the courts. To my knowledge, that matter would have entailed cheques being made out with forged signatures and utilizing some cheques numbers that the corporation would have had.

Ms. Ramdial: What is being implemented to detect and deter further instances of fraud?

Mrs. Ramdass-Ali: Okay. So, what I would have said originally is that it would have been by external parties; it would have been difficult in those circumstances to determine whether it was something that happened from an internal person, a member of staff, we are unable to ascertain. What we did try to do though—I would not have been there at the time, but what did happen is that we ensured that there were proper checks and balances in terms of making sure that the cheque books were issued in a particular manner, proper recording, there was a segregation of duties so no two persons would have been carrying out the same duties, similar duties, and I believe there may have been a rotation of staff as well.

Mr. Forde: Just a follow-up on that same particular matter. Now, Madam CEO, you mentioned that you were not there at the time—this was in 2016—and I am sure my colleague, member Ameen, might be able to assist me with this one, but the Chief Financial Officer has been there quite a while? Your Chief Financial Officer has been there quite a while. During our term of office within the 2010—2013 period there was an instance similar to this cheque fraud system that came up. I do not know if Mr. Burnette could shed any light on what came out of that because that was a matter during the 2010—2013 period?

Ms. Ameen: I just want to add to that question. The incident that member Forde is talking about, the council had agreed, we called in the Fraud Squad. It was dealt with. Members of staff were arrested. Clearly, there have been other incidents in your corporation, but in other corporations as well. So it is not about hiding the incidents to protect your reputation, but my concern is the members of staff who are implicated in fraud matters, not where there is suspicion, but where they are charged by the police officer as we saw, I think, in San Juan regional where you had about 11 persons charged.

If it is persons outside of the corporation you do not have control over them, but where there are staff members, after they serve their time or they pay their fine for the crime, they resume duties in the very same corporation. How do you treat with that, or if not the regional corporations, the Ministry, HR? You cannot keep sending these people who are accused and convicted of fraud back into the same regional corporation to continue. You are compromising the integrity of the corporation, and the first thing that people say when you hear corruption in any corporation they blame the politician, the lil councillor and the chairman of the corporation who are trying their best. So do you have a guideline for instances where persons are convicted of fraud, staff members, with regard to resuming duties?

Mr. Burnette: Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, the incident that was referred to previously by Mr. Forde, well my first biannual contract was from the 1st of May, 2014. So I was not at the corporation when that particular incident or incidents took place. I only heard about it, and I believe as the member said—

Ms. Ameen: So you are saying in your six years there were no incidents?

Mr. Burnette: Well, this is what we have reported here. That was in 2016, but as you said—

Ms. Ameen: The staff implicated, have they returned to their duties in the corporation?

Mr. Burnette: As far as I am aware, I know one member or one person's name was mentioned to me, because, like I said, I do not have the whole story of what went on, all the people who were involved, but one member of staff, and that member, yes, is at the corporation but they are not in the accounting unit in terms of dealing with cash and things like that.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: The information that just evolved is a bit, not a bit—it is rather disturbing. Is this Committee being told that an employee of a corporation was charged and found guilty and that person was allowed to return to work in the corporation? That is highly irregular. Once you are convicted in a court of law you cannot be employed in the public service. So if that has happened, that is highly irregular. Mr. Deputy Permanent Secretary, could you investigate that incident and communicate that information to this Committee, whether or not there is any veracity in the information that an employee was charged, convicted, and was reemployed with any of the corporations in Trinidad and Tobago? Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: For the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation. You stated that three ongoing projects were voided for non-performance and are now subject to be retendered. My question: In the light of this occurrence, were the underperforming contractors or vendors removed from the corporation's list of contractors and vendors, and has the corporation sought to increase its scrutiny of tendering companies' contractors in order to reduce the likelihood of project failure?

Mrs. Ramdass-Ali: Through the Chair, the three incidents are relatively new. It is very recent. No, they have not been removed from the list of contractors; no decision has been taken in terms of that. Of course, it will be put forward in terms of what happens in the future. We will have to look at, when we do the evaluation process, how contractors are selected.

Mr. Forde: Mr. Chairman, what year that occurred?

Mrs. Ramdass-Ali: Through the Chair, that happened very recently.

Mr. Forde: Recently. So, 20—

Mrs. Ramdass-Ali: Very recently.

Mr. Forde: So 2107, 2018, 2019.

Mrs. Ramdass-Ali: No, no, no. This year, 2019. Yes, very recently.

Mr. Chairman: And then we had the instance with the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo corporation where again some contractors are under some sort of investigation. But those contractors, is it the Ministry who gives approval and scrutinizes the contractors to see if there is any sort of a conflict of interest in the directors of those companies? Is it the Ministry? Is that under the Ministry's portfolio? And if there is a form of blacklisting— certain contractors, if in one corporation they underperform, that they do not go to another corporation and can get a job.

Mr. Seepaul: Mr. Chairman, the role of the Ministry is very limited. Just for the information of the Committee, the registration of contractors begins at the corporation where applicants will submit their applications, and they would then be interviewed by officers of the corporation and recommendations would be made. Of course, certain statutory documents would have to be provided by the applicants. The Ministry really is the conduit to the Ministry of Finance. It is the Ministry of Finance that is responsible for registering contractors.

To respond to your concern, the operations of the contractors as it relates to contracts, this would have to be in accordance with the Central Tenders Board Act until the impending procurement legislation comes into being. So based on what the issue is, the Central Tenders Board would normally be consulted as far as taking action.

Mr. Forde: Mr. Chairman, if I may just follow up based on what the Deputy PS just said—that is the ideal scenario. That is the scenario that is on pen and paper. I can tell you for Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation the file misplaced after the person submits the documents. With all the statutory arrangements in place, it goes missing. Secondly, no engineer is available to interview the particular contractor to ascertain whether he can qualify as a small contractor, a big contractor, or a medium-sized contractor. They would supply everything. The next story is that it went down to head office, Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, and that is how it goes.

None of that documentation has reached to the Ministry of Finance as yet in order for final approval, and that has been going on since 2015, Mr. Deputy PS. Because contractors come to the office, "Mr. Forde, we send in the document." I say, "Okay, go and check the regional corporation". They are even identified to who to go to and the issue comes back. Couva, Sangre Grande, "all yuh" say what is the situation, you know. Do not sit there and decide that it is all hunky-dory and everything is smooth. No registration of contractors from 2015. Who are these contractors that continue to get work in the Tunapuna/Piarco region that continue to reside outside of the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation?

The sanitary contractor who does not know where Ragbir Street is in St. Augustine, that waiting for the sanitary open tray truck to come months now to pick up some stuff that CEPEP, and URP and them have left in the particular area, and that is the scenario we are talking about, Mr. PS. No document "ain reach" the Ministry of Finance as yet. Some of them have not even reached your Ministry. The situation resides at the municipalities. I can talk for Tunapuna/Piarco. Ms.

Ameen could vouch that also, and I am seeing Chairman Rondon shaking his head as the case may be.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you for that observation, and you may have to respond to that probably in writing. And a very important—sorry. You are willing to answer it now?

Mr. Seepaul: Mr. Chairman, one of the key roles of the Ministry is to exercise oversight over corporations, and I just want to allay the concerns of the member, that where aggrieved parties can ventilate their concerns to the Permanent Secretary, providing the necessary documents and outlining their concerns in detail, and I guarantee you that these matters will be investigated.

Mr. Chairman: So contractors have an avenue that they can approach you?

Mr. Forde: Mr. Chairman, again, not to be toing and froing, we are talking about the ideal scenario, but it does not exist. It just does not exist. I could provide a list you know, Mr. Deputy PS. I could provide a list. I am into my community, I could provide the list. I could provide names, telephone numbers to each particular chairman in order to identify, to see what is the status with this particular member.

Ms. Ameen: Chairman, I agree with my colleague. The issue is not the procedure, you know. There is a procedure for contractors to be registered, but in a hearing before this, corporations had similar issues. The CEO of Couva said the same thing this morning. The list of applicants for registration of new contractors, the corporation did their assessments, sent it to the Ministry, and since 2015 not a single new contractor has been approved by the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, and that puts—well, that is the information that has been coming out. So if you have—I understand that there is a procedure, but what is the challenge with these regional corporations registering new contractors?

Mr. Chairman: I would like a report from the Ministry about—we are gathering some thoughts that there may be a monopoly on the contracting arrangements, and I—

Mr. Forde: Mr. Chairman, in one of the documents provided by the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation—I do not want to call out the name of the particular contractor, but out of the 16, 10 areas have the contract for—is for one contractor.

Mr. Chairman: So the Ministry—

Mr. Forde: Sixteen areas, member, and one contractor has 10. I am sure if we decide to even go into it with an audit, with a fine tooth, you will realize that some of the other contractors may be a subsidiary of that same scenario they are talking about.

Mr. Chairman: Yes. So I am hearing there may be a monopoly existing and we need to look at that. It is a great cause of concern and in case even the subcontractors may be also involved in this. So a report from the Ministry, unless you have an answer?

Mr. Seepaul: Yes. Mr. Chairman, I would like to respond. The member is referring to specifically scavenging contracts here. I just want to say that it is not the responsibility of the corporation, nor the responsibility of the Ministry to be awarding those contracts. My colleague on the left here would have indicated that these contracts would have been awarded going back to 2013 and it was the agency mandated to award contracts for SWMCOL.

Ms. Ameen: But apart from and in addition to the scavenging contractors you also have another list of contractors where corporations submit to the Ministry for approval, and the feedback is that the corporations have not been receiving this approval. So if you wish, you could send it in writing to the Committee if time is limited for the answer now.

Mr. Chairman: I would appreciate from the Ministry an overall contracting list, who are the contractors, so it will give us an overall sort of an idea what is happening there to see if, as you say, the perception that we are getting, if we could somehow look at that.

And a very important issue that member brought up also was the fact that certain files may go missing, and I need to find out from the different corporations very quickly because in the essence of time—what measures are being undertaken by the corporation to digitalize its records and to develop an appropriate computer-based record management system to prevent what member said has occurred? Because we had one corporation saying that water had damaged their records and they had no sort of records existing. So, could we get some feedback from the corporations, starting with Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo?

Ms. Maharaj: Through the Chair, our records are placed in two vaults at the main building in Couva. Also, we have fireproof cabinets that are used to supplement our records. However, as I said, my inception there is only year and that is one of the systems that I am looking at to digitize some areas especially the accounting area. So right now that is under consideration. Soon, a document would be put forward to our council and forwarded to Ministry.

Mr. Chairman: Could give us a timeline? Because remember, this is an important issue of keeping up with the times, having records safe. You know your corporation was tardy in the past for giving financial statements, so when you say "soon", we will try to get an idea how soon we could look at this. Give us a timeline, please.

Ms. Maharaj: Okay. Well, looking at what happened and the tardiness of the financial statements, and all our information is recorded manually at this time, I look at the interest of time and to get the works done, I am seeking presently to get quotations from different persons. Also, I understand, before my tenure there was a document that was put forward for PMCD recommendation, but to date I have not found that document.

Mr. Chairman: Documents go missing, we hear the story. Tunapuna/Piarco, could you give us an idea about your record management?

Mrs. Ramdass-Ali: Through the Chair, in terms of our record management we have a fairly satisfactory system; however, we need to digitalize. We understand that. Under the Development Programme there was a request; not this financial year but in a prior financial year for computerization so that we could increase our scope of what we digitalize actually. However, we did not receive funding on that occasion, but we are going to make a request in the new financial year under DP as well. There are a lot of records; storage is definitely a challenge for us in terms of space. With the Freedom of Information Act as well it means that we are required to keep more records. So we understand and yes we are looking at ways that we can do it. Right now we are looking at—we are saving information on our servers and soft copy as well, but we need to increase it.

Mr. Chairman: Could I get a response from Sangre Grande Regional Corporation?

Mrs. Hosein: Mr. Chairman, at the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation we have a manual system where files are stored in accordance with the Trinidad and Tobago manual of registry procedures. These files are stored in the vault at the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation; however, we realize at the corporation we need to digitalize our records. In so doing, in the last fiscal year 2018, we requested funding under Development Programme computerization and we did not receive that funding. This year we propose to include into our draft estimates that request once again.

Mr. Chairman: Is the Ministry—yes, sure.

Mr. Seepaul: Mr. Chairman, I am pleased to announce that the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government is on the verge of embarking on an exhaustive digitalizing process of our records. It is the intention of the Ministry that once this starts, that this facility will be made available to all our corporations.

Mr. Chairman: Well definitely, the need to modernize is there, and a question that was put to the members about their satisfaction of actually the open tray trucks before. What am I saying?—our corporation where I live in, the Tunapuna Regional Corporation, we have a WhatsApp connection with our councillor. So we have jumped the gun where we are a little more modernized. Any sort of complaints we send to her—garbage is not picking up, the open tray is not there. So in that way it is a direct link to the councillor. She responds in our WhatsApp neighbourhood chat and I think it is something that we have to look at to get a little better service. So what will come into play there is the telephone bills that we are looking at, even we could be utilizing that, but the service is there. So I can thank for that. So, at this stage we are now coming to an end. I would like to know if any of our members would have any other questions.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Yes, Chairman. Thank you kindly, Chairman, and this question is directed to Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation. Your submission stated that and I quote. "The Accounts Department or unit is headed by a financial officer who is on a third biannual contract", and my question is: What are the arrangements in place to facilitate evaluations of the performance of financial officers? You, Madam Vice-Chairman, or Mr. Deputy Permanent Secretary, can respond because I am not aware who is responsible for evaluating the performance of these financial officers. Is it the regional corporations, which I think it should be because they have direct oversight; or what role if any does the Ministry play? Go ahead, Madam Chair, and then the DPS would then respond—from your knowledge.

Ms. Haynes: I will have to pass that on to—

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Your CEO?

Ms. Haynes: Yes.

Mrs. Ramdass-Ali: Through the Chair, the Chief Executive Officer evaluates the performance of the contracted officers, which would be one of them, the financial officer.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: And Mr. DPS, what kind of oversight the Ministry has on this process?

Mr. Seepaul: The Ministry is very cognizant of the importance of performance appraisals. So that whenever the vacancies would arise at these corporations, those who will have served in the positions, their performance appraisal will be closely looked at to ensure that we are looking to fill the positions again with people who are competent and who will served well.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: May I enquire with regard to the financial officers, is it the Ministry which reengages the contracted officer, or is it the corporation?

Mr. Seepaul: The role of hiring these officers is that of the Ministry.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: On what basis do you reengage?

Mr. Seepaul: Based on the vacancies that exist at the corporations.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Mr. Deputy Permanent Secretary, I was hoping to hear, based on the performance appraisal report from the Chief Executive Officer, because we are talking about reengagement. You do not want to reengage someone who is an underperformer.

Mr. Seepaul: Well, as I would have explained earlier, the point I was making is that the performance appraisal of these officers is key to rehiring or not rehiring.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Chairman, just permit me further. Madam CEO of Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation, of Sangre Grande Regional Corporation, of Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation—

Mr. Cummings: You know that one by heart.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: I must. Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo service me. I am a burgess and I do not have any complaints to date. There is a happy relationship with the Chairman and the CEO and myself.

Ms. Ramdial: I hope MPs too? [*Laughter*]

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Yes, and my other MP. When the contractual period of a financial officer expires that officer must proceed on contract leave before reengagement, do you all ensure that you complete a performance appraisal on that officer? That question is directed to the CEOs.

Ms. Maharaj: Okay. Through the Chair, the present financial officer was hired from 2014. So her service is approximately four and half years. However, apparently a period went before my tenure. There—

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Wait, wait, wait. Madam CEO, if these contracts are normally for a three-year period—yes? It ought to be for a three-year period because you really want to encourage the person to stay. So if that person came in 2014, in 2017 the three-year contract would have expired; if it was a two-year contract it would have expired in 2016. We know that you are of recent vintage within the corporation, by being one year in the post, but have you seen evidence on the files of any performance appraisal having been completed on not only the financial officer, but other contract officers?

12.15 p.m.

Ms. Maharaj: To be honest, I did not check but I would have assumed that a performance appraisal would have been conducted.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Do not, Madam CEO, do not, do not. Mr. Chairman, may I—

Mr. Forde: Just a follow-up, the Corp Sec, I do not know how long the Corp Sec at Couva has been in place, probably, I do not know if she could share some light?

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Yeah, she said at the beginning that she was there just about a year.

Mr. Forde: Orrr.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Yes.

Ms. Maharaj: The Corporate Secretary is approximately eight months. She is new also.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Okay. So the other CEOs, Tunapuna and Sangre Grande, with regard to the performance appraisal of the financial officers.

Mrs. Ramdass-Ali: Okay, through the Chair, the present financial officer, it is an annual performance appraisal that is done. Even though the contract is for two years, it is an annual appraisal. So I know personally, I would have done a performance appraisal for my current financial officer last year and I would have been with him for at least some of the months before I would have done that.

Mr. Chairman: I think Sangre Grande would want to also respond.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Yes, she is going to respond.

Mrs. Hosein: Mr. Chairman, it is an annual performance which is done at the end of the year.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: And Chairman, I am really comforted at what I have heard and I just hope that the completion of performance appraisal at the end of the contractual period before any renewal applies to not only the financial officer but all officers on contract. Before any renewal, a performance appraisal must be completed. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Deputy PS, we have been hearing that, you know, when there are staff changes, there is no institutional memory of what went on before, so there might be some sort of policy or protocol in place where new members coming in, are given a sort of a knowledge, an oversight on what went on and what is in the work and to have that continual level.

I wish we could keep you here whole morning, we have a lot of questions but I think in the essence of time, Member Forde, I think, will be giving us the last question since he is eagerly willing to.

Mr. Forde: To Couva—and I think we started with Couva and we come back on Couva. There is a memo on the correspondence that you submitted to us, Appendix 3 with regard to the vote book subject where the Auditor II Acting from the Ministry responded. All right.

> An internal report for the period 2017 to 2019 conducted revealed that there is poor transparency.

And this is in quotation.

> Poor transparency, accountability and the depletion of the systems on internal controls governing your business system which is unacceptable in

Government accounting and procedures.

Right. So you are with me on that Vote Book? Right. So the question is: On these findings of the Internal Auditor, what measures have been put in place since to address the concerns highlighted by the auditor here? You could give us a quick synopsis but then you can provide it in writing also later.

Ms. Maharaj: Through the Chair, this report was brought to the attention of the Financial Officer and the Acting Accountant I at this time. Discussions were held with them and we are seeking to train the staff in a more in-depth manner because as you would have seen from our organizational structure for the accounting unit, we have a lot of daily-paids who are not fully competent to perform accounting duties properly. So we have to keep training and upon the receipt of this report, discussions have been held and we are seeking to put more measures in place to correct and to mitigate these occurrences.

Mr. Forde: And what I may add too, you know, based on what we have discussed earlier from the outstanding financial statements, it only shows the whole impetus in order to deal with it, in order to minimize these discussions. And final question before I go, Mr. Chairman, to the Deputy Permanent Secretary, it is something that you can provide for us in writing. From 2010 to present, the various chairmen of the municipalities, they hire their particular staff. They usually have a secretary, a clerk or something of the sort in the office, a driver as the case may be. Gratuities are usually due for these individuals. But I understand that from 2010 to present, some of these officers have not received their gratuities. All right?

I think there is a query right now whether it is that municipality themselves, the corporation should pay it or whether the Ministry of Finance should pay it. So I would just like to—supply us in writing please in terms of the delay and if it is that something can be done in order to—. I see Chairman Rondon is shaking his head there. I do not know, Chairman for Couva, you have that situation by you also too? And Tunapuna/Piarco, I understand that that is a situation. So it is just something that as from the Committee's point of view, we would like to know that they are taken care off. Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: So we will appreciate those comments in writing. And in closing now, I would like to ask the chief officials to make brief closing remarks starting with Mr. Raymond Seepaul, our Deputy PS.

Mr. Seepaul: Mr. Chairman, it has been a very fruitful session this morning. I personally welcome these forums because it can only lead to the strengthening of local government systems and operations. It can only lead to transparent exercises out there and getting value for our taxpayers' money. So, again, we look forward to continuing to meet with you so that local government can be what we would all like it to be.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you, and could Mr. Henry Awong of the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Corporation give us closing remarks?

Mr. Awong: I thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and it has been a learning experience for me here this morning. As was indicated by Deputy Permanent Secretary, I hope it augurs well for the organization, strengthening our systems and everything else. So I am thankful for the opportunity to be here this morning.

Mr. Chairman: Could we get closing remarks from Ms. Onika Myers Haynes, Vice-Chairman of the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation?

Ms. Haynes: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I wish to thank the Committee for the opportunity today. I have learnt quite a lot, Mr. Chairman. I will, indeed, take back to council issues for attention and action. Mr. Chairman, we recognize the need for a policy at least on fraud and we need to, once again, at the corporation, follow up with the Ministry as it relates to the registration of new contractors. Our files have been there in that Ministry for three years now, since 2015.

Mr. Forde: Some of the files.

Ms. Haynes: In closing, Mr. Chairman, we recognize the need for reform on local government which would aid us in improving service delivery and that service delivery should redound to the benefit of every single burgess. I thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. So the tardiness goes both ways. Right? Not just with the corporation, the Ministry also. I would like Chairman Martin Terry Rondon to give us some closing remarks please.

Mr. Rondon: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I first want to say thanks to the Almighty God and all of us here today for this session. Sessions like these help us to carry the region forward. I have learnt a lot here today and I am going back to Sangre Grande well prepared, equipped in making sure that—pave the way for the other chairman that is coming here that could have the answers to his fingertip.

Before I leave here, I want to share something with you all and what is really not having Sangre Grande go forward as it should. Other agencies are not taking up their responsibilities. Schools will call us, health, police, everybody depend on the regional corporation. "I and my staff", we do it under humanitarian but "is ah strain" on our finances. So it is an appeal, take up your responsibilities. "Too much ah time", the corporation—people look at the Corporation and "feel we have ah bag ah money". No, no. I thank you all. May God bless each and every one of us.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. So we have an appeal for other service industries or other providers to come on board and do their part and support which is needed.

So in closing, I would like to thank all the other officials who were present for the attendance and the participation. And I would like to just mention to the Deputy Permanent Secretary that our next carded meeting may be April the 24th at 9.30 at this same venue so please keep that in your agenda; so any sort of further preparation. I would like to thank the members of the media for their attendance and also the Committee members for being present and also members of staff for their participation and support.

If there is no further business for consideration, I will declare this meeting now adjourned.

12.25 p.m.: *Meeting adjourned*.