



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
AGRICULTURE AND
RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Policy and Legislation

7 June 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Frew (Chairperson)
Mrs Dolores Kelly (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Mr Willie Clarke
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr William Irwin
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Dr Mark Browne)	
Mrs Kate Davey)	
Mr Roly Harwood)	
Dr Sinclair Mayne)	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Ian McKee)	
Mrs Joyce Rutherford)	
Dr John Speers)	

The Chairperson:

Officials from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) will provide an overview on policy matters and legislation in two parts. More intensive briefings may be necessary at a later stage, so I emphasise that we do not have to get into the nitty-gritty of the detail today. Over the coming weeks and months, there will be time to delve into more detail. As

members can see from their packs, the subjects are wide-ranging.

I welcome Dr Mark Browne, Mrs Kate Davey, Mr Ian McKee and Mr Roly Harwood and invite them to start their presentation.

Dr Mark Browne (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development):

Thank you very much. As you said, the briefing on policy and legislation will be in two halves. The first part will deal with animal health and welfare, and the second will deal with climate change, renewable energy, and our evidence and innovation strategy. At the end of each section, there will be an opportunity for members to ask questions.

To deal with animal health and welfare, I have with me Kate Davey and Ian McKee from the policy team and Roly Harwood from the veterinary service. I will cover animal health matters, mainly relating to bovine TB and brucellosis. Kate will then pick up on the roll-out of the new Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 and Dogs (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

DARD is committed to the eradication of TB in cattle, and we will continue to work towards that end. We have a rigorous TB eradication programme in place, which has been approved by the EU Commission. That incorporates actions to implement the recommendations of the Public Accounts Committee's 2009 report on the TB programme.

We have made considerable progress with TB. TB herd-incidence rates have almost halved, from 10% when the disease levels peaked in 2002 to 5.1% at present. Also, the number of TB reactors in 2010 — 6,404 animals — was the lowest since 1998. The number of herd breakdowns in 2010 — 1,150 herds — was the lowest since 1996, when TB was on a rising trend.

The TB eradication programme, which costs some £23 million a year, safeguards our export-dependent livestock and livestock products industry, which is valued at over £1,000 million. Having approval from the EU Commission for our TB eradication programme allows DARD to claim co-funding from the EU veterinary fund to offset a proportion of our costs. For example, that will enable us to draw down €5 million of co-funding from Europe for 2010 and €4 million

for 2011.

Although we have made considerable progress, TB is a complex multi-factorial disease that is difficult to eradicate; there is no simple quick-fix solution. Extensive research has been carried out internationally into the causes of bovine TB and how it spreads. Although scientists have established that there is a link between TB in badgers and TB in cattle, it has not yet been established with certainty exactly how the disease is spread between cattle and between wildlife and cattle and what can be done to prevent its spread.

Interventions to address the wildlife issue can include improving biosecurity to prevent contact between livestock and badgers as well as more direct intervention such as the culling or vaccination of badgers. Research findings so far suggest that culling is not a straightforward solution and present a mixed picture of its cost-benefit effectiveness in reducing disease levels in cattle. It is also highly contentious among some sections of the public and with wildlife groups in particular. We are monitoring the development of proposals in England and Wales for badger culling. We will be interested to see how those proposals evolve and if they can withstand any legal challenge. Vaccination may be a more viable long-term solution, and we are closely following research and trials on badger vaccination in both the south of Ireland and England. As the badger is a protected species, any direct interventions in the badger population here would have to be agreed by the Environment Minister, licences would have to be issued, and substantial additional funding would also be needed.

We have been working with key stakeholders to identify where local research could provide important evidence to assist with our eradication strategy. Additional funding has been allocated in the DARD budget over the next four years to commission TB and wildlife research and studies to provide a robust evidence base to guide our future eradication strategy.

We are currently conducting a TB biosecurity study in County Down in an area of high TB incidence. That study is assessing selected cattle and wildlife risk factors for herds that have recently had a TB breakdown and herds that are clear of TB to identify why, in a high-incidence area, there are differences between rates of infection in herds. In addition to that study, we have commissioned a number of literature reviews to help establish the gaps in evidence that we feel

we can address locally. We will use the results of all that work to develop a programme of local TB and wildlife research and studies to steer future policy.

Northern Ireland remains the only part of these islands that still suffers from brucellosis. We are committed to pushing towards the achievement of officially brucellosis-free status in Northern Ireland as early as possible. The brucellosis programme costs some £12 million per annum, of which around £2 million is spent on compensation. More focused and intensive efforts since 2007 have resulted in significant reductions in the disease, including in areas that have historically had a high incidence.

Brucellosis herd incidence has dropped from 1.43% at its peak in 2002 to 1.06% in September 2008 and to 0.3% now. If we had not had the deliberate infection at Lislea in December 2009 and the cases at Keady in early 2010, the position would have been even better. If that progress is maintained, we could see brucellosis eradicated within three years; that is, by 2014. We would then be able to seek EU Commission approval to obtaining officially brucellosis-free status, which requires that we have three years without a breakdown after our last confirmed outbreak of brucellosis. That would be important because it would allow us to begin to step down the current requirements for annual testing and pre-movement testing, which could be a significant benefit to most farmers here. That is why we must take concerted action to choke off the last vestiges of the disease and to remove any incentive that there may be for deliberate infection.

That leads me on to the review of animal disease compensation. Disease compensation is an important element of the eradication programmes and is designed to encourage farmers to comply with disease-control requirements and to disclose suspicion of disease, thus helping to prevent or reduce the risk of infection and to enhance disease eradication. However, if the level of compensation is too high, it may not encourage the generality of farmers to be sufficiently diligent in taking steps to avoid disease, and it may encourage fraud by a small number of individuals.

Criticism that our current compensation arrangements are too generous has come from a number of important quarters, including the EU Commission brucellosis task force and the local Public Accounts Committee. DARD has, therefore, reviewed its compensation arrangements to

ensure that the level of compensation is appropriate. The aim is to ensure that compensation paid to farmers strikes an appropriate balance between ensuring reasonable compensation for farmers affected by the decision to slaughter their animals and protecting the interests of taxpayers.

As the Committee will be aware, DARD conducted a public consultation from 23 February to 21 April 2011 on proposals to introduce a system of table valuation for bovine animals slaughtered as a result of TB or brucellosis, which would replace the current system of individual valuations, and to reduce the rate of compensation paid for animals removed as brucellosis in-contacts from 100% of market value to 75% of the appropriate value in the valuation tables. We are currently giving detailed consideration to the responses received and how best to proceed. Once we have completed that, we will brief the Committee on the results of the consultation and seek members' views on the best way forward to achieve the desired outcomes.

In concluding, I should mention that, in the coming weeks, we will be bringing before you a range of proposals for subordinate legislation, including proposals relating to the identification and registration of pigs and to Aujeszky's disease eradication and proposals for changes relating to the welfare of animals at slaughter or killing. Those are two aspects of subordinate legislation that will come before the Committee in the coming weeks.

That completes this section of the presentation. I will hand over to Kate to say a bit about the roll-out of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 and the Dogs (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

Mrs Kate Davey (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development):

I will start with the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. I will give a brief overview of the work that we are doing and how we will roll out the Act's provisions.

The new Act received Royal Assent on 29 March 2011 and has a number of key benefits. It will provide a duty of care to all protected animals, including domestic pets and horses. It will be possible to take action to prevent animals from suffering, as opposed to the current position whereby action can be taken only after suffering has occurred. Stronger powers will be provided in respect of animal fighting, including dog fighting. Powers will be provided to regulate,

through subordinate legislation, a wide range of activities that involve animals, such as dog-breeding establishments. The Act increases penalties for serious animal welfare offences, such as dog fighting, and extends the powers of seizure.

The new Act places a statutory obligation on the Department, councils and the PSNI to enforce the Act. The Department's veterinary service will continue to have responsibility for enforcement in respect of farmed animals. District councils will have responsibility for enforcement in respect of non-farmed animals — that is, domestic pets and horses. The PSNI will continue to have responsibility for enforcement in respect of wild animals, animal fighting and animal welfare issues where other criminal activities are involved.

There are two main strands to the implementation of the Act: first, the commencement of the legislative provisions and associated subordinate legislation; and, second, engagement with councils as they prepare for the enforcement role in respect of non-farmed animals. Commencement of the Act's provisions will take place on a phased basis during 2011 through to April 2012. The Act is extensive and contains more than 60 sections. We will enact the powers of the Act as new subordinate legislation is introduced and powers are given to councils. At the same time, the relevant sections of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 will be repealed as they are superseded by the new Act. We envisage that three commencement Orders will be required to activate all the provisions of the 2011 Act, with the majority of sections being commenced in the first commencement Order.

We propose to make the first commencement Order later this month. That will activate all sections in the Act that do not require subordinate legislation to be made or inspectors to be appointed. At the same time, prior to the summer recess, the Committee will see forthcoming consultations on the proposed subordinate legislation for permitted procedures for the tail-docking exemption for working dogs and a consolidation and update of the welfare of animals regulations. Those will be with the Committee in the coming weeks.

Following the consultation on the permitted procedures regulations, those regulations will be made and a second commencement Order will be required to introduce those powers. That is likely to happen around January 2012. We anticipate that the third and final commencement

Order will be made in early April 2012. It will introduce the following provisions: a ban on docking of dogs' tails, with an exemption for working dogs; power to issue improvement notices; power to inspect farm premises; powers for councils to prosecute offenders; and powers for the appointment of inspectors by the Department and by councils.

During the previous Committee's scrutiny of the Welfare of Animals Bill, the then Minister, Michelle Gildernew, agreed to bring forward at an early stage new subordinate legislation on dog-breeding establishments to enhance and replace existing legislation made under the Dogs (Northern Ireland) Order 1983. Work is under way to develop the policy for such legislation, and that will be taken forward with stakeholders over the summer. It is anticipated that a public consultation will issue in October 2011, and, needless to say, the Committee will be advised of that consultation in advance.

As stated earlier, the 2011 Act includes powers for councils to appoint inspectors to enforce the provisions in respect of non-farmed animals. During the passage of the Welfare of Animals Bill through the Assembly, Minister Gildernew agreed with the Committee and the Assembly that the powers for councils to appoint inspectors would not be commenced until 12 months after the Act received Royal Assent, in order to provide the necessary lead-in time for preparation for implementation. She also committed annual funding of £760,000 for each year of the Budget period for implementation and to help councils in respect of the welfare of non-farmed animals.

The previous Minister also agreed that, during that period, the Department would engage with elected council members and officials to provide advice and practical assistance to help them prepare for implementation of the provisions for non-farmed animals. As a result of the recent council elections, it has not been possible to engage directly with elected members on the future role for councils. However, in order not to waste time, we have been engaging with officials from the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and council officials to identify work that needs to be completed to help councils prepare for taking on that role. When NILGA's new agriculture and rural development working group is reconstituted, further discussions will be held with elected members.

I will move on to the Dogs (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, which also received

Royal Assent in March 2011. The Act updates the Dogs (Northern Ireland) Order 1983, which provides for licensing of dogs and includes provisions on dog attacks, straying and livestock worrying. Under that Order, it is also an offence to possess certain designated types of dogs, such as pit bull terriers, except under certain very strict conditions.

District councils are responsible for enforcing the legislation. Council dog warden services carry out enforcement duties, which include dog licensing; the seizure and re-homing or disposal of stray dogs; and the investigation and possible prosecution of offenders. Income from the dog licence meets a proportion of the cost of the dog warden service.

Provisions in the new Dogs (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 include scope for dog wardens to attach control conditions to dog licences where a dog's behaviour has led to a breach. The Act also provides an increase in the dog licence fee, in line with inflation, to £12.50, with concessionary rates for the elderly, people who are on benefits, and those who have had their dogs neutered. It increases the block licence fee, again in line with inflation, from £12.50 to £32, so that councils can recover more of the cost of their dog warden services. The Act makes it an offence to have a dog that attacks and injures another person's pet. It also increases certain fines and penalties and makes it a requirement that all dogs be microchipped.

The Act's provisions will be commenced over the next 12 months following the publication of new guidance on the Act for members of the public and councils and as new subordinate legislation is made. As part of the implementation process, departmental officials have been working in partnership with the Northern Ireland Dogs Advisory Group, which represents dog wardens throughout Northern Ireland, and the Chief Environmental Health Officers Group to develop comprehensive guidance for enforcers of the Dogs Order; basically, for council staff. The draft guidance has now been issued to all councils and elected members for comment by 30 June 2011. Once that guidance is finalised and published, provisions in the Act that do not require subordinate legislation to be amended or made will be commenced. We anticipate that that first commencement will happen in July 2011.

In order to allow the dog licence fee to be increased and new fixed penalties to be introduced, the Dogs (Licensing and Identification) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1983 and the fixed

penalty regulations must be amended. The Committee will have the opportunity to scrutinise drafts of those regulations before the summer recess. It is proposed that those regulations will be made in July after councils have had the opportunity to comment on the guidance for enforcers. Although we will make the regulations in July, it is intended that they will not come into operation until early October 2011. That will give councils a firm implementation date and allow them time to adopt their systems and procedures to implement the new licensing fees and fixed penalties.

Further subordinate legislation providing for the necessary technical and administrative requirements to allow for the introduction of compulsory microchipping in April 2012 will be brought forward to the Committee later in the year. The commencement of the provisions on microchipping in April 2012 will mean the full implementation of the Dogs (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

Dr Browne:

We are content to take members' questions.

Mr McMullan:

Will the sliding scale on compensation be the same for pedigree animals?

Dr Browne:

We are proposing that there will be a series of table values. There will be tables setting out values for animals, and the tables will be broken down by sex and age, pedigree and non-pedigree. The values will be based on the information that has been obtained from various markets.

Mr McMullan:

Does the Dogs (Amendment) Act 2011 cover dogs on public ground? People go for a day out to the beach, for instance. An idyllic thing to do is to walk the dog on the beach. The dog comes bouncing along like a bear, but there are children playing on the beach. Who is responsible for that? Is it the council, as it owns the beach?

Mrs Davey:

The Act covers dogs on public property. The council is responsible for enforcement of the Order, if there is an offence. All dogs should be kept under control in public places. If the dog is not under control, a responsibility for enforcement rests with councils.

Mr McMullan:

Have we looked at the wording used in respect of that? That section uses the term “under control”.

Mrs Davey:

There would be guidance for the councils on what “under control” means.

Mr McMullan:

Do we think that that wording is robust enough to protect the public? We talk about control of the dog. Who is in control of the dog? There is nothing there to say that a dog has to be muzzled when it is off the lead, but it says that dogs have to be muzzled when they are on the lead.

Dr Browne:

One of the key ways in which control is determined relates to whether the dog will come when called. If, in a situation that you describe, a dog attacked a member of the public or another animal, there would be penalties involved. The Act provides for a new offence of a dog attacking another dog; that offence was not there before. There are, therefore, new provisions in the Act that will ensure that those sorts of things can be properly controlled.

Mr McMullan:

I would like to see the wording in respect of the control of the dog being looked at again. You mentioned whether a dog will come back when it is let off the lead. Since the dog is a natural pack animal, it will not come back.

Dr Browne:

There are two aspects to that. First, there is the question of what we mean by control — will a dog come when called? Secondly, if a dog exhibits threatening or aggressive behaviour and

action is taken by a dog warden, a control condition can be applied to the owner to enforce on the dog. That can include being kept on a leash, kept muzzled or kept in or away from a particular place. Those are aspects of the control conditions that the dog wardens can apply if a dog has exhibited aggressive or threatening behaviour. So, there are two aspects to control. First, what do you normally mean by control? Will a dog come when called? Secondly, if a dog threatens or is aggressive, a control condition can be applied. That may require the dog to be muzzled, for example, or the imposition of any of the other conditions applied to the licence of the dog.

Mrs D Kelly:

I thank the officials for the briefing papers that they have presented to the Committee this afternoon. They will be a useful reference point. However, I ask that officials assume that Committee members have read their papers. I do not wish to be rude, but I ask that they do not read a verbatim account of the papers. I think that it is best to give the salient points. We are at risk of losing our quorum soon otherwise.

The Chairperson:

Your point has been taken.

Mr McCarthy:

I welcome you back to the Committee. I see some faces that were here the last time we discussed all the things to do with dogs that Kate spoke about.

What about councils' reaction? Speaking as a councillor myself, I know that not many councillors were enamoured of the money that you were throwing at them. I think that it was £760,000 per annum. Kate, you mentioned further consultations with NILGA. How are those going?

Mrs Davey:

As I explained, it is really only with officials at this point. NILGA's agriculture and rural development working group has not yet been reconstituted with elected members. We are waiting for that to happen. We understand that, when constituted, the group intends to engage directly by writing to the Minister, and no doubt the Minister will be happy to speak with it. Our

plan over the next nine months is to work closely with officials and elected members to try to provide assurances and to help them prepare for their role under the Welfare of Animals Act.

Mr McCarthy:

To follow on from that, I am sure you will be aware of a lot of concerns. We had a meeting upstairs here with members of all councils in Northern Ireland, along with some officials, and the reaction from all councils was that this is too much and that there is too little money to do it.

Mrs Davey:

We have tried to provide assurances to NILGA, and we will do exactly the same for elected members when they come back in. They will make their representations to the Minister —

Mr McCarthy:

I wish you well.

Mrs Davey:

We are certainly working to try to resolve any fears there are.

The Chairperson:

There are no further questions, and we are struggling for time here. Thank you for your presentation. We will move on to the second part of this evidence session.

I welcome Dr John Speers, Dr Sinclair Mayne and Mrs Joyce Rutherford, who have joined Dr Mark Browne at the table. To take the point of the Deputy Chairperson, I invite the officials to make a brief presentation. I support her point about the time that we have left. I ask that you just cover the points briefly. I assure you that members have the papers in front of them, have looked over them and will keep them for future reference.

Dr John Speers (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development):

Thank you, Mr Chairman. I will cover agriculture, climate change and renewable energy perspectives. I will do my best to be very brief.

Clearly, climate change presents a challenge to agriculture worldwide to produce more food while having a reduced impact on the local and global environment. Industry interests here, together with government, have been working to develop a food development strategy. They have identified the need for some specific work to be done on production-focused mitigation measures based on available scientific evidence. Consequently, the Department established and chairs an agricultural and forestry greenhouse-gas stakeholder group with the aim of developing such a strategic framework to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions in the sector. The group comprises membership from farming, food, feed and forestry organisations, together with the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside (CNCC), the Department of the Environment (DOE), the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) and the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE).

The situation with agriculture is quite unique. On the one hand, agriculture and agricultural systems emit greenhouse gases, principally nitrous oxide as a consequence of soil processes and methane by the action of ruminants breaking down cellulose in their diets, and therefore contribute to the problem of climate change. However, on the other hand, agriculture is part of the solution, since grass pasture, soil, plants and trees lock in and store carbon and prevent it from entering the atmosphere. There is a complex of biological systems at play here, not all of which are directly controllable through human intervention.

Over the past year, the group has made considerable progress in reviewing the evidence base, devising a series of proposed workable measures that can contribute to reducing greenhouse-gas emissions from agriculture and providing advice on future research needs. The plan now is to finalise the group's report and embark on a programme of communication and awareness raising to ensure its effective delivery.

The series of measures is focused on the main agricultural enterprises: the beef and dairy sectors and the arable sector. The measures concentrate on greater efficiency in farming practices, increasing yields and improving the use of farms' input resources.

As it is a voluntary and industry partnership approach, the group was very much aware of working to a principle that will encourage farmers to adopt mitigation measures where there can

also be an economic return. One of the key messages will be that efficient farming practices that save costs, improve efficiencies and increase production output will, in turn, help to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions from agricultural production and help to reduce the carbon footprint from the food that we produce. DARD will continue to support the work of the greenhouse-gas reduction strategy through the provision of funding for R&D. We have recently approved a range of new research projects that looks at studies on local grass and soil carbon sequestration and the composition of chemical fertilisers to suit our local conditions better, as well as livestock improvement programmes.

Another key role that farming can play in the climate change agenda is to contribute low-carbon energy services for agriculture and other sectors. From an economic perspective, the land-based sector can take advantage of the opportunities that stem from the production of renewable energy. The DARD renewable energy action plan was published in June last year, with a view to creating the conditions and environment that will enable the agri and forestry sectors to exploit opportunities that are associated with renewable energy. The implementation of the actions in year one are being delivered by business areas across the Department and focus on three key areas: research; information provision on a number of different levels; and policy support mechanisms. DARD sponsors the renewable energy research programme and is supporting research primarily into biomass crops and the potential for farm-scale anaerobic digestion. On the information provision side, DARD is providing that through the renewable energy actions at CAFRE. Last November, CAFRE hosted a renewable energy open day, which raised awareness of the technologies that are associated with renewable energy and related matters. More than 700 people attended. The development of an anaerobic digestion portal facility in conjunction with the National Non-Food Crops Centre (NFFCC) in England also provides access to specific information for those who are interested in anaerobic digestion that is specific to the land-based sector here.

The main policy instrument is the biomass processing challenge fund. DARD has committed funding of £1.45 million through 11 letters of offer under the fund to support five anaerobic digestion and six biomass boiler projects. The anaerobic digestion plants that are supported under the challenge fund are located in Counties Tyrone, Derry and Armagh, and there are two in County Down.

In conclusion, the Department is committed to working with the industry through the stakeholder group to see the sector play its part in a reduction of greenhouse-gas emissions. The thrust of the strategy is effective engagement, advice and awareness raising, focused on making efficiency gains, on seeking to improve resource efficiency of production and on reducing emissions per unit of output. The contribution of agriculture in providing sources of renewable energy is also key. We will continue to seek to provide research funding to provide an evidence and innovation base for the future.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much for your presentation. Are there any questions?

Dr Browne:

Sinclair will talk very briefly about evidence and innovation.

Dr Sinclair Mayne (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development):

I will provide a very brief overview of the Department's evidence and innovation strategy. It is the primary means by which the Department invests in research and development. The overall purpose of our strategy is twofold: first, to provide a robust evidence base to ensure that DARD policies are designed and delivered to achieve the best possible outcomes; and, secondly, to ensure that agrifood and rural businesses have access to the latest innovations and technologies in order to remain competitive. That is particularly important for the industry to be in a position to respond to global market demands. The key principles of the strategy are based on ensuring that our research and development is policy-led rather than science-led but also based on high-quality science. We also recognise that stakeholders have an important role in setting the research agenda and, where appropriate, contributing to cost. Finally, research and development must have impact. The benefits must be harnessed through effective knowledge exchange to policymakers and primary stakeholders.

In total, we spend around £8 million a year on a range of research and development activities. Those are very clearly linked to the Department's four strategic goals. Our research and development portfolio is primarily delivered by our arm's-length service provider, AFBI. Last

year, we introduced new arrangements for the commissioning of research, development and management, which involved the establishment of four programme management boards that have oversight for research and development in four key areas: performance in the marketplace; social and economic infrastructure in rural areas; animal, fish and plant health and animal welfare; and sustainable environment. The primary role of the programme management boards is to identify evidence gaps in consultation with stakeholders and to commission appropriate research. The programme management boards report to an overarching committee, which makes key decisions on prioritisation against the available budget.

Following agreement on key research priorities, which involve a stakeholder component in programme management board engagement and an annual stakeholder evidence and investment forum at which we look at key requirements for stakeholders, we issue a call to ABFI for research proposals. Those proposals are submitted to a range of assessments, including relevance to policy or sector needs; the scientific merit of the proposals; value for money; and the arrangements for publication or presentation of results to industry and other end users. By way of update, we are just completing the commissioning of 39 research and development projects for the 2011-12 year.

In addition to the commissioned research programme, we launched a research challenge fund in 2009 for industry-led collaborative research and development projects. The projects are eligible for DARD grant aid of up to 50% of eligible costs, and four projects with funding support of £500,000 are already under way. We plan to launch a second tranche of the research challenge fund later this year.

We also support postgraduate research in the Department through the award of eight postgraduate studentships each year. Those are based on the research priority themes identified by programme management boards. In addition to undertaking valuable research, PhD students develop scientific skills and expertise, which is an important long-term investment in our local agrifood science base. The total value of our 24 active PhD studentships in 2011-12 is approximately £440,000.

Mrs D Kelly:

Thank you for your presentation. I have one brief question on the research challenge fund. You

spoke of a second round of applications. Will a decision be made on that? How do you marry your research with opportunities in the agrifood or business sectors for rural diversification? How does the information that you have on hold get out there? How do you actively encourage applications?

Dr Mayne:

On our research challenge fund, we actively encourage industry to come forward with good ideas. That is something at which we have been very successful in the first round. For example, we had a range of projects, such as low-carbon beef, reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, bovine viral diarrhoea prevalence in suckler and dairy herds, and a project on reducing the risk of salmonella prevalence in pork and pork products. Therefore, we are looking at industry and are encouraging the rural sector to come forward with ideas that can help us make a significant contribution to developing either the agrifood industry or the rural economy.

Mrs D Kelly:

Is that information available on your website?

Dr Mayne:

Yes. It is available under the DARD strategic corporate information. In fact, we have a specific research component where we provide details of the first tranche of the research challenge fund. We are also planning to launch a second tranche of the research challenge fund later this year. A paper will come before the Committee giving full details of the second tranche, which will take account of some of the lessons learned from the first, which, as I said, was launched in 2009.

Mr W Clarke:

Thank you for your presentation. I welcome the amount of applications for the anaerobic digesters and the biomass boilers. What is the feeling from the planning end? I am aware that there have been issues with planning in County Down. What is your view on that? How is that rolling out? Are there considerable delays in that process? To take it a step further, what can the Department do to educate people about the new technology? It does not take long for scaremongering to start, and people, including politicians, could be up in arms and writing letters fairly quickly.

Dr Browne:

Joyce heads up our work in that area, so she can perhaps answer that question.

Mrs Joyce Rutherford (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development):

Before people can apply to the biomass processing challenge fund, we stipulate that they must have a planning approval in place. A decision cannot be made on their project before then. Therefore, they are coming to us already through the Planning Service.

Mr W Clarke:

And they have survived.

Mrs Rutherford:

And they have survived. The Planning Service has a special studies unit, the details of which are on the Northern Ireland tab of the anaerobic digestion portal website. Our advice to anyone who comes with an anaerobic digestion programme is to speak to those people first. As far as I am aware, the special studies unit has become more au fait with the technology. In fact, I think that staff were out in Germany in the not-so-distant past to see the technology at work. The unit is becoming more informed, as we all are, about renewable energy technology, which is fairly new in Northern Ireland.

How do we get the information on renewable energy out to our land-based sector? The research that is carried out at AFBI on the anaerobic digestion technology is publicised in a yearly report on its website. However, we know that that might not be visible to everyone, so we make sure that AFBI translates the findings of the research to our colleagues at CAFRE, which has a rolling programme of information, training and awareness on renewable energy technologies that is based on the evidence from AFBI.

The college delivers that programme in different formats. It has awareness sessions and events such as the annual renewable energy event, which is really a big awareness session. It has a lot of footfall for that. Moreover, during the year, dependent on the feedback from the renewable energy event, CAFRE holds various workshops. In the recent past, it has held

workshops on anaerobic digestion, on wind and on the growing, harvesting and processing of short rotation coppice willow. Therefore, there is quite a unified approach to informing the land-based sector, and, of course, anyone can come to the annual open day event, which is well publicised on the website and in the rural press.

Mr W Clarke:

You are flexible when it comes to open visits or bringing community groups to the renewable centre in Hillsborough by appointment?

Dr Mayne:

Yes. Having been involved in that, it is fair to say that the renewable energy centre has had a massive number of visits. In fact, it has been the most popular aspect of the research programme that is under way at AFBI. It is very well geared up for visitors, and both national and international groups have come along to view the research in progress. The centre has an important educational role to play in showing that the technology really is very compatible with the technology that operates on many dairy farms and beef farms across the country.

The Chairperson:

Thank you for your presentation.