



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural  
Development

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Food Contamination of Beef Products with  
Horse DNA: Food Standards Agency  
NI/DARD Briefing

12 March 2013

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Paul Frew (Chairperson)  
Mr Joe Byrne (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Trevor Clarke  
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson  
Mr William Irwin  
Mr Oliver McMullan  
Mr Robin Swann

**Witnesses:**

Mr David Torrens	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Rod Ainsworth	Food Standards Agency NI
Ms Maria Jennings	Food Standards Agency NI

**The Chairperson:** I welcome Maria Jennings, head of dietary health, standards and incidents; Rod Ainsworth, director of legal services; and David Torrens, deputy veterinary officer. Thank you for your attendance. If you make a presentation first, we can go into questions.

**Ms Maria Jennings (Food Standards Agency NI):** Thank you very much, Chairman. First, I would like to give the Committee an apology from my director, Gerry McCurdy, who is off ill. However, I am very ably assisted today by one of the other directors from the Food Standards Agency (FSA), Rod Ainsworth; and also by David Torrens from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's (DARD) veterinary public health unit.

As you will recall, we last updated you at the joint Health and Agriculture Committee meeting on 12 February, which seems like a long time ago. Since then, there have been several significant developments in our response to the incident. We owe the Committee a clear update. I want to take you back to the day when the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) published its survey results. On the following day, the Food Standards Agency commissioned its own surveillance sampling to be carried out by local authorities across the UK, which aimed at giving us a robust indication of the scale of the incident. We also wanted it to be reliable if we were to take some matters to court and carry out enforcement action if that was found to be appropriate. On 4 February, we met the industry to discuss its testing, as we knew that the industry was carrying out a raft of tests. We made it clear to the industry that it should share its results. A pivotal part of the investigation was that, on 7 February, Findus recalled beef lasagne, as its own tests showed that the product had 60% horse meat. The Findus supply chain was very different from that associated with the original Tesco burger with 29% horse meat in it. At that point, the Food Standards Agency decided that it was proportionate to require the industry to carry out — and to share the results of — the full testing of all its beef products.

Over the past three weeks, the industry submitted 5,430 results to us, of which 20 products contained horse DNA above 1%. We will now be with the industry in moving to agreeing a quarterly reporting regime for the industry sample results. Since the middle of January, the scale of the incident with which we have been dealing has changed. However, the Food Standards Agency has remained focused on its core objective: protecting consumers. We have to be vigilant to the potential threat to public health, but also to give consumers confidence in the food that they buy. In doing that, we have focused on four key strands of investigation: the first is around gross contamination; the second is looking at trace contamination; the third is enforcement action; and, fourthly, the local authority survey that I spoke about.

Let me briefly describe the work that we have been carrying out on each part of the plan. On gross contamination, we have, as I said, identified 20 products affected by what we have described as gross contamination at a level of horse DNA above 1%. We think that levels of horse DNA above 1% indicate either gross negligence or deliberate substitution of one meat for another. Where horse DNA is detected at or above 1%, we require the food business to withdraw the product from sale and to institute a product recall. We then use the information from the company and the traceability records to identify the supply chain for that product. In some cases, that is relatively straightforward; in others, it is quite complex and sometimes requires action from our counterparts in other member states. That work is progressing well.

The progress of the investigation is also relevant to the enforcement action that we are taking, and I will move on to that now. In some cases, action that we have taken has been triggered by a supply chain investigation, following cases of gross contamination. In other cases, however, we are following specific intelligence. You will have seen in recent weeks that a number of premises have been entered and arrests made. That means, unfortunately, that we are limited in what we can now say about that part of our investigation. However, I can tell the Committee that we are continuing to gather vital information. We remain committed to taking enforcement action or to supporting the police to do so, where the evidence allows.

We have also pushed for a joined-up approach across Europe, and we have provided the first full briefing to Europol of any member state to ensure that effective co-ordination and investigations take place across all member states.

In addition to the cases of gross contamination, we have identified cases of trace contamination. That is where very low levels of other species, including pork and horse, have been found in beef products. There is recognition that it might occur where a processing or cutting plant is dealing with more than one species. Even with thorough cleaning and good hygiene practice in a plant, traces of DNA from one species can carry over into other products. At present, we are setting a baseline of a 1% threshold as a pragmatic level to determine the difference between gross and trace contamination. The question that we want to continue to explore is what is achievable, what is detectable and what is acceptable to consumers. We, therefore, have three pieces of work under way to explore the issue, and we are working closely with other Departments, including the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), on that. We have commissioned the Laboratory of the Government Chemist to look at what is achievable. What levels of crossover would normally occur in a well-run plant processing more than one species?

A second piece of work is looking at testing methodologies, so that there is a clearer understanding of the levels that are detectable and robust tests that deliver consistent results all over the country. Finally, there is the question of consumer acceptability; we need to better understand how consumers view trace contamination. Is it acceptable at certain low levels? If not, there are trade-offs between costs and the acceptability of trace levels. We are undertaking a series of meetings with consumers to explore those issues. Separately, DEFRA is taking forward and leading on a piece of work with faith groups, acknowledging that, for certain groups, any level of trace contamination, however low, will be unacceptable.

I want to turn to the local authorities' survey and give you an update on our own independent surveillance programme to assess the scale of contamination. Sampling of the first and second phase of the survey has been completed, and we published initial test results on Friday. Samples were taken from a wide range of businesses, including retail outlets, wholesale and catering suppliers, and schools and hospitals. The results show that, of the 224 samples taken, 212 in phase 1 were negative for horse and pig DNA. Three samples contained levels of pig DNA above 1%, and preliminary tests show that seven samples, representing six products, may contain horse DNA above 1%, and a further three may contain pig DNA above 1%. However, we are carrying out further confirmatory tests to

verify that. Let me assure the Committee that, where levels over 1% are confirmed, the FSA will immediately publish the details as soon as the information is received.

Part of the programme is also to satisfy the Commission and has involved all the member states. We are also considering imports into Europe, and have begun a programme of testing samples of beef imports into the UK at border inspection posts. Those are imports from outside the European Union. In addition to the statutory sampling, industry testing is continuing, as I have said, and we will publish all the results as they come in to us. Once we have completed that programme and produced a complete report on the work, I hope to bring this phase of the investigation and the incident to an end. The expectation is that the Food Standards Agency will reach that point at the end of April.

In conclusion, it is a good opportunity for us to reflect on lessons learned and to begin to think about the long-term implications of the incident. First, I will outline some reflections on the scale of the incident response. Faced with a challenge to the integrity of our food chain, the Food Standards Agency initiated a review of food supply systems and authenticity testing on a colossal scale: more than 6,000 samples were completed in six weeks, with more to come. We have also seen investigations and actions in many parts of the country. It is a reflection of a great deal of focused hard work by people in central and local government, the food industry and laboratories, who have put in long hours and faced considerable challenges over recent weeks. That has been helped by the strong collaboration between the Food Standards Agency and colleagues in all other Departments in all four countries. That brings me to the question of whether we should have spotted this. If we missed something, so did all our counterparts in other European member states and every other food business in the UK and across Europe. It is crucial that we consider the mechanisms that we use to forecast emerging problems to see whether we can work better with industry in future to share information and ideas about the potential hazards and problems in the supply chain. We firmly believe that there is now a willingness among food businesses to consider this in a more open way than they would have previously.

There remains no evidence to suggest that any of the incidents that we have found have constituted a risk to consumers' health. However, it has had, and will continue to have, a significant effect on consumer attitudes. About half the consumers that we surveyed in recent weeks said that they will purchase less processed meat and ready meals. The main reason they gave for that was a general lack of trust. Those general concerns are now being reflected in retail sales figures. There is a real challenge for the Food Standards Agency and the food industry to address consumer confidence in the coming months.

Finally, I assure the Committee that the Food Standards Agency will robustly review the learning from this incident and the lessons that we can draw from our handling of it, in particular how we work with others. We will also provide inputs into whatever review processes will be established by industry and by government across the UK.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much, Maria, for your presentation. I remind members that they can ask one question and one supplementary question, and we will go round again if need be.

We have information from your website that states that there have been 5,430 tests conducted to date. Is that right?

**Ms Jennings:** Yes, 5,430.

**The Chairperson:** Forty-four tested positive for horse meat. You referred to 20 products in your presentation. I know that those 44 might be multiple tests. Can you clarify that issue?

**Ms Jennings:** That is exactly right. Several different organisations lifted the same products and tested them. Therefore, multiple test results will be reported only once.

**The Chairperson:** Therefore, it has been from one supermarket or one processor with the same product going through the system.

**Ms Jennings:** That is correct. There is a bit of an overlap with the formal local authority sampling and the industry testing as well.

**The Chairperson:** My supplementary question is about the blind spot here. We have just had a presentation from the Livestock and Meat Commission with regard to the farm quality assurance

scheme, which gave us all a degree of confidence to support and champion our red meat sector. Although we can do that and we have a good traceability system, the blind spot was horse meat, its processing and the passport system. Gerry McCurdy talked about that not being on the radar before. What are you searching for now that is outside your radar? Is it the processing of horse meat, its movement and the weaknesses in the passport system so that you are not only scrutinising this one way but you are seeing it coming the other way? Is there anything else on the horizon that we should be concerned about, which you are actively seeking out?

**Ms Jennings:** It is very important to reassure the Committee that, now that we have identified this and it is on the radar, it will be built into routine testing. A raft of tests is routinely carried out by local authorities, DARD officials and FSA officials across the UK. We collect about 100,000 samples a year for testing across the UK. The sampling programme on species identification will now be built into that routine sampling. As far as we can, we will try to improve our horizon scanning as well. We will put a great deal of effort into ensuring that, if there are other things out there, we identify them quickly and build controls and processes around them.

**Mr McMullan:** Thanks for your presentation, Maria. It is not an easy job to deal with what has happened here. I think that we have all learnt lessons from it, quite rightly so. The time for pointing the finger has gone. It has happened, and we have got to look to the future. I am glad to hear that traceability is coming in because it is a European issue as well as a domestic one.

I have problems with some of the major suppliers and the way in which they have stepped out of the loop on the issue of packaging. That needs to be looked at. They carry a responsibility; they cannot simply say that they took what it said on the packet for granted — blah, blah, blah — and that they are not to blame. They have a responsibility as well, so, I am glad to hear that.

You say that you will start testing imports. What size of a job is that, and how do we go about it?

**Ms Jennings:** There are designated "border inspection posts", as we call them, in the United Kingdom. Any meat products — any high-risk products — that come into the UK have to pass through designated border inspection posts. There are a number of them at specific ports around the UK, and they carry out very tight import controls. In fact, the European Union's inspectors regularly inspect our controls at the border inspection posts. Food and Veterinary Office (FVO) inspectors inspect how we carry out controls at border inspection posts. Imports from third countries will be sampled, and the sampling process will form part of our response to the incident. A routine on that will then be built into our regular sampling programmes.

**Mr McMullan:** We talk about Europe, but information from Europe is very poor; we have found that in different Departments. How do we know that Europe will carry out the same stringent controls that we now propose to implement? We need that kind of information to reassure us. Can you scotch the rumours? Are we looking at anything else but horse meat? There are all sorts of rumours about all sorts of animals being in the food chain. Has anything other than horse meat been found?

**Ms Jennings:** Controls throughout the EU are set at European level, so we are all working to the same standards: every country has to account for how it puts official controls in place. As I said, Food and Veterinary Office auditors will audit every country, produce reports and make recommendations on how to improve our controls. I can speak only for the UK. We regularly get recommendations from FVO inspectors on how our controls can be improved.

There is also a network of food safety authorities throughout Europe, which is co-ordinated by the European Food Safety Authority. There are discussions on food safety throughout Europe. There is the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health, as you know. The chief vets meet. There are all sorts of layers of control in the Commission.

You asked which other meats we are looking for. All the samples have been subjected to the same tests, which look for beef, pork, horse, goat, chicken and turkey in every product that has been tested. We are checking for all those meats.

**Mr McMullan:** My question is —

**Ms Jennings:** Are we looking for dog or —

**Mr McMullan:** Is there anything else that we are not checking for that could go through?

**Ms Jennings:** In theory, yes. However, we need to use our intelligence from the industry as well. With 20:20 vision and hindsight, we realise that a lot of horses were going into the market on the continent that were being produced for food legitimately. They were going through authorised slaughtering processes and slaughtering plants and were being produced for food. It just so happens that that horse meat was being diverted into food production in the various countries and being reclassified as beef. That is a relatively simplistic way of describing what happened.

Is any other species likely to be going through the same process? We have vets who inspect every single animal that is slaughtered through our routine slaughtering processes.

**Mr McMullan:** At European level?

**Ms Jennings:** Yes; at European level. The same controls apply.

**Mr Byrne:** Thanks for the presentation. Maria, you made three comments; what the lessons are, whether FSA in Northern Ireland missed something, and the general lack of trust. At the joint meeting on 12 February, which you and Mr McCurdy attended, reference was made to particular premises and the situation in Newry going back to 17 September. Have those investigations concluded? What is the outcome, and what are the lessons?

**Ms Jennings:** You will appreciate that I am very limited in what I can say about individual premises that the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland is investigating in depth. The answer to your question is a short one: our investigations have not concluded. They will continue.

**Mr Byrne:** That begs the question: where is the sense of urgency or otherwise to conclude them?

**Ms Jennings:** As you know, due process will work its way through the system. I have no idea how that will conclude. Certainly, when we find evidence of any kind of illegal activity, individual food businesses will be pursued with enforcement action, which, rightly, will be taken by the district council responsible for the premises.

**Mr Byrne:** That begs a second question about the continuity or otherwise of relationships among environmental health officers (EHO) of district councils, food safety standards people and DARD inspection service. Obviously, there are gaps in the system. The EHO in Newry was the first to raise the alert. What is being done to improve relationships among the three bodies to make sure that the gaps do not re-manifest themselves?

**Ms Jennings:** I assure the Committee that there are environmental health officers on the ground with specific responsibilities in manufacturing, catering and retail premises. There are also DARD inspectors who are directly authorised by the Food Standards Agency to carry out enforcement activities in slaughter premises and cutting plants in Northern Ireland. Both strands of investigators are working with the Food Standards Agency and on its behalf. We identify the issues that are required to be dealt with, and those officers carry out that work for us on the ground. That is how it works.

**Mr Byrne:** Why were the two pallets of horse meat destroyed?

**Ms Jennings:** Twelve pallets of horse meat are under consideration. They have not been destroyed. They are under secure storage by us at the moment.

**Mrs Dobson:** I think that, for me, one of the quotes of today, if I heard you correctly, was, "If we missed something, so did everyone else". That is cold comfort for those people who were fed horse meat. Your urgent investigation was launched after the results of the FSAI survey. Are the activities and powers of your two organisations — the FSA and the FSAI — broadly similar?

**Ms Jennings:** Yes, they are broadly similar.

**Mrs Dobson:** In respect of your relationship with the Agriculture Department and Minister O'Neill, and the FSAI's relationship with Simon Coveney and his Department, is it correct to say that Minister Coveney has taken a more hands-on approach than our Minister?

**Ms Jennings:** I obviously cannot speak with great knowledge about the interrelationships between Departments in the Republic of Ireland. What I can say is that the Food Standards Agency across the UK is the correct organisation to take the lead in relation to this incident. That is how our system is set up. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development certainly has a role to play in relation to the processing sector, the movement of horses, animal welfare and all that, and those lines of demarcation are quite clear.

**Mrs Dobson:** He did have quite a hands-on approach then?

**Ms Jennings:** Minister Coveney?

**Mrs Dobson:** Yes.

**Ms Jennings:** Yes, but there is a difference. As far as I know — and I am not speaking with any kind of authority — there is a difference between how enforcement officials work in the South of Ireland on a routine basis. I know that Agriculture Department officials in the South of Ireland have direct responsibility to the Government for what they do at cutting plants and abattoirs. Maybe David has —

**Mrs Dobson:** They did react quite quickly to it. David, can you elaborate a bit more on than that?

**Mr David Torrens (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development):** I think that the difference, as I see it, is that the Republic of Ireland is very much a standalone sovereign Government, whereas we are a devolved region here, and the FSA, again with its relationship to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, is also controlled centrally.

**Mrs Dobson:** I understand that.

**Mr Torrens:** Similarly, much of the action taken in Europe was under Minister Coveney on the farm council. Ireland having the presidency this year meant that it was in a position to be very much visible in taking the lead at a European level.

**Mrs Dobson:** So, you do not think that it is to do with the Minister then?

**Mr Torrens:** The Agriculture Department has a role in delivering official controls, which is my section. We do that with the Food Standards Agency under a service level agreement. We have a close, practical and pragmatic working relationship. We have been involved in checking the cold stores and cutting premises that we have responsibility for, and our agrifood inspection branch has been involved in checking beef labelling. So, the Agriculture Department has been visibly involved in this along with the FSA in Northern Ireland.

**Mrs Dobson:** This is just a supplementary question. As an organisation, do you feel that you receive the full support and co-operation of DARD officials and the Minister in tackling incidents such as the horse meat one? What could you do differently to work with it, and what do you think it could do differently to work with you?

**Ms Jennings:** Hand on my heart, every single time that we have asked officials from the Agriculture Department to carry out any kind of activity, they have done that for us. We have never had any problem with the Department in any way when we have asked it to help us with our investigations.

**Mrs Dobson:** So you would not change anything at all about your workings with it?

**Ms Jennings:** I am sure that there are ways in which we can improve around the edges of our working under the service level agreement, but I have certainly never experienced any kind of obstacle in our workings with the Agriculture Department.

**Mr Swann:** I would like clarification. Maria, you mentioned border inspection posts. You are testing all meat coming through border inspection posts from third countries. Do meat products coming from within the EU go through a border inspection post?

**Ms Jennings:** No. There is free movement of goods within the European Union, so there is no authorisation for a single member state to stop meat coming from another member state.

**Mr Swann:** So, in an instance in which horse meat starts within the EU, it would not be picked up coming through.

**Ms Jennings:** No. That would be what we call intra-community trade. Third country imports are different; that is from countries outside the European Union.

**Mr Swann:** I just wanted to clarify the border inspection posts. How much is the additional testing costing the FSA? Who is picking up the bill?

**Ms Jennings:** The initial test will give you the presence or absence of a particular species of meat. That test costs in the region of £200. If you want to go ahead and quantify the level and find out the percentage of a particular species within a meat product, it is about another £250. So, you are talking in the region of £500 a sample.

**Mr Swann:** You have tested 6,000 samples.

**Ms Jennings:** No. We have tested 6,000 samples within this short period.

**Mr Swann:** Who is picking up the bill?

**Ms Jennings:** The industry is picking up the majority of the bill, because most of those 6,000 samples were industry tests. The Food Standards Agency is picking up the bill for the local authority testing, but, as I understand it, there is some support from Europe for that testing regime.

**Mr Swann:** When you say "industry", are you talking about processors and producers?

**Ms Jennings:** As well as retailers and caterers. They have all been testing.

**Mr Swann:** So, it is private testing.

**Ms Jennings:** Yes.

**Mr Irwin:** What percentage of imported meat is tested for contamination by horse meat? Is it possible to check all meat that is imported? I am sure that substantial amounts of meat are imported. On the face of it, you have to take the labelling and check what country it has come from. I am sure that it would not be normal practice for you to try to identify horse meat in imported meat. From now on, how are you going to ensure that there is no horse meat in the country or that no contaminated meat comes in?

**Ms Jennings:** There is a regime of inspection for third countries built into the border inspection posts. When we know that a consignment of meat is coming from a third country into Belfast port, for example, the vets at Belfast will check that consignment. In the first instance, they are looking specifically for the documentation. The commercial documents, the transport documents, the health marking of that meat, and all of that, will be tested and checked. If the vets are not satisfied with that, they can start to physically examine the consignment. They can open pallets and, eventually, they can sample and test.

We could come back and give the Committee an hour on the checks regime around the border inspection posts on third country imports. This is a quick résumé of it.

**Mr Irwin:** I assume that it is impossible to tell whether there is horse meat, without DNA sampling. Is that right?

**Ms Jennings:** If it is frozen blocks of meat, it is impossible to tell by looking at it.



**Mr Irwin:** I would have thought so. What about meat imported through the Republic of Ireland?

**Ms Jennings:** That would mean that it is entering the European community into another member state. Once it moves from the ROI to the UK, that is free movement of goods.

**Mr Irwin:** So, it would have to be checked as it comes into the Republic?

**Ms Jennings:** Yes, and that inspection regime is built into the controls that the Republic of Ireland has at its border inspection posts.

**The Chairperson:** I suppose this question is more for David. We talked about the blind spot regarding the horse passport, and the fact that we can trace our red meat, but could not see the blind spot, which was the horse. Do the Minister or the Department have any plans to monitor the system of passporting and learn lessons from that on how we can make this better? We have had a lot of media coverage of late on the horse passport system. Do the Department and the Minister have any plans afoot to change something to make it much more robust, watertight and traceable?

**Mr Torrens:** Mr Chair, it is important to realise that the purpose of the passport system was not to be a traceability system or anything like the animal and public health information system — APHIS — which we have for cattle and sheep. It was largely about recording medicine use and to give conscientious horse owners and their vets a means of signing out animals so that they could avail themselves of some of the best veterinary treatment, which might be Phenylbutazone or some other medicines to ensure that the horse did not suffer. It was able to get those medicines, but it was not then taken into the food chain. The unfortunate thing is that that system has now been pressed into double duty to become a movement control system. Going back to European regulations, the passport system is based on European legislation and is designed to support the free movement of goods, animals and services with confidence between member states.

On top of that, we had a longstanding agreement called the tripartite agreement between Britain, Ireland as an island and France. That was extended recently, again to enable free movement of sport horses and recreation horses around the racing fraternity primarily. That is being looked at because, at European level, the lead is with Westminster. The Minister in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has taken this forward and has already set in place plans to work with the equine sector to improve the operation of the horse passport system. He said that this will include agreeing, setting and enforcing minimum quality standards for passports and operating standards for passport-issuing organisations. You may be aware that more information has already gone out to horse owners and veterinarians to ensure that they understand the important principles.

We also have not been idle. Even in advance of this, the FSA and DARD have enhanced the controls in slaughter premises in Northern Ireland, when we had a slaughter premises. We had a full-time veterinarian there checking the identification of the animal and impressing on the food business operator the need for due diligence. Horse passports were presented to make sure that the declarations were bona fide.

**The Chairperson:** I take your point on what the passport system was designed for, but can we be sure that it was even good at that and that there was no fraudulent activity around counterfeit passports or even microchipped horses and one thing and another? Leaving aside the traceability and the food chain aspect, can we be sure that the system that it was designed for was robust enough in the recording that that passport was assigned to that horse the whole way through the horse's life?

**Mr Torrens:** There are a couple of elements to that, and one is that any system can be defrauded by a criminal. We are content that we have good controls such as checking horses' descriptions in our meat plants. I cannot speak for Great Britain, but that is also my understanding of the position there.

Second was the question of whether any of this medicine was getting into the food chain. There has been a surveillance programme under the national plan for many years, and I know that almost 2% of horses were routinely sampled for Bute. We participated in that in Northern Ireland. In 2011, eight horses sampled with negative results. In 2012, 11 sampled with negative results. Under a special programme that the FSA put in place in the late summer of 2012, two horses sampled with negative results. So, on the outcome, we are confident that the public are being protected.

**Ms Jennings:** As you know, Chair, the Food Standards Agency has since moved to 100% sampling of horses to enter the food chain. We have a positive release system in place, where every single horse that is tested will be held until we get a negative result. If we get a positive result for that horse, that horse will not go into the food chain.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much. I was reading that before the meeting. Is that the answer? Is that the guarantee or the assurance no matter what the failings are in the passport system, which was not designed for this? Will this 100% checking be continued? Is it negative testing?

**Ms Jennings:** It is certainly a control that we want to maintain until we get a very robust system of traceability for the movement of horses.

**The Chairperson:** Will the FSA look for that?

**Mr Torrens:** One of the intrinsic difficulties, particularly in the United Kingdom and the British Isles, is that horse is largely a pet rather than a production animal. They talk about a camel being a horse designed by a committee, but I suspect that the horse passport system is influenced by the fact that it has to be workable for people who had pets as well for commercial farmers, and the policy development will have to take that into consideration at European level.

**Mr Byrne:** I want to clear up, Maria, if possible, the FSA's remit in Northern Ireland. On Monday 18 February, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development made a statement to the House and said:

*"From the very start, I have said clearly that the Food Standards Agency is taking the lead in the investigation."*

She further said:

*"The Food Standards Agency is the lead body. I have issues with the fact that the Food Standards Agency is not accountable to the Assembly"*

Who are you accountable to?

**Ms Jennings:** We are accountable to the Northern Ireland Assembly through the Health Minister. We are not accountable to the Health Minister but through the Health Minister to the Assembly. The Health Minister will speak on the Floor of the Assembly on behalf of the Food Standards Agency, and that is the same in every Administration in the UK. We are a non-ministerial UK-wide government department, but we are accountable to each of the Administrations through the Health Ministers.

**Mr Byrne:** She further said:

*"We can have the conversation about FSA accountability at another stage."*

Is that ongoing?

**Ms Jennings:** That will certainly be part of any review process that the Minister or any of the Ministers might want to put in place. We would be quite happy to participate in that.

**Mr Buchanan:** To follow on the from the Deputy Chair's question, what type of relationship does the FSA have with the Department and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development? At the commencement of the horse meat debate, the Minister said that she had no confidence in the FSA. I thought that that was a bit disturbing. There needs to be a relationship between the Minister and the FSA, especially on these sensitive issues. Is the relationship getting better, for want of a better word, than it was?

**Ms Jennings:** I would correct you in that my understanding is that the Minister said that she was reserving her judgement on the FSA, and I hope that you might ask her what her judgement is now a wee bit further down the line in the investigation. We view our relationship with the Minister to be very productive. We have talked to her throughout this incident on a regular basis, have answered any of her questions and have briefed her on several occasions.

**The Chairperson:** No other members have indicated that they want to ask questions. Thank you very much for your attendance, your presentation and your answers to the Committee. I am sure that we will meet you again at some stage.