



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Severe Weather: DARD Briefing on
Emergency Response

28 March 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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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 Chris Hazzard
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Mr Bert Houston	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Noel Lavery	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Gerry Lavery	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Philip Mehaffey	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

The Chairperson: I refer members to the updated papers, dated 25 March, from the Department. The update was e-mailed to Committee members, and the Department will provide a more recent update based on that information. Members also have in their papers a press release on the subject of severe weather, which was forwarded to the Committee by Farmers for Action.

We are joined by Noel Lavery, the permanent secretary; Gerry Lavery, senior finance director; Bert Houston, the chief veterinary officer; and Philip Mehaffey, director of operations in the Rivers Agency. I welcome you to this emergency meeting on the very concerning crisis that we are all in at present.

I am sure that Noel has a presentation for us, after which members will have an opportunity to ask questions. We know that you are tight for time, and we appreciate that you have come to the Committee to give us a presentation and to answer our questions. I ask members, because time is limited, to be brisk and concise with their questions so that we can get everyone in.

Mr Noel Lavery (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): Thank you. Given the time constraints, I will not speak for too long. I am conscious that the Committee will have a number of questions.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) is very conscious that the extreme weather conditions at the end of last week, with the heavy snow and gale force winds, have clearly caused havoc in the eastern counties and that the scale of the problems encountered by the isolated communities is unprecedented.

Resources have been co-ordinated to bring humanitarian aid to the most vulnerable people and to clear the roads in the areas. There has been a co-ordinated multi-agency response involving the PSNI, Departments, councils and utilities. Although the initial response was focused on humanitarian issues to bring support to the most vulnerable, responders have also been focused on animal welfare and providing support to farmers who have been cut off by snowdrifts.

The snowstorms were exceptional and extremely severe. They will continue to have a significant and potentially devastating impact on the farming community, particularly sheep farmers, in the affected areas. Although evidence of loss and the full costs will not be known for some time, it is expected that there will be very considerable loss of sheep and lambs on individual farms, which will result in loss of income and costs associated with the collection and disposal of fallen stock.

In response to these exceptional weather circumstances and in view of the plight of farmers and the threat to animal welfare, the Minister arranged for the purchase and delivery of animal feedstuff, where necessary by air but also by land. I will come on to that. We have encouraged farmers to contact the DARD helpline, and the Minister will also raise the issue of fallen stock and hardship payments at today's Executive meeting.

The Minister asked that all resources available to the Executive, including those of the emergency services, be made available to those affected. Forest Service has tracked vehicles called soft tracks, which have been deployed to assist in making deliveries to hard-to-reach farms. The Minister also requested helicopter support. Air reconnaissance of affected areas, together with the important information that has been supplied by local farmers via the helpline and directly to the Department's operational room, has helped to identify and prioritise areas of need. A key priority, of course, has been to ensure that roads are cleared to help farmers in dealing with the effects of the severe weather. Rivers Agency has provided support to Roads Service in assisting with clearing minor roads in affected areas.

I can update the Committee on the operational side. As of yesterday evening, we had eight helicopter flights, with 15 drops. I mentioned the soft-tracked vehicles, which are Forest Service vehicles. Some 35 farmers have had feed delivered by those soft-track vehicles; of those drops, 24 were arranged via the helpline. Obviously, this is an ongoing situation. As of this morning, six helicopter flights are planned to the glens and eight to 10 flights planned in County Down. The number of drops will depend on what is there.

That is all that I want to say. I am conscious that the Committee may have a lot of questions, and we have limited time.

The Chairperson: I appreciate that. Thank you for being concise. We will go straight into questions because we have limited time. Again, I appeal to members to be concise with their questions.

Was one helicopter from the RAF enough? Did the Minister request additional support from the RAF?

Mr N Lavery: The Minister requested support from the RAF and spoke to Theresa Villiers in person. We had a surveillance helicopter from the RAF and a Chinook to do the dropping. Logistically, that has worked, but we had to prioritise. A second Chinook is coming today. There is a technical issue about the timeline in respect of how long air crew can fly. The Minister has also requested assistance from the Irish air corps. It is working in conjunction with the RAF logistically, and that is coming on stream this morning. It is an ongoing situation, and we have to look at the operational requirements. It would be very wrong to underestimate the work that Forest Service has done with the use of snow-tracked vehicles and what it has been able to achieve. I am very grateful to the Forest Service chief executive, Malcolm Beatty, for the redeployment of those assets so effectively, and I praise the staff involved there, as well as DARD's College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) staff.

The Chairperson: You mentioned the army air corps from the Republic of Ireland. There was an initial response or communication with the army air corps down in the Republic. I believe that it has not yet received a formal —

Mr N Lavery: There are certain protocols that we have to go through. There is a timing issue. That has been received, and the army air corps will be in the air this morning, maybe as we speak.

The Chairperson: With regard to the Minister requesting support, did she ask for the Territorial Army (TA) to be mobilised? It has medical staff, infantry that could help to locate livestock and assist farmers, and engineering and logistics corps?

Mr N Lavery: I do not believe that the TA was requested. That is clearly a matter for the Minister and for other Ministers who may have wished to request that. We have been providing a multi-agency response. As I said earlier, it has involved the PSNI, Roads Service, Rivers Agency and Forest Service dealing with humanitarian aid. One of the issues that the Committee will be aware of is access to these areas and the question about snow training. We have used Roads Service, Forest Service, surveillance and drop equipment from the Ministry of Defence (MoD), and now the Irish Air Corps.

The Chairperson: I want to explore what Rivers Agency and Forest Service have done. You commend Forest Service work with regard to its snow-tracked vehicles, but yesterday I received a lot of complaints from elected representatives from all over Northern Ireland who said that Rivers Agency staff are still working on daily routine duties. Those people could have been used on the ground to assist the farming community. The Minister has declared that she has deployed the services of Rivers Agency and Forest Service, but can you tell us exactly how many people have been transferred to deal with this crisis?

Mr N Lavery: From the Forest Service perspective, it is a question of the number of vehicles. Gerry might be able to add to that in a second. We have deployed four soft-track vehicles, and those have been brought from the west of the Province. After Gerry has come in, I will ask Philip from Rivers Agency to speak. Rivers Agency has committed significant resources. It is important to consider what physical resources we have available. Rivers Agency is also committing resources to mitigating the impact of any flooding that might occur. That involves checking and clearing grilles, setting up temporary sandbag stores and deploying pumping equipment to areas identified as being at potential risk.

Mr Gerry Lavery (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): The important thing for us was that, on Monday, when we started to become aware of the extent of the problem, we needed, obviously, to respond to what was an emerging animal welfare issue. We identified that we had a number of soft-track vehicles in the west of the Province. On Monday afternoon, we made arrangements for those to be brought to the east of the Province, and, in fact, by early evening, the first of those vehicles had made two drops to farms. We then deployed the other vehicles progressively, so we had two more in operation on Tuesday. That meant that there were two in the glens and one in County Down, and we deployed a fourth vehicle yesterday. They have proven very effective and have been the major contribution of Forest Service. As Noel said, we are very grateful to the staff. These vehicles are usually deployed for crossing bogland, and that is why we have them. This was an innovative use of them, and you will have seen the photographs in the media yesterday.

The Chairperson: I do not want to make light of your effort because we have to commend the personnel on the ground for their work. However, Gerry, you referred to seeing the full extent of this crisis on Monday — this crisis started on Thursday night. Are the personnel from Rivers Agency being diverted to preparing for the thaw or are they still working according to their daily routines and timetables?

Mr Philip Mehaffey (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): I am happy to respond, Chair. No, we are not working to our daily routines in general. Our staff have been helping Roads Service to clear roads since Saturday morning. We started to deploy equipment then. We have deployed some 20 items of plant excavators, tractors with shovels, and so on. However, we are, of course, having to use drivers in spells because they are working almost around the clock. Many more than 20 people are involved in that, including support staff, relief drivers, and so on.

It has been forgotten that we are still mopping up from the flooding. The impact of the snow means that most people have forgotten that there was significant flooding, particularly last Friday and Saturday morning. We are still investigating and mopping up from that. Most particularly, we are preparing for the threat of the flooding that would come with any snow melt. Obviously, the current weather forecast suits us from a flood risk point of view, but not in getting access to the areas. From a flood risk point of view, the slow thaw is ideal. Regardless of the current assurance from the Met Office of a slow thaw, and there is no guarantee that that will continue indefinitely, we are putting in place a contingency plan for the catchment areas that have a lot of snow. We have assessed the catchments and are targeting vulnerable areas, particularly downstream. We are putting temporary

sandbag stores in areas that are at risk. We are moving around resources such as pumps, and we are inspecting rivers. Mr McMullan will be interested in the likes of the River Dall that comes down into Cushendall. We are inspecting the lower reaches of that to ensure that there is nothing obvious, such as a fallen tree, that would create trouble when the snow melt comes down.

In essence, we are doing a lot. In particular, we are preparing for the floods, but although I am giving you an assurance on our preparedness and, indeed, some assurance on the weather forecast, there is always the possibility of a significant snow melt. All we need is a change in the weather and a significant lift in temperatures for that to happen. It would be even worse if that were accompanied by quite heavy rainfall, which would melt the snow in a very short period and mean that everything comes down at once. I hope that that gives you some assurance.

The Chairperson: Bert, is there a concern about disease control measures? Are there disease implications from dead livestock in the fields?

Mr Bert Houston (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): While there is still considerable cold up there, the decomposition of any carcasses will be delayed, and the carcasses will not be all that accessible to scavenging animals. So, I am not particularly concerned at this minute in time. However, we are aware that there are likely to be casualties and fallen stock when the snow melts. We are making plans to try to deal with that situation.

Mr Byrne: I thank officials for giving us a briefing. I notice that in the document that you supplied, you talk about only north and east Antrim and east Down. There is no mention of the Sperrins, and I am very aware of people in the Plumbridge/Glenelly area who have been in touch with DARD Direct and who have not been that happy with the response. There seems to be a bit of a disconnect somewhere. Maybe that can be clarified.

In relation to the immediate issues, who is co-ordinating the emergency response? Obviously, the Minister and politicians take policy decisions, but who has the hands-on responsibility? Is there a star chamber group of civil servants making things happen practically?

Mr N Lavery: You mentioned the Sperrins, Mr Byrne. We respond to information that has come into us. Obviously, we have had to prioritise, and we have responded in a prioritised way. We have worked on that with our CAFRE advisers and those who know, from their work in Greenmount, the individual farmers. I pay tribute to the people from CAFRE. I am happy to take back what you said about our response in the Sperrins, and we can write to you, Mr Byrne, if it would be helpful, because I am not on top of the detail. However, I give the Committee an assurance that there has been information coming into the helpline that has been extremely helpful. We have had direct contact with farmers, we have done the surveillance work and we have had to prioritise and put out prioritised lists for air and ground support.

Mr Byrne asked about the co-ordination. There is a central civil contingencies group, which is chaired by the head of the Civil Service. That convened on Sunday afternoon. You used the phrase, "star chamber" —

Mr Byrne: To signify the urgency that is required.

Mr N Lavery: A meeting of that group was called on Sunday afternoon, which I attended. It is a multi-agency group. Below that, there is a tactical group. In the civil contingencies group, all relevant Departments are included, as are NIE, NI Water and the blue-light services. There is a tactical group that operates below that, which was in direct contact with local government, which is key to its operation. That group met on a daily basis until yesterday, and it is meeting again tomorrow. We have a person in that group. As I said, I attended on Sunday night the meeting of the civil contingencies group and was in touch with the Minister and the senior team.

Mr Byrne: Your submission states:

"Advisors are contacting farmers highlighted in the press to consider available options."

So, are we waiting on the demand to come in from farmers? Do we not have enough officers to go out and survey the scene in the hills of Down, Antrim, Derry and Tyrone? Should we not have a more

practical and upfront approach from officials? It seems, from the submission, that only 30 farmers have contacted the Department. Is that right?

Mr N Lavery: No. As I said, there have been quite a number of calls — 280 — to the helpline. It is a question of what assistance was required and what advice was required, and we have prioritised that.

Mr Byrne: Can I ask the Chairman —

Mr N Lavery: Sorry, Mr Byrne, I do not mean to interrupt you, but I did not fully answer your question. We have had advisers phoning farmers directly.

Mr Byrne: I was with one farmer on Monday afternoon. When we placed a call to the Department from the house, we had to give the same answers to the same questions to three different officials. The frustration for the farmer is unbelievable. What can we do to address that frustration and take a more proactive approach, where you explain the details to only one person rather than having the same questions repeated by four or five different officials within two hours?

Mr N Lavery: I am obviously concerned if the individual did not get the level of service and attention required at this very difficult time. I am happy to take the details of that individual. I note that the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) fully welcomes the actions being taken by the Department, and that is welcome. We have had close discussions with the UFU, and I also had a conversation with the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association about our response.

Mr Clarke: Thanks for the brief presentation. I will pick up on a point that Joe Byrne made. Joe was of the opinion that there were a limited number of calls, but you said that you received quite a number of calls. The presentation that you just gave us says you received only 30 calls.

Mr N Lavery: We have had 280 calls. Those 30 calls are the ones that we did helicopter drops to.

Mr Clarke: OK; that is fair enough. I had read that in the report.

I am not criticising the response of clearing the roads, because that has obviously been useful in letting the services in. However, when the full extent of this incident is discovered, some farmers, even those who have been less impacted upon, will find that damage has been caused to their stock fencing. Who will pick up the bill for damage to stock fencing caused by the heavy machinery that was brought in, given that the farmers were not responsible for that? That response was necessary, but fences have been destroyed.

Mr G Lavery: We are still in the middle of the incident, as you appreciate. So, I will say, without prejudice, that there will have to be the normal operation of the arrangements. If heavy equipment was brought in by Roads Service, liability will lie with Roads Service. Is that the sort of —

Mr Clarke: That is something that you need to bear in mind going forward. A vast area has been cleared, and we cannot take away from the fact that large shovels were required to do that job, but farmers facing these issues will be suffering enough financial loss. They should not have to suffer additional financial loss for damage caused in clearing roads. In the past, farmers have always been responsible for their own fencing if there is a road accident, for example. If they are lucky enough, they can get compensated. In this incident, necessary as the response has been to do the job, other financial losses to farmers should be borne in mind when we are doing a complete wash down.

Noel, I think that politics are being played in the response. You did not actually answer the Chairman's question about the TA and more resources. Politics have been played here. There has been a reluctance to bring in the army. We are now trying to balance it out by bringing in the Irish air corps. I have no problem with it coming in because, if it can assist, that is good. The Chairman asked whether it was the only one that was asked for — I am not sure exactly how he framed the question — but you did not actually answer that.

Mr N Lavery: Sorry. I was not being —

Mr Clarke: Let us put this in context: the British forces are among the largest. We have an evolving emergency situation in respect of loss to farmers. I do not want to play politics. I do not care whether the Irish air corps, the French air corps or any other air corps is brought in. Given that, five or six

years ago, five or six Chinooks flew past most of our houses daily, it seems bizarre that the Minister reluctantly called in one helicopter. I want to tie this down. Yes, we have a multi-agency response, but the other things that the army has at its disposal are loading shovels and stuff that could be used in clearing roads. I have not heard mention of those things coming in on the ground. I can put that into context by saying that I spoke to Roads Service in my geographical area on Sunday, and it said that it was calling on anyone to come to assist with the clearing of roads to help local farmers.

That takes me to another point. You said that part of the multi-agency approach was to work with the blue-light brigade. There is also the suggestion that one element of the blue-light brigade has been dipping some vehicles to see whether they are using clear or red diesel. I want that to be tied down as well. People are coming out in an emergency to help their neighbours, at their own expense — they are getting no money or remuneration to do so — and the police are dipping vehicles in the Ballyclare area for red diesel. I think that that needs to be teased out in reference to this "star performance" that you had, or whatever the term was that Joe used, regarding the meeting of power that you had on Sunday.

Will you answer those few points, and I will have just one other question after that?

Mr N Lavery: Going back to the point about the Ministry of Defence and what happened, the Minister asked for support, and we were in direct contact with the MoD. We asked for air support, and it made available to us what it had available, which was a Chinook that, I believe, came from the south of England, and a surveillance helicopter. The two had to work in tandem on the operation. Time was taken to get this operation up and running, which related to logistics and planning what we were going to do. The glens were surveyed, and drops were made in the glens and in County Down. We brought in the Irish Air Corps, and a second Chinook has been made available.

Given the surveillance and the information provided by farmers, our view was that this was the most effective way of dealing with isolated farms using the resources available to us. The key issue was to clear the roads, which is the responsibility of Roads Service. As regards its assets, I believe that Roads Service brought in private contractors and used Rivers Agency assets.

I cannot answer your point about red diesel. I will make sure that it is logged with the civil contingencies group. I heard that a similar issue was raised on the radio this morning.

Mr Clarke: It is worrying. As regards the event itself — and it is useful that Bert is here — I spoke to a number of farmers, and they are thankful that the army came in and did the drops, albeit that I am surprised at how late in the incident the second helicopter came in. However, and I am asking this directly of Bert, is the feedstuff for some of these animals coming too late? Some of them will be in poor condition and may not make it. Should there not be humane veterinary destruction of some of these animals as opposed to the inhumane suffering that they will have to go through, and the suffering that the farmers will go through. They are passionate. I watched someone from the glens on television last night who was quite distraught and concerned about his animals. He was more concerned about their welfare than his own welfare and the risks he was taking in going to examine them. Is there something that the Department should be doing to assess whether the animals will make it, and, if not, should there be humane destruction?

Mr Houston: At the moment, you are more likely to have animals that are alive and able to be kept alive and those that are dead. I imagine that farmers will do their level best with those that are marginal. On television, we have seen them bringing lambs into their kitchens to try to revive them and to keep them going. I am sure that they call their private practitioners to do what they can for those that they think cannot make it. I am not sure whether there is anything that we can do at the moment, but I will consider the point.

Mr Clarke: I have one final question, Chairman. I am not dismissing farmers, but what has the Department done in relation to its own hill farms in the Greenmount area? Can you indicate what your total stock holding was on the farms? What are your losses to date? What resources have you employed in your area and the one that we are talking about?

Mr N Lavery: I cannot give you all those details. Gerry may have a bit more detail. I can say that we believe that we suffered very heavy losses at Glenwhirry.

Mr Clarke: Have you no indication what "heavy losses" means?

Mr N Lavery: We are assessing that, but, obviously, we are prioritising helping other farmers.

Mr Clarke: Given your resources compared to those at the disposal of some farmers who have been struggling in the marketplace for many years, you will understand how such farmers feel today. There is no loss to the Department, because it will just write it off and move on. The farmers that we are talking about cannot write it off, because, by doing so, they would be writing themselves off. Listening to some of those farmers speaking on television last night would have made you cry. For them, that was it: after generations of farming, they were finished. You admit that the Department has also taken heavy losses, but, yet and all, it is well resourced.

Mr N Lavery: Before I bring in Gerry again, I will say, as I said in my opening remarks, that the Department is fully aware of the severity of the situation and its impact. None of us can yet determine what the losses are, but we know them to be very heavy. That is why the Minister will bring a paper to the Executive today. Do you want to say anything more, Gerry, about our position?

Mr G Lavery: We share the position of other farmers in so far as we do not know the extent of the losses. We can say that we had a flock of about 350 ewes on the hill at Glenwhirry. We have been able to locate about 80 of those. That does not mean that that is the extent of the loss, but it is the extent of the uncertainty that we face, and other farmers are in the same position —

Mr Clarke: You have a healthier chequebook than most of those other farmers.

Mr G Lavery: We are at the point in the year when my chequebook is not that healthy, but we will see what emerges.

The Chairperson: It should also be said that Glenwhirry is one of the worst-hit areas. It is being found very hard to clear snow that is still on roads around Douglas and Shillanavogy. I am sorry for interrupting you.

Mr G Lavery: That is fine.

The Chairperson: I want to clear something up before moving on. There was a question concerning the 25 March update that the Department gave us on Monday afternoon. It stated that "fewer than 30" farmers had contact the DARD Direct line, which is what I think led Trevor to his line of questioning. You now say that there were 280 calls. It may have been the case that only 30 farmers had phoned the helpline, but that the helpline was an answering machine over the weekend. I think that a lot of farmers might not have cared to leave a message on a helpline answering machine. They wanted to hear a human voice rather than an answering machine. So that clears up the figures.

Mrs Dobson: I agree totally with Trevor, because I also heard that about Glenwhirry. As you said, if the Department with all of its resources faces a loss, what about other farmers? I have never witnessed scenes such as those I witnessed in Dromara in south Down on Tuesday. To say it was heartbreaking would not come close. The first farm that we went to was a young family's. The farmer's wife, daughters and son were out — the husband had to go to his job because he also has to work to sustain the farm — and she was able to name every one of her ewes. I do not think that I will ever forget those scenes. That family is struggling on its own; it does not have the financial support that the Department has. There is such a real danger here that bloodlines may be lost and that these farmers, who contribute so much to the rural economy, will be wiped out by this.

I am quite cross to hear Gerry say that the Department started making plans on Monday. As happened to us all, my phones — house and mobile — rang and my front door was knocked on all weekend. I took visits and calls from people all weekend. In fact, I heard on Friday that an elderly gentleman in Dromara was bed-bound and could not get out of his home. We got the Red Cross out to rescue him. Yet, the Department started to make plans on Monday. To be truthful, I just find that hard to take in.

May I focus on what happens next? I called for a response on Tuesday. Earlier, Trevor spoke about politics sometimes being played with this as well. On Tuesday, farmers told me that it will be two weeks before they know the full extent of how many animals are dead in fields. They are very concerned about the financial implications of paying for the disposal of animals under the fallen animal scheme. I think that it costs £10 to dispose of a lamb and £20-odd to dispose of a ewe. They are

worried about that coming down the line. I called for that on Tuesday, and I notice that the Minister has called for it today.

What can we do to compensate farmers? I would like the Executive to consider that, and I want your opinion on how you will ensure that farmers will not have to incur the cost of disposing of animals under the fallen animal scheme. Has the Department undertaken to pay the cost of the disposal of animals in the past? I am thinking about in cases of bluetongue and other diseases. That would at least alleviate that financial burden.

As Philip said, we are now looking at flooding. It will be up to two weeks before we know the full extent of the number of animals dead in fields, and farmers will then be thinking about how much they will have to pay to get those animals removed. Can you enlighten us on that? Do you support farmers not having to pay the costs under the fallen animal scheme?

Farmers really need an up-front payment similar to the financial assistance given to flooding victims a while back. I have spoken to our Minister, Danny Kennedy, and he will be taking that issue to the Executive today.

I think that it was Trevor who said that the farmers are more worried about their animals than themselves. As I said, I visited a young family this week. Their boiler had packed up, and the boiler man could not get near the lane to the farm to fix it. The family had no heat, as the electricity had just been connected, and they had no food. However, the mother told me that she was more concerned about running out of feedstuff for her animals. She was concerned not about herself but about her animals and the loss of her animals.

Farmers are going to need financial support up front. Otherwise, we are going to lose them for ever, as they will be wiped out. What is your opinion on that? I know that that will be discussed at the Executive today, but it is our duty to see what we can do.

Sorry, I am ranting a bit, but I just cannot get the scenes that I saw on Tuesday out of my mind. They were horrific.

Mr N Lavery: Absolutely. I saw those scenes on TV, and the Minister was obviously also out.

To go back to the point about the timeline after this, I would not want to pre-empt anything that might be discussed at the Executive. I know that a number of Ministers have an interest in —

Mrs Dobson: Surely you will be supporting financial assistance, Noel.

Mr N Lavery: I cannot —

The Chairperson: May I just step in and ask that we raise our voices a wee bit? The representative from Hansard is having difficulty hearing us.

Mr N Lavery: Sorry, Chair. I gave an outline about fallen stock and hardship payments. I cannot go into any more detail in advance of the Executive meeting.

Gerry can give more detail on what the Minister would support and what the Department has supported in the past.

Mr G Lavery: We gave some support under the fallen animal scheme in the past when we were trying to move to a position in which there was a fallen stock company. However, that was really about getting that company and that professional disposal established. That shows that we are committed to the professional collection and disposal of fallen stock, and we will build on that. We appreciate that there is a serious risk of environmental damage, public nuisance and reputational loss to the farming industry if the animals are not quickly taken off the hills. As Noel said, the Minister has indicated publicly — it has been reported in the media — that she will press the Executive today for some form of hardship scheme and some form of financial assistance related to —

Mrs Dobson: For the fallen animal scheme. I raised that on Tuesday.

Mr G Lavery: — the cost of collection and disposal. I am sure that she would welcome the support of the Committee for that, if that is its general view.

Mrs Dobson: Considering that the whole Committee has called for that, I think that that is definitely its general view.

Mr N Lavery: To go back to the timeline, Philip can talk about the deployment of Rivers Agency, and I can certainly assure you that I was in direct contact with Rivers Agency on Sunday. As I said, I attended the civil contingency meeting, and there was clearly a focus on humanitarian issues in the early stages of the crisis. I spoke to local government directly, and I was on a conference call with the local government people in Larne Borough Council, which was leading the effort in the glens. I also contacted the entire senior management team. We put an incident team in place first thing on Monday morning and put in place the Department's protocols during the day. We were able to arrange helicopter support during Monday.

Mrs Dobson: Have you been out yourself, Noel?

Mr N Lavery: I have been working all hours with my staff trying to run the operation. I have not been out. I have seen all the media reports, but, along with many staff, I have been running the operation over long hours. We have deployed a lot of resources and got in air corps. Logistically, those things take some time to become operational, but we had helicopters flying on Tuesday. I commend the CAFRE staff, whom we talked about earlier. They have also worked incredible hours, getting on helicopters to go out to spot the difficult areas.

Although I have not been out myself, you will appreciate that my responsibility was to deploy the resources and to make sure that the Department responded.

Mrs Dobson: I appreciate that we have all been — working very long hours and have visited —

Mr N Lavery: Absolutely.

Mrs Dobson: One farm outside Kilcoo had seven shed roofs collapse in a one-mile radius. If you had seen the community spirit out there, you would know that all the neighbours were coming over and helping one another. Such community spirit was demonstrated, but most farmers did not have insurance. The coverage did not include —

Mr N Lavery: I am aware of that. The Minister visited the Kilcoo area, and she specifically referred to the community spirit, which is evident.

Mrs Dobson: But community spirit —

The Chairperson: I am going to have to move on, because three other members wish to ask questions, and we are running out of time.

Mr McMullan: First, I congratulate all the staff who worked over the weekend and up to now on this emergency. I congratulate your own staff, all the emergency services, and so on, on the ground — everybody. They have done a magnificent job.

I have been talking on the phone to your staff since the weekend — not since Monday but the weekend. They have been taking some very harrowing calls, but the way in which they dealt with them and the degree of professionalism shown was very welcome. There were young staff answering the phone at some stages. Staff were very sympathetic. When I say that I was talking to your staff, I personally put in anything up to a dozen calls from farmers. I gave their co-ordinates and folio number for the benefit of the air drops, and that is the kind of thing that should have been done since the weekend. I have to say that the phone line was manned from the weekend.

I want to mention the extra shovels in the roads. One must bear in mind that we are working with country roads here. With one of those big shovels in the middle of a road, there was no room for anything else, unless you worked at the road from both sides. Shovels were commandeered from quarries, and all of that. When I asked for any kind of shovel at all, it was there within a couple of hours. Therefore, there was no problem at all in getting the machinery in, and that can be verified. We are threatening to go a wee bit over the top with some of these things.

Mr Clarke: No, we are not.

Mrs Dobson: No, we are not.

The Chairperson: I remind members to —

Mr McMullan: Sorry, I did not —

Mr Clarke: Oliver, you are being controversial now.

The Chairperson: If I can just get back to the questioning —

Mr McMullan: Sorry, Chairman —

The Chairperson: We will use our time more valuably if we start asking questions rather than make statements.

Mr McMullan: Chairman, how dare you say that my time is not valuable. I will pull you up on that. You did not —

The Chairperson: I ask you to come to a question, Oliver.

Mr McMullan: I will come to my question. You did not pull up anybody else, so —

The Chairperson: We are running out of time because of it.

Mr McMullan: Afford me the same courtesy.

The Chairperson: You will see that I afforded myself only seven minutes, whereas the members who have spoken all had more.

Mr McMullan: I have only started here.

The Chairperson: If you ask questions, I will give you the same time.

Mr McMullan: I have only started here, so let me finish my two questions. If you stop talking, I will get my two questions out.

The Chairperson: I ask you to ask your question, please.

Mr McMullan: After that interruption, I have two questions. First; was there or will there be a cost for the helicopter flights?

Mr N Lavery: Yes.

Mr McMullan: Secondly, will there be a cost for the Irish air corps flights?

Mr N Lavery: I do not believe that there will be a charge by the Irish Government.

Mr McMullan: But there will be a charge for the RAF flights.

Mr N Lavery: I believe that there will be a cost.

Mr Clarke: That is a planted question.

The Chairperson: Trevor.

Mr N Lavery: Can I continue, Chair?

The Chairperson: Go ahead.

Mr N Lavery: I believe that there will be a cost. The final arrangements have not been determined.

Mr McMullan: Can I ask my last question? We have talked about the emergency services being called in and about everyone doing a wonderful job. Have social services been asked to come in? After every catastrophe, there is usually a need for social services to talk to families about what help is there and can be given, such as emergency payments and the like.

Mr N Lavery: I believe that social services have been linked in but I am not absolutely sure what those arrangements are. I am happy to come back to the Committee and to Mr McMullan on that.

Mr McMullan: Larne Borough Council co-ordinated with the other councils very well indeed. I also thank the PSNI for how quickly it helped to get out medication and mountain rescue and all that to the families. All of them are to be commended.

Mr Swann: The majority of my stuff has been covered. To follow on from what Oliver said about social services: have you yet engaged Rural Support, which serves as a back-up service for the Department?

Mr N Lavery: I think that I saw something on that this morning —

Mr G Lavery: That was an action point, I think, on Monday. As Noel indicated, we convened our strategic command and our incident management teams. So we have kept logs of actions taken, and one of those was to alert Rural Support that there would be a requirement. That was done because we could see that a lot of distress lay ahead and people would need to have access to counselling. Therefore, the answer is yes.

Mr Swann: That is one thing that we should be looking for. We are in emergency session here talking about what is happening now. The fall-out will be the long-term impact and mental anguish that this causes to farmers and their families, which will not become apparent this week or next. My colleague Jo-Anne Dobson described how the family that she talked about were not worried about the heating now, and people deal with stress and depression by ignoring what is straight in front of them. That is how they get through it. Jo-Anne and Oliver made the point that a social network behind and around farmers must be prepared to ensure that there is a mental crutch or support in place. We must learn from how we do this so that we are better prepared in future.

I will use this forum, for which I will probably get flack from elsewhere but not from around this table, to say that one of the things that truly shocked me over the weekend was the extent to which some politicians blatantly tried to exploit, for PR purposes, individuals in a very serious situation. If any such politicians are listening to the Committee, I ask them to take stock and think of the families and the individuals that they are going to. Before another row starts, I am not getting at anybody around this table or on the Committee. I just wanted to say that.

Gentlemen, the long-term weather forecast is not good. We are in the middle of — not at the start of — this crisis. More snow is coming and floods will follow, which I think that Philip is planning for. Are we looking far enough in advance to prepare for what is to come?

Mr N Lavery: The thaw is clearly extremely slow. That is where we are. We are looking at the livestock feed requirements daily and logging what we get. As time goes on, road access is improving. The Minister has stated today the real concern that there is about veterinary services for livestock. So our thoughts are also turning to that.

Mr Swann: Philip; are we ready for more snowfalls and floods?

Mr Mehaffey: There are two aspects to the weather. From a flooding perspective, the forecast is excellent in that it is projecting that there will be a slow thaw until at least the middle of next week. That, of course, is detrimental to clearing the snow quickly and hampers our addressing the problems on which we have been concentrated. I believe that some snow fell last night in the Dromara hills and the Antrim glens, but the forecast that we have seen is that such snow flurries and whatever will certainly diminish if not cease over the next lot of days. So, we are hopeful that the thaw will continue

for at least another five or six days and that the snow flurries that have been adding to the problems will diminish.

Mr N Lavery: The Minister has written to her ministerial colleagues seeking to convene a meeting on flood preparation.

Mr Swann: Noel, you touched on something that I can talk about from personal experience. The Department asked unaffected or less-affected farmers to supply additional feedstuff. One farmer said that he used to complain all the time when Chinooks flew over his fields and scared his animals. He said that it was only when he saw one flying over yesterday that he phoned to tell the Department that he has straw available. That is an indication of the community spirit that exists in the farming community.

The Department is to be commended for bringing about the co-ordination that it has. It is not a perfect situation. We were not prepared for it and it was never going to be perfect, but we are getting on with a good job. If there is anything else that the Committee can do, it should be pulling in behind. It is going to be a difficult situation for industry and for individuals.

Mr N Lavery: I appreciate those comments. We have used feedstuff that we had at Greenmount, and the UFU has been extremely helpful in helping us to contact people who had feedstuff, just as farmers have been helping their neighbours.

Mr Hazzard: Thanks, guys, for the briefing. I do not want to go over everything that has been said. We have all been out and seen what has gone on. To be fair to the Department: we have seen the response, which, to a large extent, has been very good. Of course there are areas where we need to improve but we are dealing with an unprecedented case, and it was always going to be the way it is.

As was mentioned earlier, the Minister was with me and colleagues in Kilcoo and the wider south Down area. One of the problems that farmers said they kept coming across was difficulties in dealing with their insurance companies. In one case, a gentleman's sheds were damaged before through storms and snow or whatever it was. He said that he has had to jump through so many hoops for the best part of a year, and when this came along, it completely destroyed the rest of the shed. Had the insurance company played ball from the start, he could have had a brand new shed that was fit for purpose. I know that that definitely made an impression on the Minister. Are there any plans to engage with the various insurance companies to put a bit of pressure on them and tell them that they need to be flexible, that much work needs to be done and that the local communities need their help?

Mr N Lavery: Yes. The Minister specifically asked us to take that on board and action it, and we will.

Mr Hazzard: That is very positive. I am sure that it is an issue across the board, as it was in south Down.

As has been mentioned, this is an unprecedented case. Year on year, the weather seems to be becoming more erratic. There is perhaps a greater need, year on year, for this type of response. I know that we are in the middle of a crisis, so I do not want to pre-empt any thinking, but has there been any thought about developing some sort of countryside response project between Departments, even with DARD investing in the type of machinery that has been called upon, year on year?

Mr N Lavery: That is an excellent point. Clearly, there are lessons to be learned from this, as there always are. I do not know whether Gerry has any comments on that. Philip may have a comment about the equipment. My general point is that lessons will be learned. Your specific point about assets that would work in the rural community is a very good one.

Mr G Lavery: After every emergency — we experience a number of them and this Committee accompanies us through a number of them — we do a lessons-learned exercise. We will be looking at this one. I think this is the first time that I have had this particular type of crisis, certainly in the past 10 years. It has presented different issues for us. We need to reflect on those and work our way through them, particularly because the weather does appear to be presenting more frequent extreme events. We will certainly be taking all of this on board.

Mr Mehaffey: We have certainly been flexible with our equipment. The nature of our business means that we do have some machinery that is of use in these circumstances, particularly excavators and

machinery with front shovels. We were very flexible from the start. We were engaged with Roads Service from noon on Saturday clearing the roads, which, of course, was the necessary first step in trying to get any sort of help to those beleaguered people, and that was in the midst of a flooding crisis as well. We pulled our plant from the west, where it was not affected by the flooding, over to the east in the first part, so we have been flexible. We regard this equipment as being Government equipment — if it is necessary for other Departments to use it in the midst of a crisis, we will continue to be flexible.

Mr Hazzard: Thanks. I have just one final point, Chair. A lot of people have alluded to the threat of flooding. In and around the Leitrim area, where I was yesterday, there is a real fear that the perennial flooding spots will be hit hard again pretty soon, and people are quite pensive. I know that the DARD hotline was very successful over the weekend, and I am just wondering about the best way to get information out. There may be people at home wondering whether their house will be affected by flooding again. If there are numbers that they could ring or things that they could be doing, we should disseminate that information at every level, through social media and everything else, to ensure that everybody knows exactly what to do.

Mr Mehaffey: Yes, indeed: the key contact point for flooding is the flooding incident line, and the number is 0300 2000 100. That will be manned. We spoke with the people in charge at the civil contingencies group, which Noel referred to earlier, through NI Direct yesterday, to ensure that there were additional staff there because of the threat of flooding. In addition to that, our area offices provide support to people locally, and, as I outlined, we are already trying to identify locations within catchments affected by snow, where there may be problems in the future.

You referred to Kilcoo and that area. I know that there are temporary sandbag stores placed at those sorts of locations where we anticipate that the risk might be greater whenever the snow melts.

Mr Hazzard: Finally, Chair, I commend the community spirit that has been shown. In my area recently, the Hilltown Sale Yard made its premises available to local farmers for shelter for animals. You really get to see what the rural community means and the thread that runs through it. As we commend the Department and all the Departments that have shown great selflessness in getting out and protecting local people, it is good to commend the local people too.

Mr McCarthy: Most of what I am concerned about has been said. However, Philip, in relation to the flooding that is undoubtedly coming, you know where the excess of snow is at the minute and where the flooding will come from. Hopefully, you will be able to be there to ensure that people's lives are not in danger as a result of that flooding.

The other point is that I heard Gerry say that lessons will be learnt. Of course they will be, but I was struck, right at the start, when Gerry said that nothing was done until Monday. We knew — the world knew — on Thursday evening and Friday, as the Chair said, that there was a blizzard coming. It seems strange that nothing was done, or very little was done, until Monday. There is a lesson there. If you hear a weather forecast saying that there is going to be storms or that there is going to be a blizzard, let us get in there and try to prevent problems.

Again, I reiterate what everybody else has said about the community spirit in rural areas shining through, but that is always the case in a crisis; people come together. That has been seen over the weekend. We are not out of the woods yet.

Another important thing is the health of the farming community. Social services and mental health have been mentioned. Joe mentioned co-ordination: has the Health Department been included in your co-ordination? It is important to look after the mental health and wellbeing of people who are affected.

Finally, do you reckon that, as things stand, there are enough food supplies to get us through this emergency?

Mr N Lavery: You made a couple of points that I will come back to. First, I will answer the question about the timeline and mobilising the Department's internal resources. As I said, I would not diminish the work of Roads Service and Rivers Agency over the weekend and, as Philip said, particularly on Saturday.

You asked about the Health Department. The Chief Medical Officer has chaired what is called the tactical group, which works at the operational level. I have not been at those meetings, so I do not know specifically about the mental health issues, but I know that they have been discussed. I do not know the detail, but we are very cognisant of that.

With what we have and what we have been offered, we have enough feed resources. That is an ongoing situation that was of concern to us early on, but we are in better shape now. However, we are keeping that reviewed.

Bert may have something to say about what is ahead of us on the veterinary side, on feed and on the impact on grasslands.

Mr Houston: We are also aware of the fact that this will be a very, very late spring. That will have an impact on the ability of farmers to make fodder for next year, never mind feed their animals this year. We are aware that problems are building up as a result of this particular severe incident, but we will try to keep those in mind when we do our forward planning.

The Chairperson: We value your time here, gentlemen. The decision to call this emergency meeting was not taken lightly, I might add. We are all very aware that all of you will be involved in this emergency crisis at some point or another, higher up and lower down. We appreciate the hour that you have taken with us today. I am sure that it has been very helpful for all members of the Committee here.

Mr Byrne: I just want to say that most of us have been very restrained in what we have said in public. We have supported the efforts that have been made by the Department. I am conscious of the fact that Gerry is appearing at what may be his last meeting with us.

Mr N Lavery: No.

Mr G Lavery: Reports of my demise are greatly exaggerated. *[Laughter.]* I intend to be available to the Committee for some time yet.

Mr Byrne: And Noel is here for his first meeting.

Mr N Lavery: Mr Byrne, I am sure that anything good that you say about Gerry would be greatly appreciated.

Mr Byrne: We have tangled in the Public Accounts Committee as well.

Gerry made a very positive point about fallen animals. Some sort of central co-ordination is needed. I am aware that 10 dead lambs were left outside a skip site in Ballymagorry on Wednesday evening, which was quite disturbing. The quicker that there is co-ordination on that, the better.

There are some farmers who are apprehensive that they still have not got their single farm payment for this year or for last year. Anything that can be done to speed things up would be deeply appreciated.

The Chairperson: Again, it was remiss of me, Noel, to forget to mention that this is your first official meeting with the Committee, albeit in dire circumstances. Forgive me, and accept my apologies for not stating that at the start.

Mr N Lavery: I am not concerned about that at all, Chairperson.

The Chairperson: I have a question — perhaps you can follow up on it — about the access to European aid that may be available to us in the coming days and weeks. Perhaps it is already happening, but could the Department put some resources into finding a pot of money from Europe for emergency assistance?

Mr N Lavery: At this stage, I will use my new permanent secretary privileges to pass that question to Gerry Lavery. We will deal with that, Chairperson. The point was made about the rural community coming together, and that has been absolutely fantastic. The information that farmers have given us

has been invaluable in trying to target the operations that we have undertaken, and we pay tribute to those farmers.

Gerry will comment on the European issue.

Mr G Lavery: I would say that we should not expect too much from that quarter. Our experience of severe weather conditions is that European rules are very constraining. You may recall that when we offered weather aid, it required farmers to show that they had suffered a 30% loss of income compared with their average income over three years. You had to get that scheme of assistance through Europe and fund it with national money. It was a very slow process, and it resulted in limited assistance being made at a very late stage. Frankly, most farmers could not comply with the level of documentation required. The other form of assistance that is permitted is, again, funded nationally. It is a de minimis aid of up to €7,500 per farmer. That is made to any farmer in a period of three years.

Those are the sorts of European rules that constrain us. Do not rule out a specific request for additional assistance as the situation develops. As I said, we are still in the middle of trying to deal with the emergency, and we have not yet seen the full scale of what is out there. We do not know the scale of loss and damage, and we need to get a better handle on that.

The Chairperson: Gentlemen, I know that you are shooting off to another meeting now, so thank you very much for your time here today.