



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development/Committee for Health, Social
Services and Public Safety

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Contamination of Beef Products with Horse
and Pig DNA

12 February 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development/Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Sue Ramsey (Chairperson)
Mr Paul Frew (Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs
Mr Mickey Brady
Ms Pam Brown
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Mr Joe Byrne
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Gordon Dunne
Mr Samuel Gardiner
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr William Irwin
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Ms Maeve McLaughlin
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Jim Wells

Witnesses:

Mr Robert Huey	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Alan McCartney	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Ms Maria Jennings	Food Standards Agency Northern Ireland
Mr Gerry McCurdy	Food Standards Agency Northern Ireland
Mr John Farrell	Newry and Mourne District Council

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): I will hand straight over to the witnesses. I do not know who is taking the lead in this presentation. Gerry, if you do the honours and introduce your team, we will go straight into your presentation. Then I will open it up to questions from members.

Mr Gerry McCurdy (Food Standards Agency Northern Ireland): I thank the Committee for the opportunity to come before it to update members on current issues around horse meat. I am the director of the Food Standards Agency (FSA) office in Northern Ireland. On my left is Maria Jennings, who is the head of incidents, among other things that she does for the agency; she looks after the detailed operational aspects of the incident. Further to my left is John Farrell, who is the director of environmental health services in Newry and Mourne District Council. On my right is Robert Huey,

deputy chief veterinary officer from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD); and further to the right is Alan McCartney, again from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

By way of opening remarks, just to be clear, the Food Standards Agency is the lead government agency in the investigation of this incident and we are supported in our investigations by colleagues from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and by local authorities. The FSA's primary function is to protect the interests of consumers; first, in relation to food safety matters, and, secondly, in relation to ensuring that consumers are not misled. The issue that we are dealing with is not at this time a food safety issue but one of consumer information through the proper labelling of products and consumer confidence in the food industry. It is totally unacceptable for consumers to be misled in the products that they buy and how those products are described. This issue is our number one priority at this time, and we are fully supported in our work by our colleagues from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Northern Ireland district councils and local authorities across the United Kingdom. This issue is fast-moving, and it has moved out of the UK and Ireland arena into a pan-European one. It is an extremely complex issue due to the global movement of foodstuffs, the extended length of current food chains, and the fact that we have involved at this time some 18 countries, over 30 companies and, in the case of the UK and Ireland, major retailers.

Operating at this level presents significant challenges in information flow and the accuracy and timeliness of that information from those parties upon whom we rely for providing it. The matter is being dealt with as a priority at the operational level by regulators such as the FSA in the UK, our colleagues in the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, in the Republic of Ireland, and similar agencies across Europe. It is also being dealt with at the highest levels in political terms. The Secretary of State for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is actively involved in this. He is meeting with agriculture Ministers in the European dimension. We are dealing with other member states. The Agriculture Minister has engaged with her counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, Mr Coveney, and discussions continue to try to resolve the issue.

As I stated earlier, this is a fast-moving incident. Fraud is a real possibility. There are ongoing investigations, and members will appreciate that I am not at liberty to go into the specifics of individual cases or companies, so as not to prejudice any potential legal action. I hope that members will understand that the complexity of this issue is such that there are still a lot of unanswered questions. We await the results of tests carried out by the industry and our local authorities, and the results of the inspection programmes that we have put in place. We are, therefore, in a situation where we continue to have information exchanged between officials within the United Kingdom and Ireland and across Europe.

I will stop there, and we will answer such questions as we can. As I have said, this is a very complex matter. Some of it may be prone to legal action, and some of it is so complex and protracted in that I may not have all the information that you might require.

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): OK, Gerry —

Mr Beggs: Madam Chair, can I declare an interest? My dad has a suckling cow herd, and he rears some sheep and lambs.

Mrs Dobson: Can I declare an interest? My husband is a farmer, too.

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): Does anyone else want to declare an interest? We will go through that first.

Mr Irwin: I declare an interest, too. I am a farmer, too.

Mr McCarthy: I declare an interest as a vegetarian. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Wells: So do I.

Mr John Farrell (Newry and Mourne District Council): Madam Chairman, I am a farmer as well.

Mr Wells: Not a vegetarian?

Mr Farrell: Not a vegetarian.

Ms Maria Jennings (Food Standards Agency Northern Ireland): I declare an interest in that I am married to a farmer, and my father is a farmer.

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): I declare an interest as someone who eats a lot of beef and supports local farmers.

Mr McCurdy: I should have asked at the beginning whether you had received the brief that we have put together for the meeting.

The Chairperson: We did, Gerry, and thanks very much for that. Your presentation probably answered some questions that members had, and I appreciate that. It is important to stress again that we need to be careful. Gerry has mentioned that there is a possibility that he will not be at liberty to go into details on specifics. We need to be aware of that. You can guide us on that, Gerry.

Mr McCurdy: Of course I will.

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): The purpose of today's meeting of the two Committees is for us to get as much accurate and proper information out into the public domain as we can, and there has been some media interest in that. Both Paul and I hope that this meeting goes towards ensuring that the right information goes out.

I appreciate, Gerry, that you have said that this is a number one priority — that is important — and you are supported by DARD and local councils. You also said that this is not, at this time, a food safety issue. Again, I and all members appreciate that. However, the issue is that some people are saying that they could have eaten meat that was contaminated by horse meat. Although we are saying that, on the one hand, it is not, at this time, a food safety issue, is there a guarantee, based on the information you have, that there is no public health risk? Can we reassure people who feel there is a possibility that they might have eaten contaminated products?

Mr McCurdy: First of all, the Food Standards Agency did a risk assessment of the current situation relative to the information that is available to us. That risk assessment covered the microbiological aspects associated with the foodstuffs we are dealing with. We dealt with veterinary residues and we dealt with anti-helmintics, which are to do with parasites. Given the nature of the product we are dealing with, which requires proper cooking and reasonably good hygiene handling in the home, we do not see a microbiological issue, provided that the instructions in relation to cooking, cooking time and general hygiene handling are followed.

With regards to the anti-inflammatories — the phenylbutazone (bute) — we have consulted with our own scientists and the Chief Medical Officer. Based on the information to date that we have, the Chief Medical Officer for England, Sally Davies — because a lot of this is led strategically from our headquarters in London — is confident that the evidence and information that is coming through there is that at this point in time there is not a risk to public health. This is not a food safety issue. I will quote the Chief Medical Officer:

"It's understandable that people will be concerned, but it is important to emphasise that, even if bute is found to be present at low levels, there is a very low risk".

There is a very low-level risk associated with the consumption of products that may have been contaminated with bute. We have not found, through our sampling programmes, the presence of bute in any of the products that have been sampled by the local authorities or ourselves, or in the samples that have been taken by the industry.

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): It is important that as much information as possible goes out into the public domain.

To move to one of the other issues, there is a claim that over 70,000 horses are unaccounted for or missing. Is there any evidence that this is associated, or are they two separate issues? Is that claim clouding the issue that we are dealing with?

Mr McCurdy: In relation to horses that go through the approved system, in Northern Ireland there is no slaughter of horses at this time. The premises that did deal with that, for commercial reasons, not enforcement reasons — I want to be absolutely clear that it was for commercial reasons — stopped production. Abattoirs operating on a United Kingdom basis are now subject to enhanced inspection with regards to the passport system and the horses' entrance into the food chain; 100% sampling of the meat from those horses is in place, and we await the results of the tests that have been carried out. Those animals, and the meat associated with them, are detained until such times as we get a negative result for bute. Once that negative result comes through, the meat from those animals will be put into the food chain.

The issue of the movement of horses and live animals is a matter for our colleagues in the Department of Agriculture. I will defer to my colleague Robert Huey.

Mr Robert Huey (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): Thanks, Gerry. It is important to start with the focus of the investigation by the FSA, which is the adulteration of beef with horse and where that horse has come from. The allegation about the 70,000 horses was made by the Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (USPCA) back in 2010, and has been recycled in the past few days. As Gerry said in the briefing, until two weeks ago, we had a legal slaughter facility in Northern Ireland, in Lurgan, which killed about 40 horses a fortnight. It had killed more, but the supply of horses is running out. There were five slaughterhouses down South; that is down to two now. Let me give you an idea of volumes. Three years ago, the Republic of Ireland was slaughtering about 2,500 horses a year. Last year, it killed 23,000; the year before that, 17,000. With the economic downturn in the Republic, folks have not been able to keep their horses. Horse slaughter is something that we do not like to think about on these islands, but I consider it to be good for animal welfare. Those animals are slaughtered in abattoirs under veterinary supervision to ensure that it is done in an acceptable way — not a nice way, but an acceptable way. The horse meat is then exported to the Continent, where they habitually eat horse, which is no bad thing and is good for animal welfare. I am saddened that those 40 horses a fortnight are now going on a boat to Bristol, where the nearest slaughter facility is. That does not do very much for animal welfare.

There have been lots of allegations and suggestions about the illegal slaughter of horses. The Department has followed those up and found no evidence to suggest that illegal slaughter is going on. There have been lots of rumours about slaughterhouses working out of hours. We have no evidence of that. Every legitimate and approved slaughterhouse in Northern Ireland has full-time veterinary presence of my staff. If a slaughter happened over the weekend, they are in on a Monday morning. I do not believe that that sort of thing could be hidden.

If you were slaughtering horses out of hours in an abattoir, you would have to make sure that there was no horse manure about or horse by-products, because my staff check the animal by-product skips. It would be a difficult thing to do — not impossible, but difficult. You would then have to ensure that all the staff involved did not talk. I am satisfied that those rumours of illegal slaughter in abattoirs out of hours have no grounding.

There is then the question of slaughter happening illegally out on a farm. That is the sort of thing that we are always open to, our friends at the end of the table — the environmental health officers and local councils — and the FSA. Occasionally, we come across that sort of thing, but to consider that it would be widespread and able to produce meat that in some way they would then launder into the legitimate system — it is difficult to see how that would work, to be honest.

We are not complacent. I received three more phone calls this morning from people giving us information. That information is followed up, but, to date, we have found nothing to substantiate in any way the claims being made through the press. Of course, if anybody has information, tell me and we will investigate.

Mr McCurdy: That is a general plea. If anyone has information, a whistle-blower or whoever, we have processes in place to protect the identity of that whistle-blower and to give them the confidence to talk to us. If anyone has any substantive information that we can follow through, please bring it to our attention.

Mr Huey: The 70,000 figure in the initial press release and in the information campaign on the USPCA website referred to the island of Ireland. We have 35,500 horses in Northern Ireland, so the 70,000 figure is — I do not know what the basis of it is. Again, if anybody has information —

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): Again, and just to emphasise, we want to ensure that the relevant and right information leaves this meeting. A lot of members want to ask questions. People have been saying that our locally sourced products are OK, and we are encouraging people to go for locally sourced products. I know, without mentioning names, that my butcher is a family-run business of good standing in the community and with a great history. I do not have a farming background, but I look up and am able to find from the notice where the meat comes from. When meat becomes processed, whose responsibility is that? Is it DARD or the FSA?

Mr McCurdy: If you look at the food chain as animal feed, animals, animals slaughtered, meat, processing, wholesale, catering and retail, the policy responsibility for animal feed controls belongs to the Food Standards Agency. The only deviation from that is in relation to veterinary medicines, which is the responsibility of the Department of Agriculture.

Slaughterhouses are the responsibility of the Food Standards Agency. We do that directly through operational issues in Great Britain. Here in the North of Ireland that service is provided by Robert and his team, the official veterinarians and meat inspectors, who have a full-time presence at abattoirs and have a risk-based inspection programme at cutting plants. So, the slaughter and cutting of meat is our responsibility but delivered by a service level agreement from DARD. Once you move away from that primary cutting of meat and into processing, where you are into preparations with, for example, minced meats and products such as pies and sausage rolls, that becomes a hygiene responsibility and a composition and labelling responsibility of local authorities. That is because those products contain not just meat but pastry, vegetables and all sorts of ingredients, and there are composition and labelling requirements in European law that must be complied with.

So, that part of the food chain from meat preparation and meat products right up to the point of sale for consumers is the responsibility of the local authority's environmental health officers. Those officers have their own inspection programmes, which are based on a risk assessment relative to the condition of the premises, compliance with legislation and the confidence that the local authority has in the management of those premises. A programme of inspection is then developed relative to those risks.

A similar approach is taken to composition, labelling and standards matters. Again, the local authority's environmental health officers will have a programme of inspection. Those programmes of inspection can have additional interventions if intelligence or a sampling programme suggest that something untoward is going on. They can then go back to investigate and carry out further inspections. That could also include complaints from consumers.

That, generally, is the enforcement regime that applies across the United Kingdom.

Ms Jennings: In consistency across the UK, the Food Standards Agency, as the central competent authority, works closely with all local authorities. We have a code of practice in place that the local authorities work to, so their inspection and sampling frequencies and regimes will all be captured under that code of practice.

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): Thank you. I will now hand over to the Chair of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee.

The Chairperson (Mr Frew): Thank you, Chair. I thank you for the clarification around the confusing headlines that we have had about horses and the fact that Ireland or the Republic of Ireland has been the source of this scandal. That has been very troublesome and not at all helpful. It is good to have clarity on that issue with regard to the numbers and the checks and balances that were and are in place.

I want to interrogate the detail of the investigation that is going on. We have been told that the food industry is expected to conduct authenticity tests on all its products. First of all, what does "food industry" mean? Where are we touching here? Who is investigating what, and what is the FSA's role? Is the FSA there only to gather the information, or does it actually penetrate down and test and see for itself? There could be a credibility issue there.

What will it tell us? I know that some of the results have to be out by Friday. What results are to be out, what will that tell us, and how far-reaching will that be? Is this test just a snapshot of what is in warehouses and on shelves at present, or will it go some way to tracing the travel of meat, whereby it can pass through several countries before it reaches its destination? How then can we investigate the procedure around the labelling, wrapping and authenticity of food?

I will let you answer that, because that is a very important question, and it will go some way to reassuring consumers. One issue that we need to get out of this investigation is the proof and separation between our good red meat and fresh product that we produce in Northern Ireland compared with the processed material that we import. Will this investigation go to that length?

Mr McCurdy: There are a lot of elements there, Chair. I will try to deal with some of them, as will my colleague Maria Jennings, who is involved in the operational side.

The Food Standards Agency's responsibility as a central competent authority is to ensure that public health and the interests of consumers are protected. We have a responsibility, then, to ensure that local authorities do their job. We monitor and audit the functions of local authorities to ensure that that happens. We actively investigate in premises for which we have a direct control, and we direct and co-ordinate those premises that are controlled by local authorities. So what we have done, at this point in time, is to ask local authorities to carry out an enhanced programme of inspections of those food premises that are in the category of food preparations and food products to see exactly what is going on in those premises. The results of those inspections will give us the intelligence that will allow us to direct further inspection programmes towards cold stores, because cold stores play a significant part in the food chain, whether that is through the ownership or through brokering and the movement of product. That is the first thing that we are doing.

The second thing is that we have put in place an enhanced programme of sampling. We have taken advice from our statisticians as to the range of companies and food businesses that should be included in that. It will include processors, those who do food preparation, food products, wholesalers, institutions and retailers. We have a spread of types of food businesses, and we will also have a spread of products, but primarily products that are associated with beef. Everything that you look at at this point in time directs you towards some form of either fraudulent activity or gross negligence associated with beef. Our sampling programme will cover that range of products and food businesses.

We have asked the food industry — that is, the retailers and the processors — to do their own sampling. We have given them a deadline to come back to us with their results. We have asked them to focus on speciation — we are focusing on horse meat because horse meat is the issue at this point. We need to separate the horse meat issue from the trace issues that we found associated with horse meat and pork. There are manufacturing practices, etc, for that inadvertent transfer of minute particles across, so let us leave that aside. We have asked the industry to focus its attention on horse meat. We have asked it to do the speciation test, and if it finds the presence of horse material in any product, the next step that it must take is to test for bute, which is obviously the public health concern aspect if that were to be present in any substantial quantities, and we have asked the industry to present that information to us.

That is where we are with regard to what the regulator is doing and what we expect from the industry.

The Chairperson (Mr Frew): With regard to the institutions, will environment health play a massive part in that?

Mr McCurdy: As far as the regulator's responsibilities are concerned, all of that inspection and sampling will be done by the local environmental health officers here in Northern Ireland and by their counterpart trading standards officers in GB.

Ms Jennings: To complete the picture on the very detailed investigation that you talk about and rightly highlight behind all of this, every single piece of intelligence and information that we have will be followed up. It will be followed up through the appropriate authorities across Europe until we get to the bottom of what is happening with this meat and how it is moved around within the European Union, and if it transpires that it is further afield than that, we will follow all those leads. The environmental health officers who are doing the very in-depth inspection work looking at the meat that is supplied to these meat processing plants will bring us more questions that we will follow through the system.

The Chairperson (Mr Frew): I have one final question before we move on to members. Obviously, the credibility of this is paramount for confidence in the industry. I keep talking about the separation between our fresh product — our red meat, our grass-fed, home-grown produce — compared to the imported material. However, there is something that worries me and needs clarified. What is the relationship between the Food Standards Agency and the food industry? Findus knew about the

contamination of its products and started to withdraw them from supermarket shelves as early as Sunday 3 February, yet the FSA was not informed until three or four days later. Can you clarify that incident for us? How did that happen, and why were you informed so late?

Mr McCurdy: Our relationship with the food industry is, primarily, as a regulator, but we fully accept that we need to work in partnership with it to maintain consumer confidence. We have had regular engagement with the industry since the incident broke. With regard to the Findus findings, my view is that it is unacceptable to a regulator for industry to have information available to it that could have facilitated our investigation. It is unacceptable that that information was not made available to consumers and to us: it is bad for consumer confidence. I cannot answer your question about why there was a breakdown in communication; that is a question for the industry. We have made it absolutely clear to the industry that we expect it to provide us with information as soon as it becomes available, and we will keep stressing that point.

The Chairperson (Mr Frew): You can see where there could be a loss of credibility. Even though the investigation is being conducted partly by the food industry, it waited three to four days to tell you about the incident.

Mr McCurdy: I fully appreciate that. We find it unacceptable that any part of the industry would withhold information of that nature.

The Chairperson (Mr Frew): How can you police that, or how can you reassure the Committee and the public that that was a one-off incident?

Mr McCurdy: The Food Standards Agency, the Secretary of State for the Environment and various Ministers have all made it absolutely clear to the industry that it has a responsibility to co-operate fully with us and to disclose all information as and when it becomes available, and we will continue to emphasise that to the industry. Such behaviour is not good for consumer confidence. That is uppermost in our minds in trying to work with the industry, particularly when we have an agreed programme of sampling that it has been asked to carry out. I fully take the point that you make, and I assure you that we are not comfortable with it.

Ms Jennings: Both Committees will want to be assured about the relationship of the Food Standards Agency with the local industry. After the dioxin incident in 2008, we took strong measures to put in place enhanced procedures to have formal discussions with our industry representatives through the food and feed industry advisory panel. The panel meets regularly to talk about all sorts of issues; it is the first group that we call together when there is an incident. We bring representatives together in one room and work through with them the implications for the industry in Northern Ireland. We have had several meetings with our industry advisory panel on this incident. I assure you that our industry is as worried as we are about this incident.

Mr Wells: I regularly visit Iceland where horse is the main meat source; indeed, it is not uncommon to be offered horse and chips. It is taken as absolutely read that horse is the main meat rather than beef, and it has had no health implications.

After BSE, we were promised full traceability of our meat system. BSE was a terrible blow to the farming community in Northern Ireland; it almost destroyed the beef industry, and it has taken us years to get back. One of the reasons why we were able to rebuild the beef industry was the guarantee of complete traceability from stable to table. It strikes me as odd that, in all that effort to ensure complete traceability, no one in DARD or the FSA detected horse meat in any of the processes. It was the Food Safety Authority of Ireland that stumbled on this in the autumn of 2012. If that had not happened, we would not be having this meeting; people would be totally unaware of the great scandal throughout our food industry. Why did nobody suspect that this was going on or at least test for it and identify it in the 15 years between BSE and now?

Mr McCurdy: That is a very good question. Sampling and testing by the Food Standards Agency and colleagues in local authorities is very much driven by information that we have available to us from various sources and by targeting food safety sampling in particular. We do a great deal of composition and labelling sampling as well, but horse meat simply was not on our radar. We did not think that it was an issue, given the culture and the culinary practices of the United Kingdom and Ireland.

It is not unusual for member states across Europe to carry out short surveys that, from time to time, uncover issues. Once they have uncovered issues, they share the information with the other member states, which directs our attention to dealing with the problem. However, horse meat was not on the radar of the Food Standards Agency or local authorities until the authorities in the Republic of Ireland embarked on their activities in the latter part of last year and the issue came to light on 14 or 15 January. As I said, we, in Northern Ireland, took more than 3,000 samples of product for various labelling and compositional matters but horse meat was genuinely not on our radar.

Mr Wells: In all those thousands of tests over all those years, not one of your scientists said, "Hold on; that looks a bit odd. That does not look like beef; it looks as if it is from another species." Was there not the slightest degree of doubt?

Mr McCurdy: The test does not tell you all the species of meat that are present. Testing will be specifically for things that we are aware of, such as chicken, pork and beef in various products. As I said, horse meat was simply not on the radar.

Mr Huey: That is an important point: the tests are specific. They are normally used for exports of pork to America, as the Americans want confirmation that it is pork, so you do a test of that material and it comes up as pork. You cannot do a test that tells you what is not there or the other things that might be there. You would have to do specific tests for pork, horse, zebra, kangaroo or whatever.

Mr Wells: Yes, but think about it logically. If you are testing to confirm that it is definitely beef and you see something that does not look like beef, surely the next logical step is to test for that.

Mr McCurdy: If you test for beef, the test will tell you that beef is present but it will not tell you that something else is present.

Mr Wells: Surely it is either all beef or not. It is either 100% beef or it is beef and something else, and you should test for that.

Mr McCurdy: Not all products are labelled as being 100% beef. You get various descriptions of economy burgers, which have various species of meat present. You then rely on the label being accurate in describing what species are present. As Robert said, tests are specific to the particular species that you are looking for. If you are looking for beef, the tests will tell you that beef is there.

Mr Wells: Yes, but if you test something that is labelled as 100% beef and something is there and you do not understand what it is, do you not take the next step and test for it?

Mr McCurdy: The test is not designed to do that. That is my understanding.

Mr Wells: The traceability was meaningless if that is what you are testing. The public think that you were testing the authenticity of the meat from the minute it left the field until it arrived on someone's table. That is what the public believe they were getting as a result of BSE, but they clearly were not.

Mr McCurdy: That is true. You have to be clear: it is not the responsibility of the regulator to police every aspect of food production. It is absolutely clear in law that that responsibility lies with the food business operator. To use a simple analogy: if you drive a car, you are required to do so safely and within speed limits; that is the individual responsibility of every driver. It is not the responsibility of the police to go out and ensure that you, as an individual, drive that car in accordance with the law and the speed limits. Our regime is there to police the industry, but we cannot police every aspect of it. That responsibility falls completely within the remit of the food business operator.

Mr Wells: That is interesting, to put it mildly. Thank you.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the presentation. I will ask a rhetorical question: will we hear the full story or half the story? Did the sequence of events originate in the Republic, in the North of Ireland or in Britain? Is it a fact that a local environmental health officer in Newry was alerted to or became concerned about what was observed happening in a frozen store there on 17 September?

Mr McCurdy: As I said at the beginning, I have to be careful because the investigations into a plant in Newry are ongoing. The general picture is that the local environmental health department inspected

the premises, and irregularities were found on them. Those irregularities were not associated with horse; I understand that they were to do with beef labelling. The local environment health department took action. The declaration by the Food Safety Authority of Ireland in January threw up relationships, shall we say, between the movement of meat and the identification of parties potentially involved in it. That prompted the local authority to test for horse meat, and samples that were taken from those premises came back with horse meat present. Therefore, there was one investigation for a particular matter, and information that became available later raised suspicions that necessitated further investigations into a different but related matter. I am not sure whether my local authority colleague Mr Farrell would like to add to that.

Mr Farrell: I can confirm what Gerry said and state that I am aware of an investigation that has yet to be completed. Once it has been, the matter will be reported to Newry and Mourne District Council. However, this particular batch of meat was detained by my officers on 17 September purely for labelling, wrapping and quality issues. There were then protracted discussions about the ownership of the meat. On 25 January, we sampled that batch of meat for horse DNA. There were 12 pallets, so 12 samples were taken and two of those pallets proved positive for horse DNA.

Mr Byrne: Why was DARD so slow in making its concern public? The Minister appeared at our Committee on 29 January, and when I asked whether she or her senior officials were aware of any concern regarding the event that we have just heard about, she and Gerry Laverty categorically said no. However, when Mr Huey was here last week, he informed us that DARD was alerted on 15 January.

Mr Huey: I have checked the dates and will take you through what I knew about Freeza Meats and when. During summer/autumn, I was aware that an investigation was going on at Freeza Meats, because the FSA had asked me to provide staff with expertise to help in the investigation. The 15 January date referred to the date on which the current incident arose, and the Minister was informed. I have checked my notes, and I was first aware of some of the details of the investigation of the establishment in Newry on 1 February when Maria briefed the food and feed incident management group, which is chaired by the Chief Veterinary Officer. That is the cross-government group that meets when incidents such as this occur to ensure that there is a joined-up cross-government approach.

That was the first time that I heard about it. I also checked, and the Minister was first informed by a submission from the Food Standards Agency on the evening of 1 February. As I suspected last week, the Minister did not know when she arrived on 29 January of any developments in this incident. I hope that that clarifies the issue.

Mr Byrne: Catherine Brown, the chief executive of FSA UK, described the situation as appalling and said that it seemed likely to have happened through deliberate fraud or other criminal activity rather than mistaken contamination. Gerry, do you agree?

Mr McCurdy: The information that we have now directs us towards some form of fraudulent activity. Where that activity —

Mr Byrne: In our jurisdiction?

Mr McCurdy: Where that fraudulent activity took place is still under investigation. The information available points in the direction of Europe, but we cannot be definitive about that at this point in time. Until the investigations have been completed, I would not be prepared to speculate. However, the direction of our investigations is towards Europe.

Mr Byrne: Are the investigations nearing completion?

Mr McCurdy: It is extremely complex, Mr Byrne. As I said, 18 countries are involved in this matter. We are in negotiations with individual member states through bilateral discussions, and we are involved with the European Commission at political and operational levels, and a significant amount of information is being exchanged between the relevant authorities. It is too early to say when there is any likelihood of this incident coming to an end.

Much as I would like to be able to say that we are bringing this to a close, that is not the situation.

Mr Byrne: Can we not speed up the conclusion in the North of Ireland?

Mr McCurdy: We hope to bring the investigations into the premises in Newry and Mourne to a conclusion relatively quickly. As far as the rest of Northern Ireland is concerned, much will depend on the movement of goods into and out of Northern Ireland from other member states. I am sorry; I cannot be more definitive. It is a very complex investigation.

Mr Farrell: I can assure members and the public that the batch of meat in the Newry plant was not going into the food chain. We had already decided in November, before the incident of the horse meat, that this batch would be destroyed. In fact, there were negotiations with the owners about it either going into pet food or being destroyed. That needs to be said to allay members' fears and those of the public as well.

Mr Byrne: Has it been destroyed or is it still in-house with other food products?

Mr Farrell: It was removed this week to an independent cold store, awaiting further investigation or perhaps more sampling that may be required by the FSA.

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): I have 10 members. I know that it is very hard to ask one question and a supplementary, so I am trying to give members as much space as possible. I do not want to close down a discussion if we are getting relevant information, although I know that some members have to leave for Question Time. I will not stop members asking questions but please remember that others want to ask questions as well.

Mr Beggs: With local butchers, you can get full traceability all the way back to the couple of fields in which the animals were reared. In the catering trade, we are also driving up standards with Scores on the Doors. There seems to be a huge gap in between, particularly with factory-processed minced meat, burgers and convenience foods. How does the food processing industry identify the convoluted lines in which there is a higher risk so that the food industry can expend greater effort in identifying and driving out those risks? How will the industry drive out those who are hiding illegal movements of meat or other products in that meat?

Ms Jennings: It is important for all processing establishments to know the source of their meat and what they are buying; we have talked about that extensively with the industry. If it looks like too good a bargain, it probably is. If you are getting meat very cheaply, you have to ask why. There are reasons why brokers are buying this meat on the market and shipping it around Europe. That is a simple answer; I am not sure whether it is enough.

Mr McCurdy: Audits of the processing sector by the major retailers have found that suppliers to the processing chain have been sourcing meat from unapproved businesses that do not meet the specification required by the likes of Tesco or Aldi. The processing sector is particularly problematic when it comes to tracing meat to its source. We accepted that; that is an issue for the industry to resolve.

I go back to my earlier point: it is their responsibility, from the retailer right back through the chain, to satisfy themselves that what they are buying comes from approved sources and that the product is exactly what they are asking for. The industry's own auditing, testing, verification and validation of what it is getting is extremely important. That has broken down in certain parts, and that needs to be addressed by the industry itself.

Mr Beggs: I heard on the radio that horse meat can cost £20 a ton, whereas beef costs thousands of pounds a ton. Have you been able to assess whether this situation has happened as a result of profiteering by processors who are trying to stay in business and who have been driven to it through financial difficulties? Have they been driven to it by the supermarkets?

Mr McCurdy: I go back to my earlier point about fraudulent activity. I have heard various figures bandied about on how much horse meat costs; someone said £700 a ton, someone else £3,000 a ton. It is obvious that there is a financial incentive for buying horse meat fraudulently, breaking down product in a cold store or a wrapping centre and including horse meat in it. They can turn 50 cases into 60 cases and make a profit. The financial incentive for fraud is definitely there.

Mr Farrell: I share the member's concern: there is considerable pressure on processors to provide cheap product for retailers.

Mrs Dobson: Farmers' reputation is being damaged by some greed-fuelled processors. Farmers are totally innocent; they are producing beef to the highest standards in Europe, yet those standards do not extend to processors. As always, the farmer is the fall guy.

Do you feel that greater links between the main players in the food production chain — the producers, the processors and the retailers — that the Agriculture Committee has been calling for are long overdue?

What plans do you have to increase the monitoring and regulation of processors, given that they are at fault? As always, farmers are the fall guys.

Mr McCurdy: I will take the second point from my perspective, and Robert can pick up on the first point. We have already put in place an enhanced inspection programme of processors and those who produce meat products. We are awaiting information from them.

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): Sorry, just for the record, because we are in camera, some members have to leave for Question Time at 2.00 pm, but they will come back again. Do not take it personally if people walk out. *[Laughter.]* If we are not there to ask the question, we cannot get answers.

Mr McCurdy: We will await the outcome of the enhanced inspection programme to see whether there is anything that we need to do, from a regulator's point of view, to revisit our approach to inspections. That will be taken into consideration and possible lessons will be learned from the incident. I have to defer to Robert.

Mr Huey: A very useful line has been drawn here between fresh and processed beef, in that, in law, beef is defined as fresh until it is minced. It becomes processed when you add salt, herbs or other products to it if you turn it into sausage. The traceability of Northern Ireland beef from farm to processing, if you are talking about producing mince, is 100%. We can stand over that, and Alan can fill you in a little bit more about the beef traceability that is available. The earlier question was about the enhanced controls that were put in on 28 March 1996, when the announcement on BSE was made. The controls are there, and there is continuity of traceability from the farmer through markets, and any other movements that happen, through our animal and public health information system in the Department — a process second to none anywhere in the world, never mind Europe — through to the abattoir, where checks are carried out by the operator, and then onto their system. I carried out my own little audit in a supermarket on Saturday to make sure that the stuff was correct. Members should be aware that if they look at a processed packet in a supermarket, they can read the small print and see where it was slaughtered, where it was processed, where it was packed and where the animal was reared. That is all on there in a batch system, and people carry out those checks. It is useful to separate that product from a processed product.

Some members may not be aware of how the meat trade works. Meat is a commodity in the world market; it is sold from one dealer to another. If the last dealer is to sell it at a profit, it is logical that it has to start at a low level. It is often marginal meat that people are buying, but the responsibility for buying the raw material to make the product for the consumer is with the processor. That is a basic tenet of what we call hazard analysis and critical control points: the systems that are in place in every food processing plant in the country, audited by all of us, to make sure that they are right. They have to be aware of what they are buying. As Gerry said, if an operator buys something for €1 that should cost €3.60, they are being not just irresponsible, they are being almost criminal. That is where the difficulty lies. It is useful to separate the processed product from the locally produced fresh product, whether in a butcher's shop or in a supermarket. I am not sure that I answered the question at all.

Mrs Dobson: You appreciate the frustration. As always, farmers are the fall guy.

Mr Huey: The only good thing is that, I am told, the price is not just holding up but has actually improved this week. That perhaps shows that the customer is sensible.

Mrs Dobson: Why do you think so many incidents have been detected here when we have farmers who are getting the lowest prices in Europe for beef — some £100 per head of cattle cheaper than in

the rest of the UK? Are we better at detecting here or we are more open to processor fraud? Will you elaborate on that a bit?

Mr McCurdy: As I said earlier, the potential for fraud is definitely there. We are finding lots of things now, from across Europe, once the issue came to the fore. Given the complexity of the movement of goods around Europe now — certainly in the processing sector, with the cold storage and brokerage that goes on — there is major scope for fraudulent activity, and a lot of it is money-driven. That is the underlying factor.

Mrs Dobson: Surely, given the cheaper price of our meat, the processors should not have to seek imported meat from overseas unless they are going to cut corners?

Mr Huey: Part of the problem is supply and demand. Fifteen years ago, we used to have to sell forequarter meat — the meat used for processing — to other countries, and a lot of it went to South Africa. In the past few years, consumer demand has changed from sirloin, filet and rump steaks to processing meat. We want more lasagne or spaghetti Bolognese. We want to eat mince and burgers. There simply is not enough forequarter meat to answer the demand. So, the traceable forequarter meat — the farm quality assured, beef-labelled material — tends to go into the top end of the market. That is your burger in its black pack, with all the information on it to tell you where it came from. However, there are markets for other materials. There is a legitimate market for a cheaper burger. Some of those are labelled as just a "meat burger", not a "beef burger", as you will see if you carefully read the label. Believe it or not, the local beef is probably too expensive for those burgers. So processors are going out into the world market to buy commodity beef to make a commodity burger.

Mr McCurdy: Price is the dominant factor at the lower end of the market, in volume and what people can afford to buy. If you can get four burgers for £1, and that is the only source of protein that people on low incomes can get, that is where they will go, and supermarkets will target their food production towards that end of the market. However, that still does not excuse supermarkets from ensuring that that food is as safe as any other food, irrespective of price; that what is in that food is properly declared on the label; and that the consumer is not misled. Simply because it is at the lower end of the market, in that sense, that should still not prejudice consumers.

Mrs Dobson: So, do you feel the main links —

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): Sorry, I will bring you back in, Jo-Anne, because eight other members want to ask questions, and others want to ask follow-up questions.

Mr Farrell: Chair, I would like to answer about the enhanced controls and speciation of samples taken from local authorities. Local authorities will look for pig, beef, lamb, goat, horse and chicken in all samples from now on. The samples taken recently all tested negative for those. So that is something.

Mr Hazzard: Thanks, everyone, for the briefing. I want to go back to an answer that you gave just now. You said:

"the potential for fraud is definitely there ... there is major scope for fraudulent activity".

Yet, in answer to a question from Jim Wells, you said that this was "just not on the radar". If there is major scope for fraudulent activity, and the potential for fraud is definitely there, why was it not on the radar? Surely this has been a serious failing on the part of the FSA?

Mr McCurdy: I have to repeat what I said. Now, we have identified that there is horse meat —

Mr Wells: The horse has bolted. It is too late; the stable door is open and the horse has bolted.

Mr McCurdy: — in the product that is on sale. The concept of horse meat in the United Kingdom and Ireland, going back over the past couple of years, just was not on the radar. However, now it has been identified as being there, and when you look at the price of horse meat versus beef, it becomes obvious that horse meat is going into the system and that fraudulent aspect is definitely present.

Ms Jennings: We do a lot of what we call horizon scanning and intelligence gathering. We do not do that just within our own organisation. We talk to eminent scientists, across the UK in particular. We

talk regularly to other food safety authorities as well, such as those in New Zealand, America, Canada and Australia. The issue has not been raised in any of those organisations, and, as Gerry says, it was not on our radar. When the Food Safety Authority in the South of Ireland looked for horse meat, it was partly trying to develop a sampling method that it could use routinely, and we can now use that intelligence and are putting all our efforts, as you will appreciate, into dealing with this.

Mr Hazzard: I have one supplementary question. There can be little doubt that the free-trade dynamics of the EU food supply chain have played a part in what is going on here. In the future, at what point do we introduce testing in the chain to ensure public confidence in the accountability of our produce?

Mr McCurdy: There are two dimensions to that. First, there is the food business operators' responsibilities. Tesco and others have said that testing for species, including horse, will become a fundamental part of their supply chain. The second part is from a regulator's perspective. Given where we are at this point, the speciation of meat present, particularly in composite-type products, will become a factor in relation to the regulator's response to assist in giving consumers confidence in what is on the market.

Mr Clarke: I will follow on from Chris and Jim. Jim's point was about the farm quality assured system, and, in that, Northern Ireland probably has, in the past, had one of the most useful tools to ensure that quality beef is produced here. I tend to agree, considering your response to Jim and Chris, that an awful lot of responsibility for the failure of the system is down to the FSA. Even Maria, when answering a question, said that a bargain could be too good to be true. Surely even that should have been enough to alert the FSA to do more testing?

You referred to the price of beef versus the price of horse meat, and you are also aware that horse meat has been used in other countries, is safe to eat and has been produced for that reason. If you knew about all those factors previously, why did you not get into a testing regime much more quickly? John said that they were aware since September, particularly about the one in Northern Ireland, but we did not hear about it until the end of January. In the context of giving confidence back to the Northern Ireland housewife and house husband — I have to be politically correct, Chair — what the FSA has done has not been very good at all. You have an awful lot of catching up and work to do. What will you do to reassure the housewife and house husband that what we have in Northern Ireland is good? The Agriculture Committee brought forward suggestions on labelling a few years ago, but that was not welcomed by the supermarkets — I wonder why? On the back of this, is there nothing that the FSA can do to enforce stricter labelling of the processed foods that people buy?

Mr McCurdy: The September issue was completely different. That was about irregularities around beef labelling. The horse meat situation was not known at that point. The local authority was dealing with irregularities from a beef labelling perspective.

Mr Clarke: Was that not enough to alert you at that stage to the fact that other products were being used and that there should be more investigation to find out what that product was? You could have looked further afield as opposed to waiting until the end of January to jump on the back of the Republic of Ireland's announcement.

Ms Jennings: Part of the difficulty is that, when officers are on those premises, standing in a cold store, looking at frozen, wrapped blocks of meat, it is extremely difficult for them to identify particular species. If you are looking at a horse steak as opposed to a sirloin steak in front of you, you will be able to identify differences in the meat, but when it is frozen and in a block, it is extremely difficult to identify without carrying out very detailed tests, which cost, on average, about £500 each.

Mr Clarke: Sorry, a test may cost £500, but how much will it cost the Northern Ireland farmer if the industry is destroyed on the back of this crisis? How will the £500 compare with the financial loss to the farming community?

Ms Jennings: I am not saying that the tests are not worth doing; they absolutely are, and we are doing them. When officers are on premises, checking these products, it is extremely difficult to tell the differences between blocks of meat.

Mr Clarke: There was no difficulty in September. Concerns were raised about the Newry plant. The FSA did not do anything until the end of January, when it joined in on the back of the announcement in

the Irish Republic. Why did they wait from the end of September until then? Are we saying that the officials in the Newry plant know more about meat than anyone else and that is why they noticed something was wrong? Why did it take from the end of September until the end of January to come forward and say that there was a problem in Northern Ireland? We are back to the issue of confidence.

Ms Jennings: What we were checking, and John will be able to give more detail on this, as the central competent authority on meat that was detained at the premises in Newry, was the paperwork and the traceability of that product through a number of countries. So, we were checking directly with the Netherlands, Germany and Poland and were going through the European Commission to work out the paperwork and documentation trail. When we were doing that, we were assuming that the pallets of meat were beef. We only moved to test the pallets of beef for horse meat after the Republic of Ireland came out with its positive results that linked a broker who was involved in supplying meat to a premises in the South of Ireland to the supply of some of the meat that we had already detained.

Mr McCurdy: The linkage with the horse meat situation did not come up —

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): Sorry. As I said, I do not have a farming background. What you are saying is that the holding of the meat to look at its traceability and the paperwork was, from the district council's point of view, being proactive? That worked?

Mr McCurdy: Yes, that worked, but it worked from the perspective of beef.

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): Whatever the cut of meat was, it worked on the basis that the traceability records were a concern?

Mr McCurdy: Yes.

Mr Farrell: Yes, I can confirm that. As I said, with our colleagues in the FSA, we had already decided in November that the meat would either be diverted into pet food or would be destroyed. There were negotiations at that time with the owner, who said, "Look, can you leave it until after Christmas?" Then, as we know, in January, because of the horse DNA testing, the FSA asked us to sample the meat because it was still detained at the premises. We had decided that that meat was going to be destroyed for other reasons. It just so happened that, in January, the other situation arose. So, it was never going into trade. That proves that environmental health officers are on the ground and do notice things. It is an extremely difficult job, because you are working in conditions of -18°C and below. When they went in, there were 208 pallets of beef in the particular cold store that we are talking about. Staff go around looking at blocks of beef with various labels on them from various countries, so it is difficult. In this case, the system worked.

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): I just wanted to confirm the whole issue of paperwork and traceability in that case. I interrupted Trevor, so I am going to give him the chance to ask another supplementary.

Mr Clarke: Thanks, Chair. When did you actually do the test on the beef in Newry?

Mr Farrell: On 25 January.

Mr Clarke: I am still at pains to find out why it took you from September to January to test it. You decided in November that it was not moving, so you came to that conclusion for some other reason that you have not said. Why did it take you until the end of November to decide that you were not going to do anything with the beef and that you were going to test it? Even today, you still have not made a decision about the destruction of the beef.

Mr Farrell: We have.

Mr Clarke: No, you said earlier that you are going to move it to another store.

Mr Farrell: It has been moved, but we had decided that the meat was going for destruction in November. We gave the owners of the meat the option to divert that meat to pet food, because of the cost. There was then a dispute at Christmas time over the ownership, because the original owner said

that someone else owned the meat. So, there were various protracted discussions on the ownership of the meat, but it was detained, and it was going for disposal. In January, there was no reason for us to be thinking about horse meat. Like the FSA, we did not look for it. Only when the scare broke out were we asked to sample it by the FSA, because it knew that that batch had been associated with the factory in Monaghan and that the owner of the meat was associated with that. It also knew that the meat was detained in that plant, so it asked us to sample it. The scare broke on 15 January. We sampled it on 25 January, and the results were available the following week.

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): For the record — correct me if I am wrong — the environmental officers worked out that there was a problem with the paperwork and the traceability around that batch.

Mr Farrell: Absolutely.

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): Come November, whether it was 100% beef or 100% whatever, it was to be destroyed anyway because of the traceability and the paperwork.

Mr Farrell: Because they could not satisfy us —

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): It was only when there was an issue with the possibility of there being horse meat that it was tested. It was never going to go into the food chain anyway.

Ms Jennings: Correct. We have also to remember that there have been protracted discussions around the ownership of the meat. We do not have a queue of people lining up to claim ownership of that meat.

Mr Clarke: Just —

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): No. I am going to bring you in at the end.

Mr Clarke: Just on that point —

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): Let me bring you in at the end. I did the same with Jo-Anne.

Mr Irwin: Thank you for your presentation. As a farmer, I am fully aware, as has already been said, of the fact that farmers have to adhere to strict guidelines on traceability. Sometimes they are not totally happy, because there are some very strict guidelines in that regard. At the moment, they shake their heads in dismay when they see what has taken place. Is it possible that horse meat in processed meat may have been imported undetected for a number of years?

Mr McCurdy: The information that we have available to us, and what the supermarkets have found, is that, by its nature, the product has a long shelf life. It is possible that that meat was in the system as far back as May of last year. There is that potential.

Ms Jennings: The industry would acknowledge that rules around mechanically separated and de-sinewed meat were clarified by the European Commission in the summertime. That has helped to exacerbate the problem —

Mr Irwin: Than previously?

Ms Jennings: Yes.

Mr Irwin: OK. Is it right to say that any meat that has traces of horse meat has been only imported meat? No local meat —

Mr McCurdy: We have no evidence to suggest the horse meat going into product is from horses that originated here in Northern Ireland. That is a fair statement to make at this point in time relative to what we know.

Mr McMullan: We talk about traceability and confidence. One of the big talking points at the minute, and rightly so, for farmers is how much they have to go through with traceability and all of that. They all say that it benefits the industry. What can we do now to guarantee that there will be no cost to the farming industry when new checks and balances come in? Those have to come in, because what we heard today is an absolute nightmare. There will be costs coming in here for testing. The costs of that testing must not be passed on to the farmer. I would like that guarantee.

Missing from the argument is the whole thing about the role of Europe and the multinationals. They are walking away, rubbing their hands. They tell the supplier what they should source, and if they do not do it, they do not take from them any longer. Who do they go to now? They have a duty of care. They should check their product to make sure that what they tell them to put into their product goes into their product. You cannot rely on a label or use that excuse the whole time. I would like that assurance that there will be no cost to the farming industry when new regulation comes in and checks and balances are done. The farming industry should not have to foot the bill for this whole fiasco.

Mr Huey: I will be starting that in any case, Oliver. In discussions on charging, my Minister is very aware of the costs involved in farming. She is not minded to allow increased costs to be passed down to the farmer. However, it is very hard to buck the market, as the saying goes. Without question, increased sampling and testing will add costs at the supermarket and processing stages. Those processors will then try to pass those costs on. Someone will pay. It is unlikely that the supermarkets will be able to pass them on to the consumer, so it will get passed on down the chain through the processor to the slaughterhouse, and we know who is at the bottom.

It is hard to give you that guarantee. There will be increased costs, and market forces being what they are, supermarkets and processors will be looking for someone else to carry those costs.

Mr McMullan: We agreed that a lot of that meat is coming from the wholesale trade in Europe, where batches of meat seem to be floating about in the ether all the time. We see what happens to the farming industry here if it does not adhere to European regulations and policy. What is European policy on this type of activity in the food chain in Europe when we can get fined millions of pounds here? It is worrying to hear that those costs could be passed down to the farming industry.

Where does Europe come in to this affair? Europe has a role to play with regard to, dare I say it, compensation. Those costs cannot be laid at the door of the farming industry because it is nearly on its knees with costs. To put costs due to the faults of others back on the farming industry is totally and absolutely wrong. A stop has to be put on that, and we must get that assurance out to the farming industry.

Mr McCurdy: The regime that applies in Europe in relation to controls in food production is common across Europe. All member states are meant to apply and comply with those rules. I am not in a position to give any guarantees on where those costs may go and who will ultimately bear them. As far as —

Mr McMullan: Sorry, but the Food Standards Agency cannot even give a guarantee as far as European policy goes because European policy is not applied evenly across the European market. For example, we had the laying hens directive, and cages here were shipped for use in Europe when we were not supposed to use them here. We cannot go down that road. We have to look at this differently.

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): I remind members that this is a joint meeting and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development is due to answer questions in the Chamber at 2.30 pm, so people may be leaving. If we do not get answers to all the questions, we can come back to this and write to both Departments for updates.

Ms Jennings: The only thing that we can say on this is that we have to work within the European system of regulation. Those regulations are laid down and are common to all countries. The FSA, as the central competent authority in the UK, negotiates its position on food safety matters within the European Union. That is the influence that we have. We also have influence by working with the food safety authorities of Europe and discussing these issues with them. Ministers in the United Kingdom also then have to influence and lobby within the European Union.

Mr Dunne: Thanks very much for coming along on what is a difficult subject.

We have certainly picked up, and it is my understanding, that the white meat industry is well-regulated through its quality assurance processes, and we are told that the red meat sector could learn from it. What do they mean by that?

Mr Huey: The poultry meat industry in Northern Ireland, in particular, is very integrated. We have basically one company now, Moy Park, and it produces 104 million chickens a year. By "integrated", I mean that it controls the feed and the housing standards. The automation of poultry production is such that, for the crop coming through every 42 to 46 days, there are very strict controls on everything as far as the husbandry factors of the feed and the inputs into the birds are concerned.

The beef chain is slightly longer, in that you may have a suckler cow farmer who produces a suckler calf that he sells in the autumn to a guy who takes it on and sells it to another chap who then finishes it before it goes to the abattoir. We are able to provide that traceability through the animal and public health information system and the system that Willie was complaining about earlier because of the checks and returns that he has to do.

I think that that comment was from Professor Chris Elliott. I think that what Chris is saying is that, by looking at the detail of what the poultry industry does through integration, we could further improve. I think that that is what he is getting at. I would argue that our systems in Northern Ireland are at the forefront of not just Europe but the world. However, there is always room for improvement.

Mr Dunne: I think that we would all agree with that. We are aware that our quality assurance system is working well, and the evidence is there to say that that is the case. However, there is certainly a perception — perhaps it is just a perception — that imported meat is not subject to that regulation. Someone said earlier that it is meant to be.

Mr McCurdy: Yes. European rules on food safety, food safety management systems and all that are common across the European Union. That is one of the premises upon which food produced in any member state is allowed to move in free circulation. That is the fundamental premise of having that open market in the European community. So it is not that there are different standards or regulations. The requirements are exactly the same.

Mr Dunne: Would you agree that that has now been identified as a risk area, that it needs additional surveillance and that an audit needs to be carried out?

Mr McCurdy: I will go back to my earlier point. There are two aspects to that. The first is that the food business operators have a responsibility to ensure that they comply with the requirements of food law and that, when challenged, they can demonstrate that they have exercised due diligence. The second factor is that the regulator, be it the Food Standards Agency or the local authority, must properly and diligently follow through on its risk assessment and inspection programmes.

With this incident, there will, obviously, be a greater focus on the inspection of premises to try to identify where fraudulent or negligent activity is taking place.

Ms Jennings: I will just add to that. The Commission, of course, has a big role to play. The Food and Veterinary Office routinely carries out audits across all countries to make sure that the regulations are being adhered to.

Mr Dunne: Just quickly —

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): Let me come back to you, because others want in. I will come back to you later.

Mr Dunne: Can I make just quick one point?

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): No. Let me come back to you. I want to let others in first.

Mr Gardiner: When exactly did the FSA inform DARD of the situation?

Mr McCurdy: The information broke on 15 January, and we were in contact with DARD on the same day, I think.

Ms Jennings: Yes. Every single submission and note that we have put to the Health Minister about this incident has also been copied to the DARD private office.

Mr Gardiner: The Minister claims that she was only informed late last month.

Mr Huey: There has been confusion. Joe asked this same question earlier. There is confusion about when the incident began, which was on 15 January, and when news of the incident in Newry broke, which we first knew about on 1 February, and which was confirmed on 4 February. There is confusion around that. However, I can reassure —

Mr Gardiner: There should not be confusion. It is serious.

Mr Huey: There is no confusion on my side, but I think that there is confusion around the table. I want to reassure everyone that the FSA and DARD have been working very closely together. I am in hourly contact with my colleagues in the FSA. We wish it were not so, but we are. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): Near to Valentine's Day, too. It is a close relationship. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Huey: We would like it all to be over by then. There has been close working, and it should be so for such a matter.

Mr McCurdy: We fully recognise that our public health food safety commitment is paramount. However, we are absolutely cognisant of the importance of the Northern Ireland agrifood sector to Northern Ireland. On all occasions, we attempt to put the Agriculture Minister and the Health Minister in the same place at the same time. That is an absolute commitment from my organisation.

Mr Gardiner: Three weeks later is too long. The Minister should have been notified immediately.

I will move on. You reported that horses were found in Lurgan. Can you give me an up-to-date position on that? Is that the first time that that has happened in a Lurgan abattoir?

Mr Huey: There is a slaughterhouse in Lurgan that slaughters cattle and sheep in small numbers on relatively small premises, but for the past —

Mr Gardiner: Where is the abattoir positioned?

Mr McCurdy: Do I give the name?

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): I do not know whether we need to. It is not related.

Mr McCurdy: The only slaughterhouse in Northern Ireland that was approved for slaughter of horses was that owned by a company called Oakdale. That is public knowledge. The company decided that the volume of horses that it was putting through the abattoir meant that it was putting itself at risk commercially by continuing with that trade. Therefore, rather than risk its business and other contracts — those for beef, and so on — it voluntarily, for commercial reasons, said that it was no longer dealing with horses. It wanted to keep itself completely distant from what is happening, instead focusing on other species not associated with horse.

Mr Gardiner: I did ask a question. Was that the first that was found in the abattoir?

Mr Huey: They have been slaughtering horses legally at those premises for three years. They stopped for a period, and they were slaughtering horses in the early 2000s as well. It is an entirely legitimate business, exporting horse to Italy for the food chain.

Mr Gardiner: Was it reported by officials there or from your Department that they are going around trying to detect this?

Mr Huey: Sorry. I do not understand.

Ms Jennings: Every single horse that is slaughtered is inspected in the way that any animal is inspected in an approved abattoir. Therefore, every single horse would have been inspected by official vets.

Mr Huey: By me.

Mr Gardiner: By you.

Mr Huey: By my staff.

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): There is nothing illegal.

Mr McCurdy: A horse abattoir is subject to exactly the same controls as one for any other species. Every animal that goes through that abattoir is inspected by a veterinary officer or a meat inspector, and once the inspector is satisfied that all the controls and requirements have been met, it is perfectly legitimate to put the meat from that animal on to the market.

As Robert said, the vast majority of the horse meat that came out of the Oakdale premises was in the form of carcass meat destined for Europe, primarily Italy. It is a perfectly legitimate business.

Mr Gardiner: I find it strange that I cannot be told where the abattoir is.

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): It is because that issue has got nothing to do with the subject under discussion. Gerry did actually say the name of the place, but I do not want to cloud things further by assuming that something illegal went on there, because it did not.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I will be brief and blunt, hopefully. I listened carefully when you spoke about the methodology of the testing processes, including consultation with scientists. Equally, you indicated that there are now enhanced food inspections and an enhanced programme of sampling. Can you, therefore, give absolute guarantees at this point that there is no risk to food and that food is safe?

Mr McCurdy: As I said in my opening statement, in all the information that we have got to date from all the samples taken by the industry and the regulator, no substance is present that gives us concern from a public health point of view. Our scientists have done a risk assessment. We have taken advice from the Chief Medical Officer and shared that risk assessment. That is the situation at this point.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: You can confirm that additional tests are taking place.

Mr McCurdy: Absolutely. Additional tests will be carried out by the industry. The industry will first identify whether horse is present. If it identifies that horse is present, it will test for the presence of bute, which is the substance that is of most concern. All of that will be reported to the FSA. If horse is detected in the samples that we and our local authority colleagues take, we will do exactly the same. We will test for bute.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: We do not know the outcomes of those tests. We cannot predict —

Mr McCurdy: The results will start to come through. However, the results of all the tests done to date have proved negative for bute.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: On the subject of importing meat, its travel and EU regulations, has the FSA done enough to negotiate what was quoted as a "strong position" for the North of Ireland? Has the FSA failed in that regard if this is the responsibility of food processors?

Mr McCurdy: I go back to the point that I made earlier. It is food business operators' responsibility to ensure that what they produce is safe and what they put on to the market is properly labelled. Newry and Mourne District Council picked up issues during its routine inspections, and those issues were properly addressed. The system that is in place is very much risk-based.

I accept that horse was not on our radar. It is now. We will continue, as a matter of priority, to try to resolve the issue as soon as possible. It is in our interest and in the interests of the industry and consumers for everyone to get back to a position of confidence. We need to get back to business as usual for everyone concerned.

Mr Buchanan: I want to support the earlier comments that everything that can be done must be done to ensure that this does not mean an extra cost for the farmer. We cannot afford to place any further costs on the farming community at this time.

In your opening comments and throughout your answers, you referred to the fact that horse meat was not detected on previous occasions because it was not on your radar. You were not looking for it. I will refer to the horse meat as a "foreign object". Is it possible that other foreign objects that are not on your radar and you are not checking for could be in processed meat?

Mr Huey: We do not know what we do not know. That is about as far as we can take that.

Mr McCurdy: It is not as if we are going around randomly looking for things. As Maria said, we sit down and look at what is happening locally, nationally and internationally. We take all that information and assimilate it, and we then try to work out an inspection and testing programme that will address any issues. I freely admit that, with this issue, most of our attention has been directed towards food safety; that is, what is present in food that will make people ill? That is where our resource has been directed.

I am sorry that I have to repeat this continually. It is the food business operators' responsibility to ensure through their supply lines and their checks that what they put on the market is safe, produced hygienically, packaged and labelled in accordance with legislation and does not mislead consumers.

Mr Buchanan: What mechanism are they required to put in place to ensure that what they are producing is checked thoroughly and that the product is what it says that it is?

Mr McCurdy: That goes back to the industry's responsibility to ensure that operators have audit trails for whoever is supplying them, have testing in place and can verify and validate what exactly is going into the product that they make. That is absolutely the industry's responsibility.

Mr Buchanan: I am glad that I get all my meat from a butcher and that I know that it is the best-quality stuff. I am not into processed meat at all because it raises issues of concern.

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): Discount for you at the weekend. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCarthy: Gerry, I was depressed with your comment that you do not know how long this will go on for. It depressed me because it is in everyone's interest that this be brought to a conclusion as soon as possible.

A restaurant in Belfast was closed down at the tail end of last autumn. I sit on the Health Committee, but, as far as I know, we never got the reasons for that. I do not even know whether it has reopened. If it is going to take as long for the FSA to come to a conclusion on this issue as for that restaurant, we could be sitting here this time next year. Does the FSA have the resources to do its job?

Mr McCurdy: I have no issue with the resource that is available to me in the Northern Ireland office. Do not forget that the FSA is a UK-wide body that has offices in Scotland and Wales and a headquarters in London. All of that resource is available to any part of the organisation to deal with incidents.

The investigation into the food-poisoning outbreak in Belfast was led by the Public Health Agency, supported by us and the local authority. It is not unusual for the actual source of a food-poisoning outbreak to go undetected. There are so many variables associated with it that it is sometimes not possible to identify from where the organism came. We can understand how the organism was transferred around and spread, but from where it originated is not always understood.

Ms Jennings: We can assure the member that those investigations are ongoing. There will be legal proceedings. We are very limited in what we can say in public session about that incident. However, a full and comprehensive report will be published whenever it is prudent to do so.

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): Kieran, apologies. Another Committee meeting is starting at 3.00 pm, and I know that other members have questions. If you do not mind, I will call Mickey to ask one question. We are going to lose our quorum. If any other members have questions, we will put those in writing to both Departments.

Mr Brady: I apologise for leaving. I had to ask the Minister of Agriculture a question in the Chamber, although I can assure you that it was not about horse meat.

John and Gerry have answered my initial question, which was to be about the plant in Newry. Jobs are at risk, and I know that that will be expedited.

I have just one other question. Robert, you said to Jim that only specific tests are done for beef or whatever. What flagged the detection of pork DNA in halal meat? Presumably it was beef in which pork DNA was found. Was that flagged in a specific test for pork, a specific test for beef or a test for both?

Mr Huey: It was a specific test for pork.

Mr Brady: Did something flag that, because I presume —

Ms Jennings: Yes. The company in question was supplied by one of the premises in the South of Ireland that had been implicated in the investigation around horse meat and pork. It had identified from the samples that the Food Safety Authority in the South of Ireland released on its website that that meat was supplied by the same company. It undertook its own tests and stopped all the meat that was going into those institutions.

Mr Brady: Therefore, that was done because of the link. It is not regular practice. Had that ever been brought into question before?

Mr Huey: No, but it is an example of a company acting very responsibly. It did the testing and recall of its own volition, without the enforcement authority having to get involved.

Mr Brady: Would that not be a point to note for the future? If companies took that kind of initiative and responsibility, we might not have the same problems reoccurring.

Mr McCurdy: That is exactly the point that we want to get to with the industry. At the moment, we have agreed with it that it will now enhance its testing and sampling regimes and — this has been a difficulty in previous years — that the information should be shared with the regulator. Companies have commercial sensitivities, and so on.

Mr Brady: That is their responsibility.

Mr McCurdy: Absolutely. I am sorry; I am not trying to diminish that aspect. We have put the industry in the spotlight, so it must now start sharing all the information with us. The halal issue of which you spoke is extremely sensitive for faith communities, and any industry that wants to engage in supplying halal products to that faith community will have to look very hard at how it can maintain absolute separation through good manufacturing practice so that you do not get even accidental, minute crossover contamination. That sensitivity means that it is something at which the industry will have to work very hard.

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): My apologies to members, because I know that there are other questions. I have tried to get around each member at least once. If there are other questions, we will put them in writing to both Departments, so I would appreciate a quick turnaround with the responses.

We wanted to come together to deal with some of the issues as a joint Committee. Public confidence has been shattered. Have you a message today from the Department, the FSA and local government? How do we build that public confidence again?

Mr McCurdy: There are two parts to that. One depends on what the industry's response is to maintain and build on that confidence. Secondly, the Food Standards Agency, the Department of

Agriculture and local authorities will continue to make this a priority. We want to resolve the situation as quickly as possible. If there is anything that we think the consumer needs to be aware of, we will not shy away from putting it into the public domain. That is absolutely critical for anything that impacts on food safety, which is our primary concern. We do not underestimate the consumer confidence issue with what the label says and what the consumer is actually buying. That is the number one priority for my organisation, and we will resolve the matter as quickly as we possibly can, but we are dealing with a pan-European and very complex situation.

The Chairperson (Ms Ramsey): OK, Gerry. I suggest that you keep each Committee up to date with progress. On behalf of both the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, of which Paul is Chair, and the Health Committee, which I chair, I thank you. We have gone some way towards getting answers to a lot of the questions that are out there. Thank you very much.