

**COMMITTEE FOR AGRICULTURE AND RURAL
DEVELOPMENT**

**POSITION PAPER ON PLANT HEALTH AND TREE
DISEASE**

BACKGROUND

1. The Committee agreed to review the approach and policies of DARD and Forest Service on plant health and biosecurity with specific reference to tree disease by examining:-
 - the legislative background on plant health and tree diseases at EU, national and regional level;
 - the roles and responsibilities of DARD and Forest Service, regarding prevention, monitoring and tackling tree diseases (including resources available and their deployment);
 - the contingency plans for tackling tree disease in Northern Ireland in general and ash dieback in particular;
 - the relationships between DARD and Forest Service and other relevant stakeholders in the public, private sector including NGO's;
 - what planning and policies are in place to identify and prevent future tree diseases in Northern Ireland; and
 - biosecurity at Northern Ireland ports and airports.

2. The Committee took evidence from:-
 - The Woodland Trust and the National Trust on the 12th February;
 - AFBI / DARD on the 19th February;
 - Confor on the 26th February;
 - Forest Service / DARD on 7th May; and
 - The Landscape Institute (NI) on 14th May.

3. The Committee also organised a stakeholder event on 19th February and a visit to both Belfast Port and Woodburn Forest on Thursday 11th April. The Committee commissioned the following research papers:-
 - Plant health and biosecurity overview;
 - Overview of plant import controls and incidences of harmful tree organisms– selected non EU countries: and
 - Overview of the New EU Plant Health Law.

4. This paper is an examination of and a statement on the position the Committee has taken on the key issues arising from the evidence taken, the stakeholder event, research papers and the committee visits. While not a formal part of the evidence presented in this position paper, Members of the Committee, who visited Brussels in April 2013, also drew upon the knowledge gleaned from meetings with EU Commission Officials on the plant health regime and proposed changes.

KEY ISSUES ARISING OUT OF THE REVIEW

The legislative background on plant health and tree diseases at EU, national and regional level

5. While the EU plant health regimes and regulations are not within the formal remit of the Minister, the Committee noted that all those that provided evidence are concerned that the current EU provision does appear to have significant deficits. In oral evidence to the Committee on 12th February 2013, the Woodland Trust stated:-

“The EU regulations are a mess. Even with the protection that was introduced in November, we still know that border checks are not carried out properly and there is no standard surveillance across EU countries. Countries are allowed to use different methods and different inspection processes. There is also the surprise factor: when an organism is new, there is no regulation there to deal with it. With all those issues, it is hardly surprising that things continue to get through. As we know, there is going to be a big review of these issues in March. The Committee could use its pressure to speak to the Minister about her input to that process to make sure that the lessons that we pick up through this inquiry are fed through to that review.”

6. The concerns around the current EU legislation on Plant Health and tree diseases are well documented and this paper does not therefore discuss them in detail. However, one of the concerns is that the true cost of tree diseases in Europe has not been properly investigated and that the current structure favours free trade over control of destructive and often costly pests and diseases. Information available from other parts of the world indicates that the cost can be substantial. For example, during discussion in Brussels on the proposals for the revised Plant Health legislation, Members heard that the cost of controlling sudden oak death in the USA was in excess of \$1b per year, while Portugal was expending around €50m per year to control and contain the spread of a disease of its pine trees. As pointed out by the National Trust in its written evidence to the Committee:-

“The current protocols favour free trade over biodiversity threats, as they rely on regulation of known pests and diseases. Unfortunately many of the destructive pests and disease which we are now encountering are not known and therefore are not regulated for.”

7. The Committee is aware that the European Commission has been reviewing the plant health regime, with a view to introduce new plant health law in the near future. The proposals will aim to simplify and increase transparency and cost-effectiveness. The plant passports for internal movement of plants would be simplified, creating a more transparent and stable system for the growers. Better import control would reinforce the protection against the entry of new pests and diseases from third countries, which resulted in the past in additional burdens for pest control by EU growers or damage to the natural environment. The Committee are concerned however, that such much needed changes may take years to be implemented.
8. The Committee noted that the Department in late October / early November 2012 and in line with the UK and Republic of Ireland brought forward legislation to ban ash tree imports and the import of ash wood and bark. The Committee did, at the time, consider this emergency legislation and were content that it was necessary. However, the Committee are concerned that DARD did not move to ban ash tree imports and the import of ash wood and bark as soon as Chalara was confirmed in the UK in March 2012. The Committee considered and agreed that the DARD / Forest Service reaction to Chalara was too slow. It remains to be convinced that the DARD / Forest Service horizon scanning for threats to our woodlands and forests, and early warning systems for tree disease are adequate and fit for purpose.
9. In connection with specific legislation around ash dieback / Chalara and other potential diseases and pests, the Committee is aware that DEFRA did introduce in January 2013, further legislation which would require pre-notification of intra EU imports of certain species of plants including Ash. This means, for example, that all imports of oak, ash, sweet chestnut and plane trees must have documents to show place of origin. The aim is to “horizon scan” and to try and prevent more tree diseases and pests from becoming establishing. DEFRA in a letter dated 16th January 2013 to the Horticultural Trade Association, National Farmer Union and CONFOR stated:-

“Without notification of intra-EU trade there is no means of monitoring reliably the import of such plants (irrespective of whether they are plant passported). The aims of statutory notification are to: (a) raise awareness about the threats to these species; (b) provide intelligence about the level of trade; (c) facilitate tracing in the event of problems; (d) allow targeted inspections to be carried out by Fera and the Forestry Commission; and (e) generate evidence in

support of further measures, if needed. It will not be the intention to inspect every consignment notified, but the information will be helpful in making best use of surveillance resources, to focus on the highest risk plants (in terms of their source and intended destination etc). Also, to help target follow up inspections and/or submission of samples for laboratory analysis.”

10. In oral evidence to the Committee the National Trust did question why Northern Ireland has not introduced similar legislation.
“The second recommendation is that we believe that we need to significantly strengthen the importation protocols and extend what the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs brought in on 17 January — the pre-arrival notification. We need to translate that here in Northern Ireland and use it, because our authorities need to be able to get to the ports and airports to inspect the material with enough notice. Within that notification, there are specified trees. Those trees are specified on the basis of risk. We need to adopt that procedure, and we need to do it quickly for our biosecurity.”
11. When questioned about this issue DARD responded by stating, in oral evidence on 13th May 2013:-
“I can tell you where we are at the moment. Peter mentioned the legislation, and we are seeking to dovetail with colleagues in the South. Given that there are risks in planting, and so on, with these particular pests, it is important to get pre-notification legislation in place, certainly in advance of the next planting season, which will come in the autumn. In addition, and certainly from the point of view of the operation of my two inspectorates, that pre-notification legislation will help to provide good intelligence on what is moving in with those specific tree species. It will then help to target the follow up inspection that we will take forward.”
12. The Committee did spend considerable time discussing the importance of forward planning and horizon scanning with witnesses and are therefore very disappointed that the Minister is taking so long to introduce what it considers is vital additional legislation that could assist with this aspect.
13. **The Committee therefore calls upon the Minister explain why she has delayed bringing forward legislation similar to that of DEFRA around the pre-notification of intra EU imports of certain species of plants. The Committee advises the Minister to bring forward pre-notification of intra EU imports of certain species of plants as soon as possible.**

- 14. The Committee therefore advises the Minister, and her Officials, to engage with Europe, via DEFRA, the Commission, as well as with the MEPs to ensure that the new legislation coming from Brussels takes account of plant health needs and tree disease issues relevant to Northern Ireland.**

The roles and responsibilities of DARD and Forest Service, regarding prevention, monitoring and tackling tree diseases (including resources available and their deployment)

15. In examining this aspect, the focus of the Committee has been on the response to the Chalara outbreak, the resources available and the impact that this has had on other normal operational areas of Forest Service. The Committee considered that the impact of and response to Chalara is a telling and current example of how DARD and Forest Service would and are reacting to tree diseases. Overall, the Committee, based on the evidence put forward so far by key stakeholders, are reasonably content with how DARD and Forest Service are preventing, monitoring and tackling tree diseases in general and Chalara in particular. However there are some areas of concern which are discussed below.
16. When Chalara diseased ash trees have been found, they have been removed and disposed of by Forest Service personnel at no cost to the landowner (although this cost could have been passed onto the landowner)¹. This has been appreciated by the various stakeholders. DARD is still considering, seven months after Chalara was identified in Northern Ireland, what additional support it may make available to assist land owners with restocking. The Republic of Ireland brought in a reconstitution scheme almost immediately. The lack of certainty on the replanting element has not been helpful to stakeholders who indicated to the Committee that they would find a restocking scheme similar to that introduced in the Republic of Ireland helpful. DARD has also maintained the UK policy position on no compensation for landowners affected by Chalara, putting its resources instead into surveillance and research as well as the removal of Chalara diseased trees. In responding to this issue DARD officials indicated

“In terms of a response to Ash Dieback, whilst the Department has suspended grant aid for planting ash, the Department is currently considering what additional support may be made available to assist landowners availing of the Woodland Grant Scheme to replant another tree species following compliance with a statutory plant health notice, similar to the support being offered in the South under DAFM’s Reconstitution Scheme.”

¹ As of 31st December 2012 the direct cost incurred by Forest Service for removal of trees affected by Chalara has been around £13,200.

17. The evidence from stakeholders is that the response to Chalara has been rapid and appropriate and the Committee would commend both Forest Service and DARD, and AFBI who have been carrying out the testing, for this response. However, there is concern that the reaction to the Chalara threat was late in being formulated and acted upon. As discussed in paragraph 8, the Committee does not believe that DARD and Forest Service currently have adequate horizon scanning and early warning systems for tree diseases and plant health threats. The Committee believes that the seriousness of the Ash Dieback situation should have been recognised and dealt with sooner. In oral evidence to the Committee on 12th February 2013 the Woodland Trust, stated:-

“The other key issue that we would like to highlight is the fact that the response could have been a lot more proactive. It has been entirely reactive. I think that we can learn an important lesson by looking at what happened in Europe and how the disease spread there. Action was too late and things did not really become a priority until the disease had set in. By that time, the opportunities to look for proper resolutions had well passed. We are certainly concerned about that. I know that, back in November, the Committee was concerned that there had not been a risk assessment, and we certainly share that concern.”

18. The Committee share the concern that the DARD and Forest Service response has been too reactive. It is concerned that Chalara was officially confirmed in the UK on 7th March 2012 and that the common understanding is that it is believed to have entered Great Britain on plants imported from nurseries in continental Europe – the same pathway as has been attributed to the presence of the disease in Northern Ireland. Given the levels of imported ash trees into Northern Ireland, it was inevitable that Chalara would be found in Northern Ireland yet DARD and Forest Service appeared to have done no horizon scanning or forward planning around preventing Chalara coming into Northern Ireland. This is despite the fact that the being on the edge of Europe does allow Northern Ireland to avail of an “early warning system”. In oral evidence to the Committee on 19th February 2013 AFBI / DARD stated:-

“One of the advantages of our being at the very west of Europe is that we have England and Wales as our early-warning system. The trick is to have those good contacts that Alistair talked about, pick up the disease early and have prevention methods in place so that we can prevent it from coming further west. Hopefully, we can use that to our advantage. We really need to

be able to use the information so that we are able to bring in measures that, hopefully, will allow us, within the European regulations, to prevent some of the diseases from coming in.”

19. The lack of use of this “advantage” and “early warning system” in the case of Chalara does not in the opinion of the Committee bode well for horizon scanning and planning for the prevention of future plant diseases and pests. Furthermore, the fact that AFBI indicated that work around the disease came as a surprise to them in November 2012, after being formally identified in England in March 2012, some eight months earlier, does not indicate that DARD / Forest Service or indeed AFBI, had done any horizon scanning or forward planning for a disease that was widely acknowledged as making a steady westward progression across Europe.

20. DARD and Forest Service have been questioned by Committee Members on a number of occasions on how they are handling the resource implication of dealing with Ash Dieback. Both organisations indicated that they were coping. However, some stakeholders expressed concerns about the impact of resources available for other business activities. With the spring and the leafing of trees, there has been a substantial increase in Chalara infections and the Committee has sought assurances, but is not yet convinced, or seen or heard evidence that DARD / Forest Service has properly planned to absorb the resource demand (both financial and human) of dealing with the Chalara outbreak. In oral evidence to the Committee on 12th February 2013 the Woodland Trust, stated:-

“It would be interesting to ask where the resources have gone. In preparing for this review, we looked through the business planning documents of the Department and the Forest Service. It is very difficult to unpick from their documents what money exists specifically for tackling plant and tree health. Put politely, it is almost invisible.”

21. And in oral evidence to the Committee on 26th February 2013, Confor & Northern Ireland Farm Forestry stated:-

“Forest Service really does not have the resources to be able to respond to anything in addition to what is its bread-and-butter material. It was hard enough when Phytophthora ramorum came in and removed its officials for about two or three months. We then had the GIS mapping and the new farm maps that they were involved with. That wiped them out for nearly six months.

As soon as they recovered from that, chalara came in. Effectively, we have had only two or three months' worth of work out of the Forest Service towards its core business this year. The rest of its time is spent firefighting everything else that comes up.

22. In an oral evidence session on 7th May 2013 and in response to questions around the resource requirements for the Chalara outbreak, DARD officials noted (as of 7th May 2013) that:-

“Where the operational response from my branch is concerned, delivering 1,000-plus inspections on Chalara has been resource intensive. It has also been resource intensive for our colleagues in AFBI, as they have dealt with all the associated diagnostics. Similar to Forest Service, we have had to reprioritise work to assign appropriate levels of resources to take this forward. We have also procured some additional temporary resource, which will assist us over the coming weeks and months as we implement the current surveillance programme. As Stuart pointed out, once we start to see them, the outcomes of the surveillance work will indicate what our resource requirements will be and the necessary bids that we may have to make.”

23. Regarding the pressure placed on AFBI, in an oral evidence session with the Committee on 19th February 2013, AFBI noted that:-

“This disease more or less came out of left field in November. We were able to divert resources to make sure that we were able to deal with the 1,000 samples that were coming through. That has knock-on consequences, because, while staff are doing that as an emergency response, they are not involved in research projects or whatever it happens to be. So, it does have an impact, but we have dealt with it.

24. The Committee is concerned about the level of communication and interaction between DARD, Forest Service and AFBI. Despite being aware that Ash Dieback was steadily moving eastward across Europe, had been discovered in England, and that there was every likelihood that it would be found in Northern Ireland, AFBI still appeared to be caught unaware of the resource implications around the testing and diagnostics for Chalara.

25. The Committee is concerned that it has not seen or heard any evidence that the resource implications for dealing with the current Chalara outbreak, or indeed any future or current tree diseases has been properly considered and

planned for. The Committee does not disagree that the response on the ground has been good and to the level required. But the strategic thinking and planning required appears to be lacking. Despite a number of questions being asked in the Committee meetings, the Members remain to be convinced that any formal resource planning or forecasting is being done.

26. A number of stakeholders also made it clear that a major resource is access to the specialist scientific expertise in plant health. While the focus of this review has been largely on tree diseases, the Committee is aware that the major plant crop in Northern Ireland is grass. While there appears to be no immediate threat to this crop from pests and diseases this situation cannot be taken for granted. The Committee were therefore concerned that in oral evidence to it on 19th February 2013, from AFBI and DARD on the scientific aspects of tree disease, officials noted that:-

“One of the issues — it is a global issue — is that there has been a loss of traditional botanists and plant pathologists. At the moment, AFBI is reasonably OK for that, but, a few years down the road, we are certainly going to lose some of that expertise. I believe that AFBI's senior management team is very aware of these sorts of issues and is trying to address them by way of succession planning and bringing in young scientists. That is why the studentship programme is particularly important. We are training young scientists in these skills to lift the baton.”

27. **The Committee is concerned that the horizon scanning and planning for tree disease and plant health threats is inadequate. It advises the Minister to create stronger links with DEFRA particularly around horizon scanning and early warning systems to ensure her officials can adequately plan and respond to future pests and diseases not only in trees but in plant health.**
28. **While DARD has indicated that it does intend to bring a reconstitution scheme forward, the Committee advises the Minister to provide costings and details of any such a scheme to it as soon as possible**
29. **The Committee is content that there is an awareness of the need to ensure succession planning for plant health specialists but would advise the Minister to ensure that this aspect is included in the business planning for the Department and to ask AFBI to ensure that it is included in its Business Planning.**

30. With the spring and the leaving of trees in 2013, there has been a massive increase in Chalara infections and the Committee wish to seek assurances from the Minister that DARD / Forest Service can continue to absorb the resource demand (both financial, systems and human) of removing and destroying infected trees. The Committee advises the Minister that it wishes to see a formal resource plan in place as soon as possible. This resource plan should also address the issue of communications and service levels agreements between AFBI and DARD and Forest Service regarding the level of testing and other assistance which may be required for future tree or plant health disease outbreaks.

The contingency plans for tackling tree disease in Northern Ireland in general and ash dieback in particular.

31. As Ash is one of, if not the most common tree in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, its loss from the landscape, in similar quantities as in Denmark (60 – 90% losses) would be incredibly significant. The Committee therefore had particular interest in the plans to tackle tree diseases and Chalara. The Committee noted that during the course of its review that DARD and Forest Service published its draft All-Ireland Chalara Control Strategy. That draft is based on an all-Ireland approach and suggests that :-

“The fact that Ireland is an island functionally isolated by water from sources of known infection in Britain and continental Europe suggests that there may be some scope to prevent or slow down the disease from becoming established here. The effectiveness of this approach is likely to depend on maintaining that isolation in disease terms, and detecting and eradicating any foci of disease within Ireland before transmission to trees in the wider environment takes place.”

32. The Control Strategy therefore provides a framework for the policy of identification, control and eradication of the causal agents of Chalara ash dieback in Ireland. It is based on an all-Ireland approach. It would appear that most of those who provided evidence agree with the “contain and eradicate approach”. For example in written evidence to the Committee, the National Trust stated:-

“In Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland we have a time-bound opportunity to halt Chalara. It is not in the natural environment and the inoculum levels are considered low.”

33. Most recognise that Northern Ireland now has an opportunity that has been lost in the UK, where the disease is in the wider environment and being spread by “mature, sporulating canopy trees”. This is backed up by those organisations and individuals who attended the stakeholder event. When asked “What is Northern Ireland doing well regarding Tree Disease”, many attending the event noted:-

- Fortress Ireland approach is essential;
- Fortress Ireland is buying us time to build an action plan;
- Speed of reaction to likelihood of Chalara – better than Phytophthora.

34. The majority of the evidence provided to the Committee also suggests that the “All Island” approach is the correct one. As Confor / Northern Ireland Farm Forestry stated:-

“As for the whole of Ireland one, we need it to ensure that we have uniformity of approach from North and South, especially on imports and the way in which plants are moved around.”

35. There was however, concern expressed regarding how long it took to get a specific action plan to tackle Chalara published – even now it is still in draft format. While a Contingency plan for Serious Pest / Plant Health was published in March 2012, many stakeholders indicated that this was general and a more specific Chalara Control plan was needed. The Committee did note that DEFRA had published its Chalara control plan in late 2012 and was concerned that DARD, in conjunction with DAFM took so long to publish its specific action plan. In oral evidence to the Committee on 12th February, the Woodland Trust stated:-

“I know that, back in November, the Committee was concerned that there had not been a risk assessment, and we certainly share that concern. If we are to move on from that, the all-Ireland control plan is a real opportunity, which I think we need to get behind. I was pleased to hear back in January that work, or at least discussions, had already started. We want to see actual work on the ground, and that work getting signed off very quickly.”

36. There was some concern that the emphasis in tackling Chalara was based entirely on a strategy of contain and eradicate and that there is no clearly defined “plan B” if the disease spreads to the wider environment. In oral evidence to the Committee regarding Chalara, Confor stated:-

“At present, we need to focus on establishing the scale of the current attack and how we can eradicate it. However, you should be under no illusion that there may come “the Canute moment”, when little can be done to halt the spread of the disease. Before that happens, however, we need to develop means by which we can mitigate the effects of present and future attacks on our landscape”.

37. As part of its review Members of the Committee undertook a visit to Belfast Port to gain some understanding regarding timber and tree imports. This visit was very useful and informative. However, the Committee also heard

and shared concerns that substantial amounts of trees and timber is brought in via ferries with very little if no controls. The Committee was also concerned around the possible routes of infections coming from dunnage / packaging materials. And while the following quote from the Landscape Institute, is based on the situation in England, it does encapsulate the concerns the Committee has with the EU legislation as it applies to ports controls for Northern Ireland:-

“However, in my discussions with DEFRA, I said that 4,500 tons of freight comes through the Channel Tunnel every day, and I asked whether it was going to do anything about that. It said no. I said that 80,000 vehicles come across the Channel every week, and I asked whether it would do anything about that. It said no. We can do as much as we can, but you may well have seen photographs of trucks that have come through the Channel Tunnel, covered in caterpillars.”

38. While very welcoming of the approach of Forest Service in assisting with the removal and disposal of trees, Stakeholders are concerned, that outside of this landowners are not being compensated for losses. Other issues raised were the need for clarity around the annual payments if and when trees are removed and the availability of restocking grants. Forest Service is currently removing and destroying diseased trees, while in the Republic of Ireland, the landowner is being paid a grant to do the removal and restocking. This issue has been discussed in further detail at paragraphs 15 to 28.
39. In responding to this issue, in written evidence DARD focused on compensation stated:-
“The UK policy position is not to offer funding towards costs or compensation for losses associated with plant diseases. It is considered more appropriate to concentrate resources on surveillance, research and containment/eradication work. If DARD was to consider funding beyond this, it would be subject to State Aid rules, appropriate approvals, including business case and affordability considerations.
40. **The Committee calls upon the Minister to finalise the draft Chalara Control Plan and to ensure that adequate consideration is given to a “Plan B”, so that in the event that Chalara cannot be contained and eradicated, that an alternative strategy is ready and prepared.**

The relationships between DARD and Forest Service and other relevant stakeholders in the public, private sector including NGO's

41. All the evidence provided indicated that DARD / Forest Service have done a very good job of dealing with the Chalara outbreak. But it has exposed that relationships and communications with stakeholders could be improved. Stakeholders indicated that their vast knowledge, skills and resources have not been called upon. Many felt that they have been “dismissed” by or not trusted by DARD / Forest Service.
42. Practically all those who give evidence to the Committee indicated that there has been a distinct lack of communication from DARD and Forest Service. Whether from the commercial sector or the conservation sector, all have indicated that they have a vast wealth of knowledge and resources which could have been called upon, but were not, to assist with the recent Chalara outbreak. There is also concern that key stakeholders are not included in the steering group / tree disease response groups. In oral evidence to the Committee the Woodland Trust stated:-

“We talk of consultations and stakeholder involvement, but it needs to be deeper than that. There is a group called the outbreak management team, which I think is solely in the Forest Service. I respectfully suggest that, for that team to be meaningful, it needs to extend beyond Forest Service officials. Many people, whether in the conservation sector, the commercial sector, the mills or premier woodlands of this world, could have made a useful contribution to that group rather than being seen as just stakeholders.”

43. In oral evidence to the Committee on 26th February, Confor / Northern Ireland Farm Forestry stated:-

“As a body of professionals, we had been dealing with chalara for quite a number of months before it raised its head among the general public. We were talking to the Forest Service and were looking at our own trees and inspecting our own sites all last summer. Professionally, we are dealing with it quite well. However, it is frustrating when I inspect one of my sites and then have to have a Department inspector come out to look at exactly the same trees and, to be honest, half the time they are less qualified to look at the trees than I am. As you say, it would have been much easier for me to say, "Yes, it was inspected; yes, it is clear" or "I have concerns". For that to

work, there has to be trust. Sometimes, however, trust is not there, and when we are talking about disease perhaps there should be checks to make sure. We could have covered much more ground much more quickly had the Department allowed us to go out there and report back.”

44. In written evidence to the Committee, the National Trust stated:-

“While information sharing has been vital, so far the Department has missed the opportunity to enable stakeholders to bring actual resources to the table”.

And

“Our teams could have reduced the burden for DARD/Forest Service by covering National Trust sites. In addition to paid staff we have access to volunteers and relationships with the voluntary sector which could have further reduced the pressure on the Department.”

45. The evidence collected may be interpreted to indicate that the relationship between stakeholders and DARD / Forest Service could be improved and built upon to the benefit of both parties. Using the resources and expertise of the third sector could help reduce the pressure on the Department in future tree / plant disease outbreaks in general and Chalara in particular. In connection with Ash Dieback, the surveillance and re-surveillance requirements for this spring and summer and future years will be immense, and the assistance of stakeholders could be of considerable aid. Other evidence heard by the Committee suggested that DARD / Forest Service did not engage with key stakeholders to assist in the surveillance for Chalara because of a lack of trust. As Confor stated *“The fear is that, if we were to discover it, we would try to cover it up because otherwise we would be out of pocket”*. Additionally the abilities and skills of key stakeholders could be brought to bear on issues such as research, disease modelling and horizon scanning.

46. The Committee has expressed its disappointment about the level and extent of engagement with stakeholders to date. It advises the Minister to begin to develop methods in which the skills, resources and expertise of stakeholders can be fully integrated into not only the surveillance aspects but the planning and testing aspects of tree disease and controls.

Other issues - Growing our own trees and investing in and developing local nursery capacity

47. Linked very closely to the issue of Provenance (discussed below), is the ability and the desire to grow sufficient trees in Northern Ireland to meet local demand. The Committee is aware that various Northern Ireland Government Departments and Agencies have procured and planted over two million trees in Northern Ireland in the last few years (see appendix one to this memo). This is on top of the trees bought and planted by others key stakeholders. For example, the Woodland Trust in oral evidence to the Committee stated

“In the past 15 years, we have planted about one million trees in the Province, so we know that we will need about 750,000 trees, year on year.”

48. Trees are imported for landscaping and for the creation of woodland but additionally, the Committee noted, particularly on its visit to Belfast Port, the amount of timber brought into Northern Ireland and the cost of this to the economy. This point was emphasised in oral evidence to the Committee by the Landscape Institute who noted:-

“The interesting thing about the UK is the question of forestry and timber. Timber imports are third after oil and food, and are worth very many millions of pounds.”

49. The evidence gathered by the Committee on this issue allowed a wide range of differing viewpoints to emerge. Various Stakeholders emphasised how important it would be for the future of the industry to ensure that (some) capacity exists to grow trees locally from local seed.

50. The confidence of the sector, of farmers and key stakeholders who were considering establishing woodland, and those who already have, has been seriously damaged by the recent surge in tree pests and diseases – of which ash dieback is the latest. The cost of dealing with the disease, as well as the uncertainty around future losses from known and unknown pests and diseases, as well as the huge investment needed has undermined confidence. For example, the National Trust indicated in written evidence that:-

“The most recent tree health issues we have faced are Phytophthora, acute oak decline and ash dieback. We estimate that dealing with Phytophthora alone has cost the Trust around £1million pounds over the last five years.”

51. The Woodland Trust also pointed out that, as an organisation, it had created a three point plan for tackling tree disease. One of the three points was “Growing our Own”. This would allow the Woodland Trust to have confidence in the supply chain process. This would be achieved by investing in and working with UK tree nurseries, working closely with them over a long period of time to produce trees in which they have 100% confidence. In oral evidence to the Committee on 9th May 2013, The Landscape Institute noted that:-

“There is a horticulture industry here, which is fairly weak and could be built upon. Certainly, through changes to our own structures and specification methods, we encourage, by whatever mechanisms we can through procurement, the use of locally sourced and grown materials. That does not necessarily mean that you would have to have a horticulturalist starting up for the first time and getting up to speed over the five to 10 years that it might take. It might be done by encouragement through grant assistance to well-established growers in mainland Europe or Britain to establish, if you like, a sub-office in Northern Ireland.”

52. The Committee heard that in the past, many buyers had focused on price alone and that, for a variety of reasons, continental growers were the cheapest source of trees. Confor did note that it is very easy to buy from continental nurseries at 15 – 20% cheaper.
53. The Committee also heard that despite, over two million trees being sourced for local usage, the fluctuations in demand, the lack of knowledge of what species of tree and of what age or maturity would be required, as well as issues of price and cost, had created a difficult market for many local nurseries. However, the National Trust was clear that there need to be some capacity in the local market.

“The first recommendation relates to the fact that we feel that there needs to be an investment to develop the local nursery capacity. At the minute, we import huge numbers of trees — I have heard estimates of 80% or 90% — the majority of which are coming from continental Europe. The scale is massive. Those imports are conifer and broadleaf, and, as we heard earlier, the majority of our woodlands are conifer. We feel that there is an opportunity to develop the local economy and local nurseries so that they

can provide and become self-sustainable for the growing of broadleaf trees. We think that is hugely important.”

54. The National Trust did use the example of the Toome bypass where local seed was collected and, as a result, native indigenous trees were planted. However, as it pointed out:-

“One of the difficulties in the procurement system is that, if you are trying to gather a large number of trees and the nurseries are small — there are a number of smaller nurseries that are capable of growing native trees — and if the procurement does not allow for supply in small batches but wants it all in one go, there really is not much of a choice in where you can go for that.”

55. Confor cast doubts on whether greater tree production in Northern Ireland was possible in the current climate. In oral evidence to the Committee on 26th February, they stated:-

“At the moment, production in Northern Ireland is a non-starter, because we are producing only 5% of our needs internally. The rest is really coming in from Scotland, the north of England and some from the South. The nursery here that produces 10,000 plants cannot compete on cost with a nursery that produces four million or five million plants. It is a chicken-and-egg situation, and they will never catch up.”

56. The Committee heard that the demand for trees fluctuates massively from year to year, as does the amount of seed collected. Confor give the example of oak seed. There was very little available over the last two years in the UK meaning that, next year, there will be no oak saplings. So a big order for hardwood, will have to be filled from EU nurseries – not UK nurseries. The term “crystal – ball “ was used regarding nurseries being able to predict and meet local need.
57. Given the fluctuation in requirements, and the difficulties around always having sufficient seed, how can local growers predict and meet market requirements? The issue of contract growing and / or pre contracts was raised as a means of assisting local growers. In oral evidence to the Committee, the National Trust were clear that the establishment of capacity within the local industry would not be easy.

“It is a big task, because we have to understand what the supply is and what the demand is. You could probably get the supply quite quickly, because you could look at the major nurseries in Ireland and see where their capacity is. The demand is tougher, because it takes a lot of long-term planning. When we are doing a road scheme, and we need a million trees, we need to be given three to five years' notice of that requirement, not one year's notice. If you get one year's notice, you will get trees from the continent. There is, therefore, something about the long-term planning on major schemes and how we support that. It is very important.”

58. In responding to this issue, in oral evidence to the Committee on 13th May 2013, DARD officials noted the following

“I think that a lot of this is down to the economics. Part of the reason why trees are procured and sourced from mainland Europe and the UK mainland is because the capacity does not exist in Northern Ireland. I have taken that issue up with development advisers in the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE), and I have asked them to consider what work they have done in the past and what work might be done in the future. As you pointed out, if you can identify your requirements in advance, that may give businesses the opportunity to try to develop to meet that demand. However, I think that the reality is that the levels of investment that would be involved to become competitive with some of the larger tree-production nurseries may be prohibitive for some of them. Colleagues in CAFRE also identified skills issues in developing the scale of the activity that is required and the necessary expertise on growing trees. There may also be issues with the climate, soil type, and so on, that may make it less productive here than for some of our competitors elsewhere in Europe.”

- 59. The Committee advises the Minister, in conjunction with other relevant Ministers, to consider ways in which long term support and assistance, can be given to the nursery trade to enable local tree stock to be grown, including by investigating how current procurement practises can be adjusted to assist local growers for example, the breaking of large contracts into lots, or sufficient advance notice to allow suppliers to form consortia.**

Other issues - Provenance

60. While not part of the formal terms of reference for the review, the Committee found the discussion around the issue of provenance to be linked closely to that of growing our own trees and therefore a summary of the evidence provided to the Committee is outlined below.
61. The evidence stated that the use of the term provenance is, in the opinion of most witnesses, deeply problematic. It referred only to where the seed was collected and often held no relationship to where the seed was grown, or indeed how many nurseries the seedling has passed through. Therefore, when buyers had specified tree of local or UK provenance, they assumed the trees were from seeds sourced and also grown locally or in the UK. However, this was not the case – as the National Trust had discovered. That organisation bought ash trees for its Runkerry Site. On the planting contract, it had specified UK provenance trees. However, while the seed was collected locally, the trees were grown in Europe and supplied to the National Trust infected. The National Trust in written evidence to the Committee stated that:-

“Buyers need a chain of custody approach similar to that for FSC wood products to be confident that they are planting trees which are not carrying pests and diseases.”

62. Within the EU there is free movement of plant material between countries except for the most serious pests / diseases. Plants and trees can also be freely moved between countries for growing on. There is a system for notifying buyers of the provenance of seed but not the locations where the seed was grown. In evidence to the Committee (on 19th February 2013), based on the scientific aspect of plant health and tree disease, DARD and AFBI did note:-

“The movement of plants provides the potential for spreading this disease.”

And

“The current disease outbreak has highlighted the importance of local production rather than sourcing material from elsewhere”

63. However, the evidence from Confor, appears to indicate that the better and larger nurseries are beginning to address this issue already. In oral evidence to the Committee on 26th February 2013,

“I have a bit of paper with me today that I received last week with my last order of trees from a nursery in Scotland, and it gives the exact seed source, where the material has come from and the compartment numbers in quite some detail. That seed can probably be traced to within 100 metres from where it was collected on the other side of the world. That comes from the big nurseries, which are computerised and professional and have really cleaned up their act — not that it was particularly dirty. It is the smaller nurseries and the middlemen who are handling and buying in some plants from here and there and making up bundles of plants and shipping them on. Those plants are getting mixed up, which is the problem. It has to be self-regulating. The business will go towards these nurseries that can prove that they have better biosecurity. They will thrive, and the smaller nurseries that people do not trust will slowly go out of business. Even without legislation, the commercial reality will be such that people will naturally start getting from the more reputable nurseries.”

64. In oral evidence to the Committee, on this issue, the Woodland Trust stated

“We were also deceived, in that what we thought was of local provenance was, in fact, anything but local. That spurred us on to look at what we do and why we do it. As we move forward, price will not be the ruling factor when we buy materials. In the past, materials came from clearing houses in the Netherlands and could have had their origins in Turkey or along the Mediterranean. Local suppliers just could not compete.”

APPENDIX 1

Assembly Section

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Ms Stella McArdle

Clerk

Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

Room 244

Parliament Buildings

Stormont

Our Ref OCQ23/11-15

27 March 2013

Dear Stella,

The Agriculture and Rural Development Committee asked Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) to co-ordinate a response from Government Departments and for the appropriate agencies/NDPBs on:

- The number of trees procured which were grown locally and the numbers which were grown elsewhere and imported in the last two financial years; and
- Whether the procurement process took account of the provenance issue ie locally sourced seed, with locally grown trees.

The information received is attached at Annex A.

The Committee also asked if “pre-contracts” had been used in the past and whether they could be used in the future. None of the respondees reported having used such contracts in the past. CPD advises that it is not possible to

directly award contracts to local nurseries as this would likely breach the procurement legislation. However, the advance notice required for high value contracts provides an opportunity for suppliers to form a consortium, enabling them to compete for larger contracts. Buyers also consider breaking large contracts into lots as part of the procurement strategy. This may also help to facilitate participation by local suppliers.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Judith Finlay". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

JUDITH FINLAY

Departmental Assembly Liaison Officer

Table 1 Information request relating to the period 01/04/10 to 31/03/11

Centre of Procurement Expertise	Number of trees procured which were grown locally	Trees procured which were grown elsewhere and imported		
		Total	Grown from locally sourced seeds	Not grown from locally sourced seeds
Roads Service ¹	19,679	72,697	43,273	14,424
Health Estates Investment Group	0	250	0	250
CPD Supplies and Services ²	0	2,188,000	0	0
NI Housing Executive	0	1373	0	1373
Education and Library Boards	177	89	0	89
Totals	19,856	2,262,409	43,273	16,136

Note 1. During the financial year from 01/04/2010 to 31/03/2011 the source of the seeds for 15,000 trees was unknown.

Note 2. This is a contract for the Forest Service. All Forest Service planting stock is purchased from Coillte who grow the trees in their own nurseries in Ireland with either their own seed or imported seed from the UK or Europe.

Table 2 Information request relating to the period 01/04/11 to 31/03/12

Centre of Procurement Expertise	Number of trees procured which were grown locally	Trees procured which were grown elsewhere and imported		
		Total	Grown from locally sourced seeds	Not grown from locally sourced seeds
NI Water ¹	9175	0	0	0
Roads Service	11,851	168,285	28,659	139,626
Health Estates Investment Group	0	99	0	99
CPD Supplies and Services ²	0	2,240,000	0	0
NI Housing Executive	0	1056	0	1056
Education and Library Boards	490	62	0	62
Totals	21,516	2,409,502	28,659	140,843

Note 1. NIW did not have any Contract with local nurseries, but procured trees for the woodland creations at Dunore Point and Castor Bay through the Woodland Trust.

Note 2. This is a contract for the Forest Service. All Forest Service planting stock is purchased from Coillte who grow the trees in their own nurseries in Ireland with either their own seed or imported seed from the UK or Europe.