

AERA Committee Meeting Update – Thursday 18 June 2020

Food & Farming Group Input

Covid 19 update

Single Application

- The Direct Payments to Farmers Amendment Date (Amendment) (Coronavirus) Regulations (NI) 2020 will allow farmers to amend Single Application claims without penalty until 09 June 2020. They were made under the negative resolution procedure and came into operation on 31 May.
- The window for application and amendments is now closed.
- Inspections have recommenced across Basic Payment and the Environmental Farming Scheme. Whistleblower inspections are ongoing in relation to potential breaches of cross compliance, site visits are considered on a case by case basis. Consideration is being given in relation to how other inspections and how social distancing can be managed.
- The Minister has agreed to reduce the control rates for BPS inspections in 2020. This is in line with action taken by England, Scotland and Wales. A Statutory Rule to allow this reduction in control rates is being drafted and will be made under the negative resolution procedure in due course.
- Applications to the fourth Tranche of the Environmental Farming Scheme Higher level are being prioritised.

Covid-19 – Current key issues for Agri-food sector

1. NI Executive allocation of £25m for market interventions to support Farm and Horticultural Businesses.

Position – On Friday 22 May 2020 the AERA Committee received an update from Minister Poots on the £25m funding for market interventions to support Farm and Horticultural Businesses and sought the views of Committee members. Officials are also engaging with industry stakeholder representatives to discuss how best to allocate the funding to those impacted most by Covid 19. In addition, on Tuesday 9 June, Minister Poots addressed the NI Assembly as part of a Private Members' Motion in relation to Support for the Sheep and Beef Farmers through the Covid-19 Pandemic. He indicated that the funding would be allocated to those hardest hit based on the evidence in a fair and equitable way.

2. While supply chains are still working effectively there still remain concerns across all stakeholders that staff availability for work could decline quickly if staff have to self-isolate as a consequence of the new Track and Trace protocols.

Position – Output from the sector remains at 100% of demand, with levels of absenteeism reported as remaining relatively low.

3. Beef prices started to fall during March with the average steer price reaching a low point of £3.15/kg for the week ending 25 April (down 16p/kg on March prices at £3.31). Since then prices have increased to £3.46/kg and it is expected that forthcoming statistics will show

further increases as weekly quotes have been improving and are now above early March levels. Lamb prices fell by 40p/kg at the start of April but recovered relatively quickly to prior levels. The latest GDT auction (2 June) for milk products showed an increase of 0.1% from the previous auction (skim milk powder down 0.5%, whole milk powder up 2.1%, cheddar down 5.3%, butter down 4.4%). Lakeland dairies announced a base price of 23p/litre for April milk (down 0.75p/litre on March and 2.25p/litre on February cumulatively). Dale Farm also announced a base price of 23p/litre for April milk (down 1p/litre on March and 2p/litre on February cumulatively). Other firms that have announced price drops include Glanbia Cheese (0.5p/litre for April milk), Glanbia Ireland (0.5p/litre for April milk) and Aurivo (0.75p/litre for April milk).

Position – DAERA is continuing to monitor market conditions, liaise with DEFRA and other DA's, and work is ongoing to develop support schemes for farmers in affected sectors. Work is also ongoing to monitor impacts in the sheep, potato and hatching egg sectors.

4. Financial pressures continue to impact across supply chains as markets adapt to the changing trading environment. For example, loss of food service markets, certain export markets, reduced productivity in processing plants and increases in some input costs like animal feed. Industry has called for financial support measures including grants, rates relief, loans and EU (CMO) schemes.

Position – DAERA continues to work closely with industry to assess the potential impacts on the supply chain, and to explore mitigation measures if required. DAERA has announced a £25m funding support package.

5. Many horticulture businesses producing and selling spring bedding plants, cut flowers and ornamentals rely on sales at this time of year. There is a narrow window for sales and a short shelf life for the product with 60% of annual sales occurring in spring.

Position - Enabling people to visit garden centres while remaining safe, has provided a much needed injection of cash to these businesses and their suppliers and has gone some way towards helping the sector recoup some of its losses. DAERA Officials continue to monitor the impacts of COVID-19 on the horticulture sector to assess the level of financial support required.

6. As with private sector workers, there is concern that a shortage of workers in key roles within Government/Agencies with statutory inspection roles to protect public health, could lead to a slow down or halt in food processing capacity. This would limit not only the amount of product available but also have knock on effects at farm level.

Position – DAERA are reprioritising workstreams in light of the pressures created by Covid-19 to maintain key services.

- The majority of the education programmes at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) have concluded for the 2019/20 academic year, with assessment and examination marks currently being verified with the external examiners and awarding bodies.
- The Minister will deliver an address to all CAFRE students at an online student engagement event scheduled for circulation on 19 June 2020. As a result of the current COVID-19 restrictions the annual graduation ceremonies due to be held at the end of June at each of the CAFRE Campuses have been postponed. However, it is intended that the events will be rearranged at a more appropriate time, depending on Government advice on large group gatherings, to celebrate the students' success in the presence of their friends and family.
- CAFRE Knowledge Advisory Service Advisers and Technologists are available to provide advisory support to the Northern Ireland Agri-food industry to assist farmers and food businesses with technical, business and environmental advice during the COVID-19 crisis. Technical articles, videos and webinars have been made available online and promoted through social media channels to support those sectors of the agri-food industry most impacted by COVID-19.
- CAFRE are progressing the development of recovery plans, in line with the Executive's five stage plan on the lifting of the COVID-19 restrictions, for the future delivery of education programmes during the next academic year and the enhanced provision of knowledge advisory programmes to the agri-food industry.
- CAFRE's residential facilities continue to be used by the Department of Health as part of their contingency planning with health workers using Enniskillen and Greenmount Campuses for overnight accommodation.

Update on Essential Legislation

- The UKG Agriculture Bill has moved to the House of Lords where its Second Reading took place on 10 June 2020.

Veterinary Service & Animal Health Group

Covid 19 update

Delivery of Official Controls

- The delivery of official controls, that is, ante mortem and post mortem inspections, verification of food business operators' compliance with hygiene, animal health and welfare requirements continues in all slaughterhouses. All slaughterhouses are working normally with full throughput maintained.
- Following the reported development of Covid-19 clusters in meat establishments, VSAHG officials continue to actively engage with the Public Health Agency (PHA), Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland (HSENI) and the industry to ensure adherence with PHA advice and guidance in all food processing establishments.

- **Current Position**

- Agri-food Inspection Branch have recommenced some pre-notified and unaccompanied on-farm inspections for food safety. These are being carried out in line with government guidance on COVID-19.
- Remote inspection work is also being completed across the dairy, meat and egg sectors to meet official control requirements.

Bovine TB Programme

- From the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, revised temporary measures for bovine TB (bTB) testing have been introduced, based upon the following principles:
 - (i) testing should not take place except in exceptional circumstances; and
 - (ii) the primacy of public health requirements.
- The new measures are designed to safeguard the health and well-being of farmers, veterinary practitioners and staff, maintain animal and public health controls and ease the burden on farmers.
- Following implementation of revised temporary measures on 30/4/20, which included an exemption from the requirement to test young calves under 180 days old, the number of herds and animals receiving a bovine TB test has increased. This temporary exemption permits the safer handling of cattle herds and improved public safety.
- **Current Position**
- At the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, in week commencing 13th April 2020, only 44% of herds and 41% of animals were tested, compared with the equivalent week in 2019. In week commencing Monday 25th May 2020, TB tests were completed for 118% of herds and 120% of animals were tested when compared to the equivalent week in May 2019. These statistics indicate that TB herd testing is currently exceeding 2019 levels and the backlog from April 2020 is beginning to reduce.
- VSAHG officials continue to monitor the implementation of the new bTB testing measures.

Recommencement of Routine Animal Disease Surveillance Inspections

- In accordance with official Covid-19 guidance, VSAHG officials are proposing to recommence the following disease surveillance activities:
 - (1) Low risk on-farm bovine brucellosis sampling on 15th June 2020 at 25% of normal working levels, increasing every week by 25% to reach 100% normal working levels by week commencing 13th July;
 - (2) Bovine TB interferon-gamma (IFN-g) sampling on week commencing 15th June;
 - (3) Bluetongue cattle survey on week commencing 13th July; and
 - (4) Enzootic bovine leucosis (EBL) survey on week commencing 13th July.

Trade Export Certification

- From the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, a number of easements in relation to export health certificates for exports of live animals and products of animal origin to various countries have been introduced. Such arrangements help to minimise the need for face-to-face interaction between private veterinary practitioners, exporters and DAERA staff.

- **Current Position**

- Third country export health certification easements for exports of all commodities to Hong Kong will be implemented from Wednesday 17th June.
- The agreed easements will allow the issue of an Export Health Certificate on white paper instead of crown vellum providing flexibility for the administrative processes, thereby helping to keep trade moving.
- There are now easements in place with seven countries - Australia, China, Gibraltar, Myanmar, Philippines, Hong Kong and the United States of America. Negotiations with a number of other countries are ongoing.

Animal Welfare

- **Zoo Funding**

- The Department is continuing to consider the development of a possible funding support scheme for licensed zoo establishments in Northern Ireland. A detailed questionnaire was issued to these establishments in order to establish an evidence base for providing support. Officials are currently analysing the responses received.
- The Department has published advice on its website on the:
 - resumption of outdoor equestrian sport;
 - use of non-veterinary animal care services and exercising/training animals; and
 - the provision of boarding/kennelling, non-veterinary care services, animal rescue and rehoming services.

Essential Legislation

- Work on essential legislation continues but at a slower pace given the diversion of resource to COVID related work. This diversion, alongside the potential for additional COVID related absences, means that there is a risk that legislation may not be completed within the required timescales and/or to standard.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency and Environment, Marine & Fisheries Group

ENVIRONMENT UPDATE

Covid 19 Update

Waste Management Collection, Storage and Processing

- As at 12 June 2020, there are 64 Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs) open across Northern Ireland with some further sites expected to re-open in a phased manner over the coming weeks.

- The first 4 Nations Used Textiles call took place on 11 June 2020. The issue of used textiles is becoming increasingly apparent as end markets remain closed with no timeline for re-opening. To compound the issue further, textile reprocessors and collectors are reaching storage capacity. With charity shops due to re-open in the next week, a large number of donations is expected. Landfill or incineration is not an option at this stage due to the sentiment this would portray and the potentially detrimental impact it would create for donations and re-use within the sector. NIEA has addressed the storage issue in Northern Ireland to some extent through Regulatory Position Statements and temporary increases to storage. Plans are being developed, alongside our 4 Nations counterparts to address the problems with used textiles in the short and longer term.

Maintaining Drinking Water Quality

- NIEA and Drinking Water Inspectorate (DWI) have been working with NI Water and DfI in their application for 3 Drought Orders as a result of the prolonged period of dry weather. On 3rd June 2020, NIEA agreed to NI Water's proposals to increase abstraction rates and reduce compensation flows which will have a detrimental impact on the environment. These are required to protect the raw drinking water supply required to serve water treatment works. DfI published the Drought Orders on 8th June 2020. Work continues to finalise the specific method statements to minimise the impact on the environment.
- There has been some improvement in the situation due to the change in weather and significant work done by NI Water in re-zoning and tankering water to areas at highest risk. Although the treated water storage reserves have returned to normal and demand has reduced, NIEA and DWI continue to work with NI Water in the event that the situation may escalate again. This is critical for maintaining our supply of clean safe drinking water.
- DWI have been working with NI Water to agree their Rollback Plan to re-introduce regulatory monitoring of drinking water again. In the week commencing 18th May, NI Water started to increase sampling frequencies for most of the regulatory parameters that had been suspended from mid-March. This represents a return to between 85-90% of their regulatory monitoring for drinking water. Monitoring at consumers' taps is still suspended, however samples which are representative of the water being supplied are being collected to ensure continued public health protection.
- NIEA have also been working with NI Water to agree their Rollback Plan to re-introduce regulatory monitoring of wastewater discharges. NI Water are seeking a further extension to the current Regulatory Position Statement for Reduced Sampling until August 2020 due to limited capacity within the wastewater laboratories. NIEA have agreed in principle subject to the provision of clear evidence of the resilience issues and the planned mitigation measures to return to a full regulatory sampling programme.
- DEFRA have approached NIEA to take part in a research project for Covid-19 in wastewater. NIEA are currently scoping the possibilities of extending the research within Northern Ireland. The research will monitor wastewater for Covid-19. The monitoring results would be used in conjunction with other research to provide early warning of a resurgence in the virus.

Future Viability of Environmental NGOs

- DAERA has worked with Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) to issue a second survey to provide an update of the impact of COVID-19 on the eNGO sector. NIEL have extended the close date of the survey until 19th June.

Country Parks and Nature Reserves

- Minister Poots announced on 12th June that he has authorised opening of public conveniences in DAERA forest and country parks from 15th June. Vans selling beverages, ice creams and beverages will also be allowed to operate.
- Toilets will be opened at many Departmental sites including Tollymore Forest Park, Drum Manor Forest Park, Glenariff Forest Park, Parkanaur Forest, Castlewellan Forest Park, Garvagh Forest, Belvior Forest, Roe Valley Country Park, Castle Archdale Country Park, Peatlands Park and the Quoile Countryside Centre.
- Toilets at Scrabo Country Park, Crawfordsburn, Helen's Bay and the Duross bay toilets at Castle Archdale Country Park are not yet able to open as health and safety works are on-going (primarily legionnaires work).
- The Department are working towards opening toilets at all of its properties as soon as possible.

Update on Essential Legislation: Environment Bill

- The Public Bill Committee at Westminster is expected to resume scrutiny of the Bill within the next few weeks. It is hoped that the Assembly debate on the Legislative Consent Motion will take place on 30th June.

Update on Essential Finance Information

- In addition to previously securing £3.8m emergency Covid funding, an additional £0.9m has been allocated from within the Department's existing budget to assist with covering additional waste costs incurred by Councils. Consequently the Councils' bid for £4.7m to cover additional waste management expenses for the period March to June will be met in full.

Environment, Marine & Fisheries Group

FISHERIES UPDATE

Covid 19 Update

Fisheries - Sea Fishing Sector

- On 3 April 2020 the Minister announced that the Department would proceed with a scheme of

financial support for the sea fish catching sector. This required secondary legislation made under section 15 of the Fisheries Act 1981. The Statutory Rule was made and laid at the Assembly on Monday 4 May 2020 and came into operation on 5 May 2020. The Scheme is known as the Sea Fish Industry (Coronavirus) (Fixed Costs) Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2020 (S.R. 2020 No. 76).

- A motion to confirm the Scheme must be debated by the Assembly within 3 months, which in effect is by summer recess.
- The Department made an amending regulation (the Sea Fish Industry (Coronavirus) (Fixed Costs) **(Amendment)** Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2020 (S.R. 2020 No, 95) on 4 June 2020 which comes into operation on 8 June 2020. This was laid at the Assembly Business Office on 5 June 2020. The amendment has no material effect on the administration of the Scheme.
- The Examiner of Statutory Rules has not yet reported on S.R. 2020 No.95. The intention is for one motion in the Assembly to approve both S.R. 2020 No. 76 and S.R. 2020 No. 95.
- Letters of Invitation to apply for the scheme were issued to 166 vessel owners and 81 letters of ineligibility were issued during April.
- After appeals, a total of 169 Letters of Offer and Claim Forms have been issued, with 161 returned to date. As of 11th June, the Department has made payments to 155 vessel owners totalling £1,190,000.

Aquaculture Sector

- The Aquaculture Financial Assistance Scheme was announced by the Minister on 26 May. This funding is to be delivered through the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) Programme.
- On 29 May, letters of Invitation to apply to the Scheme were issued to 19 potential eligible businesses. A further 38 letters were issued to potential ineligible businesses to advise of the appeal mechanism.
- 6 applications have been received to date (12th June 2020). Applications, 3 years accounts and sales for the qualifying period will be reviewed and letters of offer issued to eligible applicants within 10 working days of receipt of application, where appropriate. We also aim to respond to any appeals received within 10 working days of receipt.

Lough Neagh Fishery

- While some sectors within Europe are beginning to reopen it will take longer for the eel market to recover which the Lough Neagh fishermen and the local community depend on.
- EMFF Regulation 2020/560 has recently been amended particularly Article 33 which may provide possible funding opportunities for Lough Neagh Commercial eel fishermen who at this time are unable to work during the short season 1st May until end of October.

- DAERA officials have confirmed that Lough Neagh commercial eel fishermen would be eligible for financial assistance under this amendment. A meeting with the Lough Neagh Fishermen's Cooperative Society (LNFCS) took place on the 11th June to discuss the proposals for such a scheme. Work is ongoing between DAERA officials and the LNFCS to look at the various issues and compile the necessary data.

Update on Essential Legislation: UK Fisheries Bill

- The next stage (Report) of the Bill in the House of Lords will begin on 22 June 2020. A second day for the Report Stage has been arranged for 24 June 2020.

Update on Essential Finance Information

- Nothing new to report.

Rural Affairs, Forestry Service & Estate Transformations Group

Covid 19 update

RURAL AFFAIRS DIVISION

RURAL AFFAIRS RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Rural Affairs continues to focus on payments processing and supporting partners. Work continues on the draft Rural Policy Framework. Work also continues in the DAERA DIRECT Offices both in offices and via home working.

DAERA DIRECT OFFICES

Admin staff continue to work in the 12 DAERA Direct offices on essential services, whilst maintaining social distancing, on a rota basis. The remainder are working from home on PCs and laptops, with secure access to the relevant DAERA databases such as APHIS, NIFAIS and CIS.

TACKLING RURAL POVERTY AND SOCIAL ISOLATION (TRPSI)

These TRPSI funded initiatives continue to proactively deliver support to rural dwellers. To date, under the Coronavirus Community Fund (CFNI) 154 rural organisations have been supported in total with £433,852 awarded. Some 74 of these have been funded from DAERA's £200k contribution agreed by the DAERA Minister. Also, 13 organisations (7 rural) deemed ineligible by CFNI have now been grant aided through a partnership arrangement between DAERA, DFC and the Rural Community Network, receiving £42,645 in total, an average of £3,280.

PROJECT STRATUM

DfE lead on Project Stratum. The tender has now closed (5/5/20) and the bids are being technically appraised and assessed by a specialist team in DfE. At this point, the project is still on target to issue a contract this financial year.

RURAL SUPPORT

Rural Support continue to deal with calls and offer support. An on-line resources hub is in development for the farming community and sectors that support the community.

Rural Support are currently adequately resourced to deal with the increase and DAERA officials continue to liaise with them on a very regular basis. The table below provides a comparison of calls to the Rural Support Helpline between 2019 and 2020.

| | 2019 | 2020 |
|--------------|-------------|--|
| Jan | 39 | 68 |
| Feb | 31 | 34 |
| March | 33 | 85 |
| April | 34 | 128 |
| May | 40 | 64 |
| June | 37 | 15 * (1 st to 5 th June) |

ROLE OF RURAL COMMUNITY TRANSPORT PARTNERSHIP (RCTP'S)

The RCTP's continue to work in a very effective partnership approach with local Councils and Health Trusts, in delivering services to rural dwellers.

Some 3,804 individual food parcels have been delivered to vulnerable rural dwellers and another 4,361 parcels have been delivered to hubs for onward transmission to households. RCTP's have made 7,016 telephone contacts and these have resulted in 3,833 individuals receiving support including signposting, onward referral and inclusion into the food parcel scheme.

SPRING SOCIAL PRESCRIBING PROJECT

Some 3,833 contacts have been made to vulnerable people and 1,104 of these people have received other forms of support such as food and medicines.

FARM FAMILIES HEALTH CHECK PROGRAMME (FFHCP) - COVID-19 RESPONSE

Contact made with 286 people in the Northern, Western, Southern and South Eastern Trust areas who are aged 70+. Some 257 of these people have received support and advice.

RURAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT SERVICE

Councils have identified the Rural Support Networks as delivery partners and all are involved in the community response. DAERA officials continue to meet with the Rural Support Networks on a fortnightly basis to provide support and advice.

In terms of practical activity on the ground, RSN's have been involved in a wide range of community initiatives including the following:

- 4000 food parcels delivered
- 3 meat parcels delivered to families facing extreme financial hardship
- £7,900 funding provided to 45 community groups for PPE
- 1000 gloves, 700 disposable aprons, 20 face masks and 15 litres hand sanitiser delivered
- 60 Wellness packs delivered
- 25 food waste recycling bags delivered
- 1305 activity booklets delivered to 18 groups
- 1480 volunteers identified and currently providing Covid 19 assistance
- 60 volunteers involved in letter writing to care homes
- 40 referrals to various Agencies
- 10 referrals to food banks
- 160 follow up calls regarding food box referrals
- 1335 e bulletins issued detailing funding programmes, Covid 19 assistance

Facebook posts with a total reach of 13,275

- 1500 food box referrals
- 762 food parcels delivered
- 600 boxes of PPE gloves, 700 disposable aprons, 200 face masks and 30 pump bottles hand sanitiser delivered
- 120 sensory packs supplied to Autism group
- £7,400 Small Grant funding provided to 44 community groups
- £2,000 of hardship funding provided
- 1070 volunteers identified and currently providing assistance
- 370 volunteers involved in Resilience fund
- 906 referrals Mental Health Awareness week
- 126 telephone contacts with shielded residents

RURAL POLICY – RECOVERY

Work continues on a draft Rural Policy Framework. We still intend to go to consultation later this year.

EU LEADER PROGRAMME AND TOURISM

RAD continue to monitor progress on the LEADER and Tourism measures. Issues on access for projects remain as previously advised. The Department is aware that the majority of contractors are now back on site or planning to go back on site.

Payments continue to be processed in line with easements set out within EU Commission guidance.

DfE has established a Tourism Recovery Steering Group and Working Group to put in place the structures that will help support recovery and prepare the industry to respond when consumer demand ultimately returns. The Department has representatives sitting on both Groups. The Department has also established a Tourism Recovery Advisory Group; the first meeting took place on 5 June. The Advisory Group will work collaboratively to provide a cohesive response to the issues facing the tourism sector in NI and to encourage the development of a recovery framework that has Green Growth as the pathway to sustainable development.

PROCESSING OF GRANT AID CLAIMS

RAD continue to process claims and make payments relating to TRPSI and LEADER.

Rural Development Programme

| Programme | 1 st March to 2 June 2020 | | 3 rd June to 12 th June | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------|---|-------------|
| | No of Payments | Amount | No of Payments | Amount |
| LEADER | 142 | £4,519,596.25 | 4 | £220,222.87 |
| Running Costs to LAGS | 22 | £634,245.40 | 3 | £175,120.97 |
| TOURISM | 7 | £1,141,339.95 | 0 | 0 |
| Farm Business Improvement | 12 | £1,250,179.00 | 1 | £22,735.00 |
| Other RDP Schemes | 9 | £69,309.84 | 0 | 0 |

There are an additional 13 LEADER project payments valued at £244,134.03 are being processed for payment.

Tackling Rural Poverty & Social Isolation (TRPSI)

| Rural Micro Capital Grant Scheme 2019 | | | Rural Business Development Grant Scheme 2019 | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------|--|--|--------------------|--|
| No. Claims Paid | Grant Amount Paid | | No. Claims Paid | Grant Amount Paid | |
| 16/3/2020 - 05/6/2020 | 16/3/20 -5/06/2020 | | 16/3/2020 - 05/06/2020 | 16/3/20 -5/06/2020 | |
| 442 | £542,821.68 | | 121 | £405,432.65 | |

Local Community Development Support Service Programme:

£173,000 paid to Rural Support Networks to cover the period 1 April to 30 June 2020.
£70,000 paid in micro grant management fees for the 19/20 scheme.

FOREST SERVICE

REOPENING OF AMENITIES AT FOREST PARKS

The Minister has authorised the re-opening of toilet facilities and concession stands at Forest and Country Parks from 15 June.

Toilet facilities have been made available at many Forest and Country Parks from the afternoon of 15 June. These sites provide a good spatial covering in the province and include highly popular forests at Tollymore Forest Park, Drum Manor Forest Park, Glenariff Forest Park, Parkanaur Forest, Castlewellan Forest Park and the Country Parks at Roe Valley, Castle Archdale, Peatlands Park and the Quoile Countryside Centre. Urgent work is ongoing to enable toilet facilities at the remaining sites

to reopen as soon as possible, when legal requirements in relations to legionnaire checks and enhanced cleaning rotas have been finalised.

For the public's information the NI Direct site, and the Discover NI site which it directs users to, are being kept up to date with relevant opening details.

Work is continuing to ensure the reopening of caravan parks and camping facilities at a later date.

Central Services & Contingency Planning

AFBI Testing

- AFBI in collaboration with Queens University Belfast and Ulster University are supporting the Department of Health's efforts in respect of Covid-19 testing
- An SLA with the Belfast Trust has now been signed.
- Live testing commenced on 21 May 2020.
- As at 11 June, AFBI are still being sent 94 samples (one microplate) per day for testing. AFBI has asked RVL when they might be able to move to the next phase i.e. 200 - 500 per day.
- Tests have been run and results provided in line with agreed targets.
- Testing capacity remains at 200 samples per day, for 10 days, rising to 500 for 7 days and ultimately 1000 per day (full capacity) thereafter.
- The release of staff to work on Covid-19 testing is currently planned so as not to impact on the priority animal health and food safety testing programmes. This will, however, be kept under close review.

Brexit Operational Readiness Update

Transition

From 27 May 2020 have been in a position to develop options for a Minimum Viable Product to meet the requirements of the NI Protocol. The focus since then is:

- Gathering the evidence to understand the trade flows, including types, volumes and timings, coming into and out of Northern Ireland;
- Understanding the processes required to reduce friction on trade as far as is possible while meeting the legal requirements of our statutory role which is to carry out SPS checks at the point of entry;
- Understanding the IT requirements that will facilitate movement of trade while seeking to minimise the impacts on traders;

- Understanding the minimum requirements for each of the designated or potentially designated points of entry to Northern Ireland that will meet EU specifications.

Food Supply Security

- We continue to track the health of the food supply chain, the Food Observatory Report currently provides an assessment of **Amber** for the Food Chain Health.
- We are developing a dashboard that will allow us to continuously assess the health of the food supply system, with a view to encouraging and supporting measures to maintain its flexibility and resilience.
- Successfully managing the impacts of COVID-19 and the transition of EU exit provides a significant challenge for DAERA and it is important that we now move to develop contingency plans and refine current actions

STAFF ENGAGEMENT DIVISION/COVID COMMS TEAM

- The Permanent Secretary continued his series of staff engagement sessions with a further Webinar on 10 June. Over 700 staff participated in the event.
- During the event staff had the opportunity to answer a series of polling questions to help us understand if there is a need to increase or decrease the amount of communications being provided to the Department. This was also used to gauge how staff are adapting and managing the ongoing challenges, including those associated with working from home. Similar polls have been introduced in the fortnightly webinar group updates for staff. A study is also underway to determine if there are additional, better or more effective ways of communication to allow us to reach as many staff as possible within the Department.
- Preparation for the resumption of Mentoring Circles is underway and it is hoped these will recommence in the near future.
- The Task and Finish Group on Resilience and Wellbeing continue to meet (via Webex) on a weekly basis, working to identify ways of providing support to our Departmental colleagues working both at home and in offices/Plants.

Questions from Members to DAERA on COVID-19 Update 11 June 2020

| Briefing Subject/Area | Question | Answer |
|-----------------------|--|---|
| VSAHG | Has the department any advice or indicative timeline for the re-opening of indoor equestrian arenas? | The Department cannot provide an indicative timescale in respect of the reopening of indoor equestrian arenas. Further relaxations of restrictions is a matter for the Executive. It may, however, be of assistance to note that Stage 4 of Executive's recovery plan provides for resumption of competitive sport behind closed doors. |
| Finance | <p>DAERA recently released an additional £3.6m for 'Additional Market Support'. Will this be added to the £25m agri-food market intervention for the agriculture and horticulture sectors?</p> <p>Does the Minister plan to include sheep and beef primary producers in the agri-food market intervention fund?</p> <p>How will the agri-food market intervention fund be distributed?</p> | <p>DAERA officials have reviewed budgets for the 2020/2021 financial year and have identified an additional £3.6m, this money will be used as necessary to support businesses within the agriculture and horticulture sectors that have been impacted hardest as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>Officials are monitoring the impact of COVID-19 on all sectors and it is the Minister's intention to ensure the funding is focused towards those most in need and those who can clearly demonstrate tangible losses as a result of COVID-19.</p> <p>Since the £25m COVID-19 support fund was announced, Minister Poots and Officials have consulted with numerous industry representatives and stakeholders, to hear their analysis of the impacts of the pandemic and their proposals for allocation of the £25m. During those discussions, there was a clear acceptance of the need for support to be targeted at those farm business hardest hit financially as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>When a final decision is made on the allocation of the funding it is the Minister's intention to ensure that it is administered with ease and at pace so that businesses get the funding into their bank accounts quickly to address cash flow concerns.</p> <p>The aim is to avoid an overly bureaucratic system which would create additional paperwork and complexity for farmers, therefore it is my intention that the delivery mechanism should ideally rely on data that the Department already holds, or is readily available from other sources,</p> |

