



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
AGRICULTURE AND
RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Dioxins Inquiry

3 November 2009

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr (Chairperson)
Mr Tom Elliott (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Burns
Mr Willie Clarke
Mr Pat Doherty
Mr William Irwin
Dr William McCrea
Mr Jim Shannon

The Chairperson (Mr Paisley Jnr):

We return to our report on the dioxin incident of December 2008. I hope that members have had an opportunity to read the report over the short break. Paragraphs 1 to 8 are a factual overview of the report; its powers, the members, the inquiry and our approach. I suggest that we agree those as read and move to paragraph 10, as paragraph 9 is a summary of recommendations that will be approved as we go through the rest of the report. Are members content?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

It is best to go through the report paragraph by paragraph to give members a chance to raise any issues that they might have. Are members content with paragraph 10?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

We move to paragraph 11. Are there any comments?

Mr Elliott:

I mentioned the number of organisations involved in the incident to the Committee Clerk. I suppose that we cannot decide not to involve organisations, but we want a single message to be sent out. We do not want three or four different messages coming from three or four different organisations. I am assuming that that is the point that we are trying to make in this paragraph. I am not sure how we would put that in.

The Chairperson:

We could list the agencies, but that would take up a full page.

Mr Elliott:

I am not asking for that. The Committee Clerk has covered the matter quite well. I just want to ensure that we get our point across.

The Chairperson:

Paragraph 11 reads:

“The Committee believes that too many organisations reacted during the incident confined to their particular areas of responsibility without any cognisance of the impact their particular decisions would have on the industry.”

Perhaps we should add a reference to a joined-up response or a joined-up approach?

Dr W McCrea:

There was no joined-up approach. One Department knew, in fact, that the pig industry was not affected by the incident. If that information had been passed on, there would have been no need for another Department to make a statement. I know that everyone watches their back at times like that, but they nearly wrecked an industry because the facts were not checked, or, perhaps, they did not know the facts. A joined-up approach would have ensured that the facts would have been known.

The Chairperson:

After the word “industry”, should we add the sentence, “A joined-up and consistent approach is therefore necessary”? Does that amplify what you are trying to get at?

The Committee Clerk:

Members should read the recommendation, which states that there should be a:

“review of the communication channels in order that the appropriate information is communicated to the relevant audience in a timely fashion.”

The recommendation asks for the establishment of an incident management team comprising the various representatives.

The Chairperson:

Let us deal with the first part of the recommendation.

Mr Elliott:

The recommendation is fine. Is it possible to add a condition that one organisation should, at all times, speak and put out the message. Is that reasonable? We should not have the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) saying one thing and the Food Standards Agency (FSA) saying something slightly different.

Dr W McCrea:

The big problem with that is that two different Departments are involved. The Food Standards Agency is not under the aegis of DARD; it is under the umbrella of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The information should have been fed to them. That was vital, because by the time those Departments found out about the incident, the farmers concerned had already been investigated and it was determined that none of them had fed the contaminated feed to their pigs.

The Committee Clerk:

If members are content, we can say that the incident management team should assume responsibility for communication. If it is accepted that the incident management team will comprise representatives of all the interested parties, that should be the case. I have tried to emphasise that there must be a strategic approach to such incidents, rather than a piecemeal approach.

The Chairperson:

The point that the member is trying to get at is that there should be a single and consistent public message from whoever speaks. That was the issue; people were getting too many messages from too many angles. If we could include that, would it cover your concerns, Tom?

Mr Elliott:

Yes.

The Committee Clerk:

If members are content, I will add a new sentence to the final bullet point as follows:

“The Incident Management Team should assume responsibility for the communication of a single and consistent message.”

The Chairperson:

Are members content?

Members indicated assent.

The Committee Clerk:

Paragraph 11 is as was.

The Chairperson:

Paragraph 12 is about sampling processes. It is a matter of fact. Are members content for paragraph 13 and its attached recommendation to remain as they are?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

Are we agreed on paragraph 14 and the recommendation?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

Are we agreed on paragraph 15 and the recommendation?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

Are we agreed on paragraph 16, which relates to communication?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

Are we agreed on paragraph 17?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

Are we agreed on paragraph 18?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

Are we agreed on paragraph 19?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

Are we agreed on paragraph 20(a)?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

Are we agreed on paragraph 20(b), which is really the knock-out one?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

Are we agreed on paragraph 20(c)?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

Are we agreed on paragraph 20(d)?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

Are we agreed on paragraph 20(e)?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

Are we agreed on paragraph 21 and the recommendations? Do we want to say somewhere in the lead up to paragraph 21 and its recommendation that there was a failure by the Minister in the Republic of Ireland to speak to the Minister in Northern Ireland? That was where the problem lay.

Dr W McCrea:

The Minister in Northern Ireland could not contact him.

The Chairperson:

Yes, it would be useful to have that amplified in the report.

Dr W McCrea:

Paragraph 19 refers to:

“the very positive work that had previously been taken by officials in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in respect of, for example, the All-Island Animal Health Strategy.”

However, that work took place only when it suited. When the muck hit the fan, the folks and the Minister in the Irish Republic looked after their own industry when it suited them to do so. The Minister here tried her best to contact him and he would not take her calls.

Mr Doherty:

I think that that is correct.

The Chairperson:

Has there been contact to date? Nearly a year has passed.

The Clerk is suggesting that paragraph 17 is probably the place to say that the Committee believes that it would have been incumbent on the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to approach and contact our Minister directly.

Mr Elliott:

How does that fit in with the recommendation?

Dr W McCrea:

God forbid that a situation like that should arise again, on whichever side of the border, but we must ensure that we are prepared for that eventuality. If something were to happen here that affects the folk in the Irish Republic, we would have a duty to let them know about it at the earliest possible date, rather than putting all our ducks in a row here first and then telling them down there. However, it must work vice versa; that co-operation must be properly reciprocated. In my opinion, the chief failure in the dioxin incident was that that did not happen.

The Chairperson:

How will paragraph 17 read?

The Committee Clerk:

The final sentence will read:

“The Committee believes that it would have been incumbent on the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to contact the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development at this early stage.”

That means following the meeting with the Taoiseach and the various other Ministers and officials.

Mr Burns:

Are you talking about the meeting that took place on the Saturday afternoon?

The Committee Clerk:

Yes. The paragraph will read:

“The Committee believes that it is totally unacceptable for the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to learn of the total recall of Irish pork and pork products by chance whilst watching a news programme in the late evening of Saturday, 6 December 2009. This is despite a meeting having been held earlier that day between the Taoiseach, the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Minister for Health and Children, the Chief Medical Officer, the FSAI and officials from the relevant statutory bodies in the Republic of Ireland. The Committee believes that it would have been incumbent on the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to have contacted the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development at this early stage.”

The intent of the paragraph is to say that after that meeting on the early afternoon of 6 December, the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food should have contacted our Minister.

Mr Burns:

That should have happened at the earliest opportunity. However, the situation had been going on, and they had great suspicions from the Thursday, which were confirmed absolutely at the meeting on the Saturday.

The Chairperson:

They had told all their Ministers. The Committee Clerk read out the list of all those who were at the meeting. That is damning.

The Committee Clerk:

The decision to recall pork products was taken at that meeting. From memory, at 7.30 pm the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) issued the statement saying that pork products were to be recalled.

Dr W McCrea:

After hearing about that, our Minister tried to contact the Minister down South and could not get him as he was away.

The Committee Clerk:

That is why I put in the words that the Minister had heard “by chance”. If the Minister had not been watching the news, she may not have heard until the Sunday.

Dr W McCrea:

The recommendations on page 15 states:

“This should also indicate the key times for contacting, for example, Executive Ministers and the appropriate industry representatives.”

However, the Minister could not have contacted her Executive colleagues when she did not know what had happened. She did not have that knowledge. I am talking about what is in our recommendations. That is why information must be passed on at the earliest possible date.

The Committee Clerk:

That paragraph is not intended to be a criticism of our Executive. What I have tried to say is that the matter is part of the review and that the review is looking at the streamlining of processes, which includes the incident management team. There will be a checklist of both internal and external contacts; it will include our Executive Ministers and our counterparts in other jurisdictions. The checklist should show the appropriate time to make contact. Obviously, contact at a ministerial level must be made very early in the process.

The Chairperson:

To pick up on Tom’s point, we should then amplify in the recommendation the point that we have just included at the end of paragraph 17. We should emphasise the need for direct contact between Ministers in taking responsibility and showing leadership on those issues.

Dr W McCrea:

Surely that is the key recommendation?

The Chairperson:

That is the most damning paragraph in the report.

Mr Doherty:

Do we have any indication as to what stage the Executive review is at?

The Committee Clerk:

I have had no indication of where that is at.

The first line of the recommendation would read:

“Accurate and timely communication is vital in order that industry is fully aware of all available information and is

briefed to handle any inquiries, particularly at a key ministerial level.”

Are members content with that?

Mr Elliott:

It is difficult for us to recommend what ROI Ministers should do, but I assume that that is as far as we can go on that point.

The Committee Clerk:

The Committee’s view on the matter is clear in paragraph 17. We are addressing this to our Executive to ensure that we learn lessons and apply them in our own context. If Members are content, we will make that recommendation.

Mr Elliott:

The recommendation also mentions the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. I am aware, as Willie will be, of a particular farmer who asked the divisional veterinary office (DVO) in his area to send someone out to his farm to give advice, but his request was refused. I do not know how we should phrase it, but we need to include something in the paragraph about better communication and support for farmers.

Dr W McCrea:

Farmers were left hanging. They did not know what was happening. The Department may not have known what was happening, but neither did the farmers.

The Committee Clerk:

Members may be referring to an older version of the draft report that I forwarded to the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson. An additional paragraph was included in the version included in members’ packs, and it states:

In addition, the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development should critically assess its communication lines and processes in order to prevent a repeat of those circumstances witnessed on Monday 8 December. This should focus on an assessment”.

Mr Elliott:

Yes, I have that. Maybe that covers it.

The Chairperson:

What was the big criticism that we heard?

Mr Elliott:

The criticism was that when cattle were presented for slaughter at abattoirs on Monday 8 December, the factory told the farmers that there was a status on their herd and that they could not accept the animals. That meant that the cattle were left in the abattoirs for days; they could not be returned home or slaughtered.

Dr W McCrea:

The farmers could not get any help or advice on what should happen.

Mr Irwin:

One particular farmer had 10 cattle in the factory on that date, and he has still not received any compensation.

The Chairperson:

We will deal with compensation later, after we have considered paragraph 22. Let us look at paragraph 20(e).

Dr W McCrea:

It is more a matter of communication and advice to farmers.

The Chairperson:

Paragraph 20(e) states:

“Because the recall was ordered (but not communicated to DARD) on Saturday 6 December, there was a dearth of information available to producers, processors and consumers on Monday 8 December 2008. This affected DARD and other agencies ability to provide clear decisions to industry stakeholders at what was a critical time in the process;”.

Mr Elliott:

That is fine; I totally agree with that and with the last paragraph that the Clerk has included in the recommendation. There was another issue, and, again, Willie will know what I am talking about. One of the milk producers asked the DVO to send a representative to visit his farm to give advice and guidance, but the DVO refused. The DVO should not refuse to visit a farm when such a serious incident has occurred.

The Chairperson:

Can we include that?

Dr W McCrea:

It is not only a matter of preventing a repeat of those circumstances; it is also about ensuring that there is communication with farmers and that they receive advice. That is vital.

Mr Irwin:

The problem was that the departmental officials did not even know what advice to give. They seemed to be at a loose end as well. They were giving certain advice one day, and, a week or two later, the advice was completely different.

Dr W McCrea:

It would not have been hard for the DVO to send someone out to a farm, especially given the crisis at the time.

What are we putting in that paragraph?

The Chairperson:

I was waiting for your suggestion. To put it in the vernacular, it says that it was a shambles, and we heard that in the evidence that we took.

Mr W McCrea:

Is the following sentence included?:

“The Department for Agriculture and Rural Development should critically assess its communication lines and processes in order to prevent a repeat of those circumstances witnessed on Monday 8 December.”

The Committee Clerk:

That would link it back to paragraph 20(e).

Mr Elliott:

Can we include the point that that should include ongoing advice and support at farm-business level?

The Chairperson:

Are members content with that?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

Paragraphs 22 to 25 deal with compensation. Are members content with paragraph 22?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

Are members content with paragraph 23?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

Are members content with paragraph 24?

Mr Elliott:

Paragraph 24 states that the package was limited to only 25% of eligible costs.

The Committee Clerk:

That was what was paid in compensation.

Mr Irwin:

It was 75% of the value.

Mr Elliott:

That was a moving fixture, and I do not know where it ended up. I think that it was around 70%.

That needs to be clarified.

The Chairperson:

We will leave paragraph 24.

Mr Elliott:

The Clerk can follow that up and clarify it.

The Committee Clerk:

It was about compensation value rather than eligible cost.

The Chairperson:

The point is addressed in paragraph 25:

“The Committee believes that the aid package did not address the full range of businesses impacted by this incident, including dairy farmers who had purchased the contaminated feed, processors and retailers”.

Mr Irwin:

I know two dairy farmers who got no compensation for two months’ milk. That adds up to quite a bit of money.

Mr Elliott:

The issue involving those two farmers is huge.

Mr Irwin:

That is exactly right.

The Chairperson:

I met one of the farmers when we were in Brussels. At least we have raised the issue.

Mr Irwin:

Can we add anything to that paragraph?

Dr W McCrea:

We would have to put it into a recommendation.

Mr Elliott:

I assume that the Department will argue over the word “compensation”. It always claimed that it was not compensation but a hardship package.

Dr W McCrea:

That is correct. It was not compensation.

The Chairperson:

We could put in the term “compensation/aid package”.

Mr Elliott:

That might be better.

Dr W McCrea:

I advise that we check exactly what it is called, because we do not want to call it compensation if Europe has not agreed to compensation.

The Chairperson:

Paragraph 22 refers to the “aid package”, but the title of paragraphs 22 to 25 is “Compensation”.

Dr W McCrea:

I advise that we check that the wording matches what was permitted by Europe, and I advise that we follow that through in the rest of the document.

The Committee Clerk:

If members are content, we will change the title of paragraphs 22 to 25. References are made to “aid package” throughout those paragraphs.

The Chairperson:

Are members content with the first paragraph of the recommendation?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

The second paragraph of the recommendation covers the issue that Dr McCrea was concerned about.

Dr W McCrea:

It recommends that the Department should:

“allow access to the scheme to those impacted on by the incident”.

Mr Elliott:

Perhaps we should include a reference to dairy or milk. Slurry and processed retail material is mentioned, but that does not cover dairy farmers.

The Committee Clerk:

We will insert “dairy” before:

“businesses impacted by feeding of contaminated feeds”.

The Chairperson:

That is a good recommendation.

Mr Elliott:

I suggest that the last line of that paragraph be amended to read:

“the disposal of slurry, milk and processed retail material”.

The Committee Clerk:

I have suggested the following wording:

“In addition, the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development should review the Executive aid scheme to allow access to the scheme to those impacted on by the incident, such as those dairy businesses impacted by feeding of contaminated feeds to their animals or those with associated costs such as the disposal of slurry and processed retail material.”

Mr Elliott:

So, do we not need to put the word “milk” in?

The Committee Clerk:

The paragraph refers to “dairy businesses”.

Dr W McCrea:

Yes, but milk was disposed of as well as slurry.

Mr Elliott:

I think that we need to include the word “milk”. In fact, those two sectors have probably been the

biggest losers in the whole farming industry.

Mr Irwin:

They did not get a fair deal out of it.

The Chairperson:

If members are happy enough, we can do that.

Are members content with paragraph 26, which is about proportionality?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

We now turn to paragraph 27.

The Committee Clerk:

I need to check the cost to the Northern Ireland vote. I think that the aid package that was eventually paid out was closer to £10 million.

The Chairperson:

Apart from that, are members content with paragraph 27?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

We shall turn to the recommendation.

Mr Elliot:

I think that the recommendation seems OK.

The Chairperson:

Are members content?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

Can we turn now to paragraph 28, which is part of the conclusion?

Dr W McCrea:

I have always had my suspicions about the so-called all-island animal health strategy, which applies only when it suits.

The Chairperson:

Do you think that we are pulling our punches in the commentary?

Dr W McCrea:

I believe that each country should have its own animal health strategy, but that each strategy should be relevant to the other. With the dioxin incident, the relationship fell down because proper and meaningful engagement did not occur.

The Committee Clerk:

In paragraph 28, I was trying to say that members expressed concern in earlier evidence sessions that the co-operation that was promised in the likes of the all-island animal health strategy failed, at the first hurdle, to come to fruition. The Committee, therefore, expresses its concern and hopes that that will not be the case in future.

The Chairperson:

My memory of the evidence sessions, especially of those in Dublin, is that there was a significant communication failure, and the resulting panic among some bureaucrats has had a detrimental impact on our industry.

We are pulling our punches in paragraphs 28, 29 and 30; we should not be too concerned about putting the boot in a wee bit further. The dioxin case, and the evidence that we have received on it, proves that the relationship between the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (DAFF) and DARD is a shambles. Are members content for us to take a wee bit more licence in describing that shambolic relationship? It is clear that the blame lies with the Republic of Ireland.

Dr W McCrea:

The Republic was looking after its own industry; that is all that it was doing. It pulled down the shutters and got all its ducks in a row. It was only after its industry had been preserved that the authorities in the Republic finally concerned themselves with Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson:

We were an afterthought. At the Committee's meeting in Dublin, one of the officials made a throwaway comment along the lines of "youse up there"; that seemed to sum it all up. As you said, it was only when DAFF had all its ducks in a row that its officials concerned themselves with their neighbour. That point has been well made in the evidence sessions, and we should not be shy about including it in our conclusions.

Mr Shannon:

I am always keen to shoot ducks in a row; it does not always work out that way, but it is rewarding when it does. I agree wholeheartedly with the Chairperson. I have not been involved in the whole process; I was involved in the latter part only. We had a Committee meeting in the Senate Chamber, and officials from the Republic of Ireland came to give evidence on the matter. I thought that those officials hedged their bets and batted carefully for their own side. Every Committee member questioned them, and I think that Francie Molloy was present at that meeting.

The Chairperson:

To paraphrase a member, they behaved like a bunch of Free Staters. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Doherty:

That is what they are. *[Laughter.]*

Dr W McCrea:

The dioxin contamination was a very serious incident that could have ruined Northern Ireland's pig industry. I have no objection to a Department looking after its own interests, but the incident had serious implications for us. Officials in the Republic, and even our own Minister, talked constantly about the wonderful relationship between DAFF and DARD. However, when the chips were down, the Minister in the Republic would not even speak to our Minister and deliberately kept out of the way. Our Minister had to go begging for information, and that was totally wrong.

We could have lost an entire industry. There was panic in Europe and in our Administration, and pork products were taken off the shelves under the direction of the Food Standards Agency. However, as it turned out, there was no need for that. All that we needed to know was that none of our produce had been contaminated. Then, Northern Ireland was not included in the aid package; it was only for the South and not for us boys up here. There was unfair competition, because a major factory in Northern Ireland was implicated in the affair. That factory was receiving pigs from the same area of the Irish Republic, but it was not included in the aid package.

Mr W Clarke:

I agree with members that there must be greater North/South co-operation. It is fundamental that that relationship is honest and fair. One of the main problems was the process by which authorities in the South passed on information. In this case, they went to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) first rather than informing DARD directly. We should recommend that DARD be contacted directly rather than being merely copied into correspondence with DEFRA.

The Chairperson:

Do Committee members agree that fault for this incident lies with the authorities in the Republic of Ireland in how they handled their communication strategy and passed on information to the authorities here?

Do members agree that the fault lies with the authorities in the Republic of Ireland and how they handled the communication strategy and the divulging of information to authorities here? Do members agree with that as a general observation? If we can agree on that, we can get a very satisfactory conclusion, which puts the blame where it lies. We should accept that, and that there was a lack of communication from the Republic of Ireland's Minister to our Minister. Communication was also made between officials at the wrong level in the Republic of Ireland's Department and officials in our Department.

To be fair to the officials in the Republic, they opened their books to us. They showed us a timeline, revealing hour-by-hour what happened and who got what, where and when. The boys from DAFF were, as Jim Shannon said, hedging their bets. Details were wanting. We can reach

a conclusion that a complete lack of communication was central to difficulties and had a detrimental impact, principally on our industry and its associated parts. The Committee concludes that authorities in the Republic of Ireland were solely responsible for that.

Are members content that we include a paragraph to that effect? We need to say what we mean, in the final analysis.

Dr W McCrea:

I accept that the authorities in the Republic should have contacted DARD. However, it is true that, under European law, they had to contact DEFRA, because DAFF and DEFRA are the two principals recognised by the European Union. However, that is not to excuse this. Those officials should immediately have realised the impact of this on Northern Ireland. That should have been taken seriously, and they should have contacted Northern Ireland.

Mr Shannon:

I presume that, through this report, we want to improve on what has happened previously. One of the ways in which to do that is to have better contact with our Minister. It is clear that she was not made aware of all that was happening, when she should have been. That is one of our recommendations.

What the Republic of Ireland did was exercise a protectionist policy on its own behalf. I do not know whether we need to say that, but we should make strong comments and be clear about what we are saying. There is no sense in the Committee's saying that we are unhappy with the situation if we do not express directly what happened in our conclusion.

The Chairperson:

The public, those to whom we have spoken in the industry and the farmers who have been affected by it are saying it anyway. If our report fails to hit the nail on the head, it will diminish the Committee's role as a voice for the industry on such key issues.

Mr Shannon:

I am sorry, but I should have declared an interest as a pork retailer.

It was not just those who are involved in producing pigs who were the fall guys. Those

responsible for taking the product to the next level were also affected. I am not sure that we have said that anywhere in the report, and I need to be sure. I ask Committee members to cast their mind back for a moment to the issue of compensation. Nowhere in the report have we mentioned the possibility of compensation for those who had bought products from the Republic and were selling them retail. I asked the DAFF representatives about that on 13 October. That meeting was covered by Hansard, was it not? Is my question recorded?

Dr W McCrea:

We have made a reference to that in the report, contained in a recommendation. The last line of the recommendation following paragraph 25 reads:

“such as the disposal of slurry and processed retail material.”

Mr Shannon:

DAFF officials did mention that a compensation process was in place.

Dr W McCrea:

No. The word “compensation” is not included. We cannot mention “compensation”, because the European Union did not allow the Republic to pay compensation. The term is “aid package”.

Mr Shannon:

I am happy to be corrected on the terminology. It does not really matter what happens to Jim Shannon — what is important is what happens to those retailers who contacted me. That is important. If the term “aid package” is used, can we include it in the report?

The Chairperson:

We have it in paragraphs 22 through to the beginning of paragraph 26, and in the recommendation that follows, and we mention

“the disposal of slurry and processed retail material.”

I believe that that covers the issues that you have raised.

Mr Shannon:

Did the DAFF officials not say that they had a methodology? They said that they would tell us about the process that they had for people to claim through the aid package. Is that not correct?

The Committee Clerk:

Something like that was mentioned, but nothing has been forthcoming.

Mr Shannon:

Can we not insist on that? Can we write to DAFF and ask why, three weeks to the day, we have still not received any correspondence? I want to pass the information on to the people who contacted me.

The Chairperson:

Do you mean information on whether the aid package is working?

Mr Shannon:

Yes. One of the people who contacted me comes from William Irwin's constituency. Another comes from your area, Chairperson.

Mr Elliott:

I was also going to raise Jim's point about paragraph 25. Perhaps we should deal with the issue about the all-Ireland strategy and policy first. We need to be more specific. It is clear that the Minister makes a big issue of co-operation through the all-island animal health and welfare strategy, but it has been shown not to have worked in this instance. I know that Willie Clarke said that that strategy must be operated better. That is correct, but this incident proves that the strategy has not worked. Although we were told that the policy is a good one that is progressing and doing well, it did not work in this case.

The Chairperson:

We need to say that.

The Committee Clerk:

To be clear, the all-island animal health and welfare strategy is a separate policy. The dioxin issue is a public health matter, and that is why it was controlled by the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI). I included a reference to the all-island strategy because, during the inquiry, members expressed a concern about the impact that it had, and the trust that they placed in it, based on this example. A public health strategy impacted on both jurisdictions, but, because of a lack of communication, only one jurisdiction was able to react accordingly to it.

Mr Elliott:

I accept that it was a public health issue, but it was also an animal health issue, because it started off with dioxins in animal feed. It started off as an agriculture issue and became an issue in the public health arena. Otherwise, the Committee would not have held an inquiry into the matter — our involvement came from the fact that it began as an agriculture issue. We can consider operating the system better, but whatever system is in place has not been working.

Dr W McCrea:

It worked in the interests of farmers and processors in the Republic, and it was deliberately set up to do so.

The Chairperson:

There is a consensus that we need to tighten up and not pull our punches on saying what we mean. I ask the Committee Clerk to reflect on what we have said and to tighten up our conclusions so that we can give them a final read at next week's meeting.

We aim to have the report debated in the Assembly in the week before the Christmas recess. The debate would therefore take place on either Monday 7 December or Tuesday 8 December.

Mr Shannon:

That will be one full year after the incident.

The Chairperson:

That point has not been lost on us. You are not allowed to use that line in the debate, because it will already have been used.

Dr W McCrea:

The Committee meets on a Tuesday, and we do not want conflict between the debate and our meeting.

The Chairperson:

We will be having our Christmas dinner then.

Mr Elliott:

Jim Shannon made the point that those with the greatest loss should receive some sort of aid package. I understand that many of the pork processors who discarded material have not received any aid. Is that correct, Jim?

Mr Shannon:

That is my understanding. Promises were made, but no aid has come.

Mr Elliott:

The dairy farmers have not received anything to compensate them for the milk that they lost.

Mr Irwin:

Am I right in saying that the processed pork was bought from the Republic of Ireland? If it was purchased there, the Republic of Ireland Government should provide compensation.

Mr Elliott:

I suggest that, in our conclusion, we ask Government to review those issues with the ROI Government.

Dr W McCrea:

It seems that a number of the pigs that went to Cookstown, for example, were from down South, and yet, those affected were told that they will not be compensated.