



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Bovine TB Review: Ministerial Briefing

3 July 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Frew (Chairperson)
Ms Michaela Boyle
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Mr William Irwin
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Mrs O'Neill	Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Bert Houston	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Gerry Lavery	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mrs Colette McMaster	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

The Chairperson: I welcome the Minister, Michelle O'Neill; Gerry Lavery, the permanent secretary; Colette McMaster; and Bert Houston. You are all very welcome. Thank you for taking the time to come here. It is very relevant, considering that this is the last meeting of the Committee before recess. Minister, I am sure that you have a presentation for us. You can go ahead.

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, Chairperson. Thank you for the opportunity to brief the Committee as part of its ongoing review of TB. You know my team. I will give a short presentation, and I will be happy to take questions and comments.

It goes without saying that I am very committed to dealing with the eradication of TB in cattle. Tackling the disease is, obviously, a priority for me. I fully recognise the burden that TB breakdowns impose on farm businesses in the North in terms of compliance cost and business risk. There were almost 1,900 TB herd breakdowns in 2011-12, which resulted in almost 8,700 reactor animals being slaughtered and additional risk testing being required in those and contact herds. I acknowledge the valuable assistance that farmers and private veterinary practitioners give to my Department in facilitating TB testing.

In particular, I wish to advise the Committee today on the plans for actions on TB and wildlife, which aim to provide evidence to underpin further interventions in cattle and wildlife and help to guide the TB eradication strategy. As the Committee will be aware from the briefing that my officials provided to its review, we have in place a robust TB eradication programme that is based on testing to detect

infected cattle, removing infected animals and reducing the risks of disease spread through movement controls and other biosecurity measures.

We have secured EU Commission approval for our TB eradication programme for 2010 to 2012. EU approval is vital to safeguard our annual £1 billion-plus export-dependent trade in livestock and livestock products. We have a business target to obtain EU approval for the TB eradication programme for 2013 also. Protecting our export status is a fundamental priority for the Department.

Having EU approval in place enables the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) to draw down around €5 million co-funding from Europe each year towards the cost of the TB eradication programme, which amounted to just over £26 million in 2011-12. Some £12.9 million of that cost was due to animal compensation payments; £6.5 million was in respect of tests by private vets; £5.8 million was due to DARD Veterinary Service costs; and £1 million was in respect of Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) costs. I want to see the cost that TB control measures impose being reduced for taxpayers and for farmers.

The TB eradication programme has been effective in reducing the level of disease in cattle, but, as you know — I am sure that you have found this out through your inquiry — TB is a very complex, multifactorial and challenging disease, and there is no quick fix or simple, cost-effective solution. Eradication cannot be achieved in the immediate future for all the reasons presented to you in recent weeks. Much is still not known about how TB spreads, how it can be diagnosed more accurately, and what can be done to prevent its spread between cattle and between wildlife and cattle. That has been outlined in the wide-ranging evidence to the Committee's review.

Therefore, the priority will be to continue to invest in TB and wildlife research and studies to build the evidence to help to deal effectively with all the disease risk factors and reduce TB further. The Committee will be aware that there is a specific reference in the Programme for Government to funding of around £4 million allocated in my Department's budget to conduct TB and wildlife research and studies.

In order to identify the priority evidence needs, my Department took a comprehensive look at what is known about TB. We commissioned five literature reviews, which were completed in 2011-12. Those were on the areas of TB tests in cattle, TB tests in badgers, cattle-to-cattle transmission, badger-to-cattle transmission and badger vaccination. We have also discussed the evidence needs and their priority with key industry and environmental stakeholders.

A number of studies have been commissioned to help to establish local evidence. We expect to have the results of the TB biosecurity study later this year, and we intend to use them to produce further biosecurity advice for all herd keepers. An assessment has been commissioned of farmers' understanding of and attitudes to applying biosecurity measures when dealing with diseases. An evaluation of the use my Department makes of the gamma-interferon blood test to detect TB in cattle is also under way. The results will better inform the way the test is used in the TB programme. A badger/cattle proximity study, which aims to assess interactions between cattle and badgers in farm buildings and at pasture, started recently in a TB high-incidence area. The results will help to better inform our understanding of disease transmission risks and also where biosecurity measures could best be targeted on farms here.

Discussions held in the past year with key industry and environmental stakeholders have helped to develop the options for further research and studies. In May, my Department hosted an international vaccination experts' scientific symposium in Belfast, which considered all the relevant issues associated with vaccinating the badger to achieve a reduction of TB in cattle. We will use the information from that symposium to inform how best to proceed on badger vaccination on the island.

In addition, AFBI was recently requested to put forward further research proposals across a range of aspects of TB, including the role of slurry in spreading TB; an investigation of the risk factors for herds with multiple reactors and/or chronic TB infection in order to further reduce disease in those herds; and an analysis of the existing molecular strain typing data to determine how that tool can be best applied practically in the TB eradication programme and to provide a better understanding of TB transmission in the North. I know that Committee members have enquired how the strain typing data might be used to help understand the spread of TB between farms. I hope that the analysis that we are commissioning will help to answer that question.

We continue to follow closely the research and studies being conducted in England and Wales and the South of Ireland, including those on the development of an oral bait badger vaccine that can be

delivered in a cost-effective way and a cattle vaccine that could be approved for use at international level. We are also watching very carefully what is happening on the wildlife aspect in England and Wales in relation to culling and vaccination.

I turn now to my own immediate plans for addressing the wildlife aspect. I am convinced that we can do more on top of all the work that I have outlined and on top of our existing programme of work. I am very conscious that any wildlife research that involves intervention would be very costly, and I want to ensure that we get the best value from the funding available. Having considered a range of possible options for research and studies, I see value in undertaking work here that would be unique to the North and not just an expensive duplication of what is happening elsewhere.

Any proposal for wildlife intervention will have to pass the necessary business case. It will also have to comply with relevant legislation and command a wide degree of support from stakeholders. Therefore, following recent discussions with industry stakeholders and informed by the views of the external experts who attended the international vaccination symposium here in May, I have asked my officials to design specific wildlife intervention research. That approach involves testing live badgers, vaccinating and releasing the test-negative ones and removing the test-positive ones. It means that a badger will be removed if it is detected as having TB, but a negative test will result in the badger being vaccinated and released. The approach focuses on removing diseased badgers and protecting uninfected ones. It is a balanced approach that would avoid killing healthy badgers and could lead, in time, to a healthier badger population incapable of transmitting TB to cattle. That is a powerful message and one that, I hope, Committee members, the farming community and environmentalists will welcome. Hopefully, by taking this approach, we will avoid any legal action being taken, as has been seen elsewhere.

The aim of the wildlife intervention research would be to test the effectiveness of the approach on the level of TB in badgers and cattle in the North. It would also generate information to produce a local model that we could use to assess the effectiveness of various wildlife interventions here in the future. That would be the key deliverable of the first stage of the work.

This approach has not been tried anywhere else. Such a test, vaccinate and remove approach was modelled in 2009 as a possible intervention for the Welsh Government by the Food and Environment Research Agency (FERA). The results of that modelling indicated that if a perturbation effect occurred, it would make the TB situation in cattle worse; that is, it would lead to increased confirmed cattle herd breakdowns. Where perturbation was assumed not to occur, the model predicted that the effect of the intervention would be marginally better than cull-only and vaccinate-only approaches. However, no field trials have taken place to test the actual effectiveness of that approach anywhere in Britain or in the South. Based on discussions with the FERA experts who developed the model, we believe that we may not see the same perturbation effect in the North, as the badger social group size here is smaller and badger movement behaviour may be different. I have, therefore, asked my officials to start work straight away on designing and costing this wildlife intervention research.

As I said, it is a completely new approach. We expect the design for such a study to be complex, and we want to make sure that we get it right. There are a number of key steps to be completed. The first step is to commission the necessary modelling using information from the North. That initial modelling will help to ensure that the subsequent design is scientifically robust. The modelling will also help us to identify the optimum location and size for the study and how long it would need to run. It will also help to identify the costs of the wildlife intervention research more clearly, because it is likely to be expensive. In Wales, the initial estimated cost of their vaccination approach is around £6 million over five years. In England, they were looking at costs of around £50 million because they were having a much larger randomised badger culling trial. So, there is a big difference there. Until we have our modelling detail, we are unable to say what the exact costs will be. At this stage, we expect that the wildlife intervention research would have to be carried out over five years in order to see a measurable effect in badgers and/or cattle. Any intervention will depend on the availability of the funding required, which must be fully justified in cost-benefit terms.

When we have the results of the initial modelling, the next step will be to design the study proposal. A number of other preparatory actions will be necessary, including completing the necessary business case, obtaining the necessary licences and securing the necessary funding. As the badger is a protected species, any direct interventions in the badger population here will be subject to the agreement of the Environment Minister and the issue of the necessary licences. Any interventions must also be compliant with statutory powers and take into account any relevant legal rulings.

I have asked my officials to get the preparatory work for the study under way immediately. The scientific work starts straight away. The timing for the start of any fieldwork depends on the successful completion of the necessary preparatory actions, but I hope that that will be as early next year as possible. I am also asking for officials to maintain and develop stakeholder engagement with the farming, veterinary and environmental representative organisations. Indeed, such a meeting has been arranged for this afternoon to provide the stakeholder group with the up-to-date information that I am giving to the Committee this afternoon.

Finally, I would like to encourage farmers to get involved in any TB and wildlife studies that are commissioned in their local areas. We will use the evidence produced by the programme of TB and wildlife research and studies to inform a comprehensive approach that deals with all aspects of TB and will help to reduce the level of disease in cattle. As I said at the beginning of my briefing, there is no simple solution. There is no quick fix that will eradicate TB. We have to be realistic in that regard, but we also have to continue to drive forward with these measures.

I want to continue to work with the Committee and stakeholders as we develop this enhanced long-term strategy for the eradication of TB in cattle and implement cost-effective disease-control measures to reduce and eradicate the disease. I know that the Committee was concerned that we should have stronger reference to the eradication of TB in the draft DARD strategy 2020. I will, of course, ensure that the commitment to develop the longer-term eradication strategy is reflected in the draft strategy 2020 that we have issued for consultation. I hope that the Committee will be able to support the approach that I am taking. I look forward to hearing your views and conclusions at the end of your review of this very important matter. I also accept that I am announcing this to you just today and that you may have a number of questions. We are happy to take those questions now and in the days ahead.

Before I take your questions, perhaps you will allow me to update you on the recent increase in TB. I know that the Committee is keen to know about that. The recent increase in TB to 6.71% at 30 April obviously has a considerable impact on farmers. Many are asking what is happening and what is being done about it. I want to assure the Committee that the Veterinary Service is working very hard to deal with the spread of the disease. It conducts an investigation of each new breakdown and applies disease-control measures appropriate to the specific circumstances. In most cases, that includes a face-to-face discussion with the farmer. Specialist advice is also provided as required by epidemiologists and scientists based in Dundonald House and AFBI respectively. Local veterinary officers have access to gamma-interferon testing and strain typing to help them deal with outbreaks. They can also use additional measures to enhance detection and control, such as severe interpretation of a skin test and more frequent herd testing.

I realise that farmers in affected areas may not be aware of all that is being done to address the disease threat or the overall disease position in their area. Therefore, I have asked my officials to look at how we communicate biosecurity advice and make sure that we are getting our message out there as much as we possibly can. I am also grateful for offers made by private vets right across the North, who want to get involved and continue the positive working relationship that we have and make sure that they can get information out to farmers. The vet is often where farmers will go, because they will have built up a relationship over many years. My officials are also, therefore, engaged in discussions with the veterinary associations to see how we can develop that partnership working.

That is an update of the situation. I appreciate that I have read out a lot of information in a few minutes. I am happy to take questions. The full team can assist with any technical details.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, Minister. We are glad that you have the full team available, and we thank you for that. Yes, there is a lot to digest in the statement; I appreciate that. I also see the significance in your statement of the wildlife intervention research and whatever programme will come out of that. Having heard about it for the first time, I think that we, as a Committee, would be very interested in finding out more. I am aware that I have limited members to one question in a round, and I will resist asking about that programme until I see more detail on it. I see it as a move on your part and that of your Department. We have been putting a lot of work into this topic, and I am sure that there has been a lot of pressure on the Department on the issue. You would expect that, as we are the scrutiny body. If we have helped in some way to get you and the Department to this point, we will take credit for that. You understand that we have a role, and we want a successful outcome to a very complicated disease that has affected the industry for so long. I will reserve questions on the wildlife intervention research and the programme that comes out of it until I see more detail. I ask you to forward as much detail as you can, Minister.

My question is about the June monitoring round and the £6 million additional moneys that were required for the increased compensation. I believe that a small fraction of that is on the cattle valuation, and that tends to suggest that more cattle are infected. That seems to be a setback in the eradication plan. How do you view it, Minister? How concerned are you about needing £6 million more on top of the £20 million already needed for compensation rates?

Mrs O'Neill: Some of the criticism has been about lack of action or people not seeing action on the ground. The initiative is about trying to address that. This has been a priority for the Department, but we are stepping up the action. It is fair to say that I have been consulting stakeholders, the farming unions and environmentalists, particularly those who are concerned about the badgers. I appreciate that you want to get more detail, and that is fair enough. In the long run, it will be a good initiative in that it will lead to a healthier badger population. It will gather the information that we need for the policy direction and where we go, but no healthy badger will be harmed. That is important. It is action, and it is a very powerful study. It is unique to the North; it is not being done elsewhere. We could just say, "Let us vaccinate every badger" as is happening elsewhere. This is unique to us, is the information that we need and is based on our local situation. That is key to the initiative and is positive.

You asked about the recent rise. We were on a downward trend until autumn last year, and that is when things started to change. Colette could take you through why we think there was a change or why things started to turn around.

Mrs Colette McMaster (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): I will start, and Bert will perhaps come in on the veterinary side. We had seen a reduction in TB since the peak after the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak. So, it was disappointing to see the recent increase. We have been looking very closely at that in the Department. Bert will say more about this, but it is usual to see some increase in the number of reactor herds during the winter because that is when most of the testing is carried out. However, there has been a higher increase in the number of reactor herds detected this year.

What is interesting is that there has been no change in the TB programme. We have outlined for you at previous sessions that we have a robust programme in place, and we continue to implement that. So, there has not been any particular change that seems an obvious factor in why there has been that change in incidence.

The specialist veterinary epidemiologists have been working on this. We monitor the herd incidence monthly. So, as soon as a change was detected, that was monitored and various investigations are ongoing. A number of factors can cause TB incidence, but it is very difficult to pinpoint any one factor that causes a particular outbreak or set of outbreaks. However, we have been looking at the factors and seeking to prioritise what those may be.

Mr Bert Houston (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): There has been a concerning increase from a low level of about 4.99% in August last year. Quite rightly, we were expecting an increase over the winter because that is when most of the testing is carried out. As Colette said, that increase was greater this year and, perhaps, extended longer.

The epidemiologists were looking at it over the winter to see what factors may have affected the herd incidence level. They are looking at a number of areas. At this time, however, we have no definitive set of proposals or hypotheses that say what we think definitely happened. That said, we are aware that the increase has been largely across the Province and not in a particular area. The increase has been bigger in some of the general divisional veterinary office (DVO) areas such as Newtownards, Armagh and Newry, which would traditionally have had high levels of TB, if you want to call it that. There have been individual large herd breakdowns, but the overall picture is largely one of an increase across the Province rather than in any particular area. It has not just been large outbreaks within herds. It has been a mixture of individual animals within herds in a large number of herds and individual herds with large numbers of reactors. We are looking into that to see what we can do about it.

The Chairperson: You would accept that £6 million, on top of the existing £20 million, is a massive hike.

Mrs O'Neill: Historically, we always start with a low baseline, and we always bid. That is how it has always been done in the Department. We always bid in-year for additional funding. That is the reason for the £6 million. It is early days in the monitoring round, so we will continue to bid in-year for that.

Mr Houston: Perhaps I could add that the price of cattle is increasing. Obviously, our compensation costs increase as cattle prices increase.

Mr Swann: Thanks, Minister, for attending. Unlike the Chair, I have a number of questions on your new wildlife intervention research, and I will try to contain myself to the one at this stage. What will make your testing unique is that you will vaccinate the negatives and remove the positives. Is that correct?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes.

Mr Swann: I see Gerry nodding anyway. By removing, you mean culling.

Mrs O'Neill: Yes; obviously, in a very humane way and within the welfare legislation.

Mr Swann: What test do you have to identify whether a badger is negative or positive while it is trapped there and then? We heard that, in England, there is a three-hour period.

Mrs O'Neill: I will talk you through our approach. The first step is the modelling. We looked at the Welsh Government model, but we need to apply our local data to that so that we can then decide on the best area to target and the size of the area that we should be targeting. We want to get the science right so that we have real outcomes for the way forward. We have a number of steps to move through, and it is very important that we start the work now and get the science right so that our action on the ground is informed by that.

Colette, do you want to explain the type of the vaccines? We have to work with what is licensed and approved by the EU.

Mrs McMaster: I will say a bit about the test. As the Minister said, we will do the modelling work first and then move to the design and consider what test will be used. A range of tests are available, but we have not made a decision at this stage on what test will be used in the study.

Mr Swann: Is there a test at the minute that will give you a turnaround, either positive or negative, for TB in that space of time?

Mrs McMaster: There is a test available called the Stat-Pak. It is a blood test, but not a lab-based test; it is described as an animal-side test in that you can get fairly rapid results from it and do not need to send the sample to a lab to have it analysed. We will look at that test when considering how we design this. A badger that is captured has to be anaesthetised first, and a blood sample is then taken. That can be processed while the animal is there, and you do not have to go to a lab and wait for results. The results can be available fairly quickly.

Mr Swann: Sorry, Chair, I do not want to labour this point, but we have seen the evidence and heard from the people who will be practising this in England and Wales, especially vaccinations. They went against anaesthetising because of the length of time that the badger will be lying there knocked out. What length of time is on the Stat-Pak test? How long will that badger be lying there knocked out before you kill it or do not kill it?

Mrs McMaster: We will look at all that very closely, but my understanding is that the process is about half an hour.

Mr Swann: What is the reliability of that test?

Mrs McMaster: The test is like any test in that there are sensitivity and specificity ratings. I am sure that Bert will say something on that. The sensitivity of a test indicates how likely it is to pick up infected animals, and the specificity is the number of false positives in animals that it is likely to pick up. The Stat-Pak has a fairly high specificity of over 90%. If you use that test, the majority of animals will be positive that you —

Mr Swann: It is up to 90% effective and has a half hour turnaround?

Mr Houston: The information that we have about the Brock Stat-Pak is that it has a high specificity, which means that, if a badger is negative, a test will not react as a positive. It has what is best described as moderate sensitivity, which increases if the badger is heavily infected. That seems to be the evidence for that test, but, as Colette said, we have not decided on the test that we will be able to use. We need to look at those tests and what is available. Other tests may become available. The Brock Stat-Pak test has been available for a number of years.

Mr Swann: Sorry to labour the point, but I just think that the whole crux of your wildlife intervention research depends on that test. Unless you get the right test, it will be pointless looking at models, scales and boundaries.

Mrs O'Neill: That is why we are doing the modelling now. That is important, because you have to decide on the best size of area and location. While we are working on the science, we are also able to work on the vaccinations and tests and make sure that everything else is in place when we go to field early next year.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for her presentation. When do you expect the new intervention research study to be completed? If I recall correctly, the previous Minister promised us a wildlife study in 2008. However, I do not think that any of us can recall getting a report on that. It did not seem to take place.

Mrs O'Neill: I have carefully considered a range of possible wildlife interventions that could be taken forward, but I have decided that the test, vaccinate and release is the best option that we have. It is the best possible option for proceeding with action on the ground at an early date. As I said at the start, we have quite a range of ongoing initiatives and research. This complements all the stuff that has been done, and it shows real action. Hopefully, as regards confidence among the wider community, people can see that action is being taken forward.

I outlined the research pieces that we have been gathering over the past number of years. We have got quite a lot of information, but we still do not have enough because it is such a complex disease. Until we have the proper information, it is very hard to move forward and to be definitive. The TB test, vaccinate and release is the best possible approach that we could take at this time, and it will add to the evidence that we already have.

Mr Irwin: Maybe your officials will answer this question. I will not go into specific outbreaks, but I know of one farmer, whose farm is bounded by a major river and a forest behind him, who had a very serious outbreak affecting a large number of animals. He was totally devastated. When wildlife looked to be the cause of the disease, did the Department do a survey of the wildlife in that area? If not, why not?

Mrs O'Neill: We cannot go into individual cases. Bert, perhaps you want to —

Mr Irwin: I mean in any outbreak; I am not talking about one specific outbreak. The indications were that wildlife was responsible for an outbreak. It would be reasonably easy to ascertain whether that was the cause if no livestock had been brought in. There was a forest behind this farm and a major river. The farmer's gripe was that the Department did not seem interested in wildlife.

Mr Houston: The veterinary officer who is studying the epidemiology of any outbreak will look at what is there and what information is available from the Animal and Public Health Information System (APHIS) about what was bought in. The veterinary officer will also try to discuss with the farmer whether there has been any sharing of breeding animals. He or she will look at the aspects that we can control. As regards surveying for badger setts or badgers in the area, we have no way of knowing whether those badgers have been infected. The badgers may be there, but you cannot lay them as a cause because they are there. In the absence of anything else, the only thing that you can say is that they are a possible cause. That is what happens in any outbreak.

Mr Irwin: With all due respect, if no wildlife survey is done, you cannot be sure. I would have thought that that should have taken place when there were indications that wildlife was the problem.

Mr Houston: I am questioning whether a survey would have given you any further information. There are likely to be badgers in the area, because badgers are widespread across Northern Ireland. However, you have no information about the status of those badgers.

Mrs O'Neill: The other point, which I made in my opening comments, is that farmers are not always aware of what is being done. That sometimes leads to a lack of confidence in what is being done, and that is what I am trying to address. There is a lot that goes on. When the Veterinary Service is alerted to the fact that there has been a disease outbreak, it conducts an investigation and applies disease-control measures. Maybe not all the time, but that often involves a face-to-face discussion with farmers. Following on from that, specialist advice will be provided. However, to go back to my original point, we need to do more about interacting with farmers so that they are aware of what is being done and what action the Department is taking, and we are looking at that.

Mr McMullan: Thank you for your presentation, Minister. You are very welcome. With all the research that has been done on TB, have you spoken to the pro-badger lobby? If so, what sort of reaction did you get?

Mrs O'Neill: I have been consulting with all stakeholders during the past year and have had a number of conversations with many stakeholders. I know that my officials have conversations on a regular basis. This approach commands broad acceptance, in that no healthy badger will be harmed. That is important. It is about trying to get a balance, and we are mindful of that, given that the badger is a protected species. I met the badger people yesterday and discussed this approach with them. Given the fact that no healthy badger will be harmed, they would be content with this approach. I hope that the farming unions feel the same.

Ms Boyle: Following on from that, I am sure that you intend to meet the farmers' union.

Mrs O'Neill: We have been engaging with the farmers' union and are trying to keep it up to date with what we are doing and the plans that we are trying to progress. Obviously, we will continue to do that. The stakeholder group will be briefed this afternoon, so, hopefully, everyone will be up to date and know exactly what we are proposing.

Ms Boyle: The cost of the initiative is £26 million a year — is that right?

Mrs O'Neill: We are currently spending £26 million. We have £4 million set aside for specific TB work in this Budget period. The costs are very varied. The cost in England was £50 million, although it is a different situation and a bigger area, and it will cost £6 million for vaccination in Wales. Until we have done the modelling and worked up the areas that we want to target and the size of those areas, it is hard to predict the cost. However, you are looking at a significant enough cost over the five-year period. All that will be subject to a business case, because I have to go through the normal procedure.

Ms Boyle: It will prove to be value for money if we get on top of it.

Mrs O'Neill: I believe so in the long term. We will have a healthier badger population at the end of this, and we will, hopefully, have more up-to-date information for developing policy, which will also be value for money.

The Chairperson: We will try to go round members again. Minister, so that we do not lose sight of the importance of the wildlife intervention research and the programme, whatever that may be, will you provide the Committee with details? We will certainly look at it and see whether we can form a judgement or seek answers to questions and more information. It is a significant part of your statement today, and we welcome your coming to the Committee to voice your statement.

I want to change tack slightly — in fact, greatly — and ask about the problems that the Department has been encountering during the past week at Dundonald House. I tend to be fairly positive due to the fact that it was a crisis caused by the weather. Taking that into consideration, as always, I try to be fair-minded. However, it adds to the relocation issue. Dundonald House houses a fundamental infrastructure piece of equipment that supplies the whole estate with electricity, and it failed last week and led to all the problems. If DARD were to relocate, what will be left there? Will it be the responsibility of the Department? How will the building be left, in whatever form or guise, so that that infrastructure will be in place? Are we talking about a new scheme of work that removes that electrical

infrastructure from Dundonald House into a new substation? You can see all those questions arising now with regard even to how this estate works.

There is also the animal and public health information system (APHIS), which is an important issue for the Department, and the effect that had over the latter part of last week. Again, that raises questions about the vulnerability of the system in that we were trading blind in our marts a lot of the time, particularly on the Thursday. The livestock market in Ballymena in my constituency was greatly affected on Thursday by the shutting down of APHIS. We all value the system, but we would now be concerned about its vulnerability. What lessons were learned over the past week and what action is now taking place to rectify the situation and make the system much more robust so that in the event of crises and weather it will not require a shutdown that affects the industry from the farmer to the abattoir to the marts and exports?

Mrs O'Neill: I will quickly run through the incident with you and will then be happy to pick up on the wider issues. Your point about estate management and where the electrics should be housed is essentially a Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) issue. It was unfortunate, to say the least, that everything was in the one place that got flooded.

It appears that a culvert in the Stormont estate was blocked and was not able to cope with the unprecedented flow of water as the debris washed down and got caught up in the grille. As you know, Dundonald House was flooded up to nearly 1 foot from the ceiling in the basement. So, for safety reasons, it was necessary to power down all the electrics and all elements of the electricity transmission network. That included the generator connected to Dundonald House.

An emergency plan kicked in. Gerry's team immediately got together. They were called from about 11.30 pm on Wednesday and met at Greenmount the next morning. We had to relocate 800 staff, which in itself was tough. We were lucky that we had the Greenmount campus and were able to go there and use it as a base to establish the incident management team.

As you said, there was temporary disruption to customer-facing services. I was at Greenmount when the team was talking to people at meat plants and those who would be impacted upon. Nearly all 800 staff have been relocated. We are expecting to be out of Dundonald House for maybe three weeks before it is back up and functional again. The IT and telephones are all up and running again and all services are normal.

We attempted to keep all disruption to a minimum, but the APHIS system had to be closed down after midnight on Wednesday. It was made available again on Thursday morning to facilitate the meat plants opening and the meat houses were informed. It closed down again from 1.30 pm to allow the Dundonald House basement to be pumped out. APHIS was fully functioning again by Friday afternoon and has remained available since. There is no good time for such a thing to happen. It was coming towards the end of the week, and we were very mindful of the disruption. Obviously, the APHIS system is key to be able to sell meat and for trade, so we were very mindful of that. We think that we kept disruption to a minimum.

Unfortunately, our backup system is in Craigantlet Buildings, which was also flooded. Those were the problems we faced. With Dundonald House shut down, we could not just automatically switch over, because there was flooding in Craigantlet Buildings. Some may ask whether contingencies should be so close. However, when the system was fitted 13 years ago, it was a dedicated fibre link so it had to be close, which is why it was in Craigantlet Buildings. That is another example that shows why Dundonald House is beyond its useful life. When we are planning our new headquarters, a lot of lessons need to be learned about where to place the power systems and generators. The wider issue of Dundonald House and all the power being situated there is an issue for DFP. At this time, however, all services have resumed and staff are working.

The Chairperson: Members, I know that you will be disappointed when I tell you that we are struggling for time, and I am sure that the Minister is struggling for time. If you have any questions, we could get them in writing for the Committee Clerk to pass on to the Minister, if that would be in order?

Mrs O'Neill: Fair enough.

The Chairperson: It is valuable to have the Minister here, and members are always keen to ask questions.

I was disappointed about the fact that the marts and markets were coming to me and saying that there was a problem with APHIS and the Department had not communicated with the Committee or me on the matter until I approached the Committee Clerk to approach the Department. I know that we are not a priority and the likes of the Ulster Farmers' Union, the abattoirs and marts will always be a priority. We come second to them, and I fully understand that. However, as Chairman of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, I was disappointed that stakeholders were coming and informing me, and then I had to enquire of the Department.

That said, Wendy Johnston contacted me three times on Friday afternoon and late evening, and on Saturday morning, to keep me fully briefed. So, once that link was created, the information passed was very good. It was just the initial response and the fact that stakeholders were coming to me and I was not even aware that there was a problem. I was informed about the problems with the flooding of Dundonald House. I was not made aware of the issue with APHIS, which was the major issue for the Department within the flooding issue. So, please, there are lessons to be learned there. However, once the link was established with Wendy Johnston, there was very good passing of information. I commend your officials for that.

Mrs O'Neill: There are always lessons to be learned about communications, but, as you said, my priority was to make sure that there was no disruption to the trade and to try to keep everybody up and running and functioning. It was always intended to brief you as Chair of the Committee. When we review these situations, we always look to improve communications, so we take your point. As you said, when you did get talking to Wendy, you were fully briefed and kept up to date. In fairness, we had pretty positive feedback from the meat plants. Our priority was to make sure that people could still trade and things carried on as normal.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, Minister, for your time. I also thank Gerry and all your officials. It has been very productive.