



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural  
Development

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Agriculture and Rural Development Priorities  
for 2013: Ministerial Briefing

29 January 2013

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

Agriculture and Rural Development Priorities for 2013: Ministerial Briefing

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Paul Frew (Chairperson)  
Mr Joe Byrne (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Thomas Buchanan  
Mr Trevor Clarke  
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson  
Mr Chris Hazzard  
Mr William Irwin  
Mr Declan McAleer  
Mr Oliver McMullan  
Mr Robin Swann

**Witnesses:**

Mrs Michelle O'Neill	Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development
Dr Mark Browne	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Bert Houston	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Gerry Lavery	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr David Small	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

**The Chairperson:** I refer members to the memo from the Committee Clerk. I welcome David Small, the deputy secretary responsible for service delivery. OK, Minister, without further ado: I know that time is tight.

**Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development):** I will run through a number of the key priority issues. The first half of 2013 will be a crucial time for common agricultural policy (CAP) reform negotiations, given that the Irish presidency is aiming to reach agreement by the end of June.

Further attempts will be made to reach agreement on the EU budget, probably on 7 or 8 February. We are hoping that the financial framework can be agreed. At this stage, the Committee will probably be aware that last week the Agriculture Committee of the European Parliament agreed to support a number of compromise amendments that, on the whole, move the debate in the right direction. However, there is still an awful lot of work to be done, especially on the detail, to ensure that it can be implemented without excessive bureaucracy for farmers and the Department.

I believe that the Irish presidency will be very competent and will be able to move the debate along. I wish them well in their endeavour. They are faced with a considerable task. I will continue to engage with the main players in the CAP reform negotiations and press for the changes that we seek, most notably on the transition period to flat-rate payments and on greening.

I am also pressing hard for the CAP budget to be protected in the ongoing EU budget negotiations, and I am very aware of the importance of the CAP support to our farmers and our rural communities. Achieving a good outcome from the CAP reform is a top priority for me.

We are moving to an important phase in the process of reforming the common fisheries policy (CFP). Last June, the Council of Ministers agreed a general approach on the basic CFP regulations. That agreement included commitments to ban the discarding of unwanted catches and included a genuine process for regionalisation of fisheries management measures. In parallel with that, the European Parliament have been considering their position on a range of proposed amendments to the CFP package. It is expected that the European Parliament will vote on their position early in February. Final agreement involves a co-decision between the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament, which is not expected until well into 2013. Again, my counterpart in the South, Simon Coveney, will play a pivotal role in brokering an agreement during the Irish presidency in the first half of 2013.

My main priorities, which I share with fellow Fisheries Ministers in Britain, are for greater regional management, with regional responsibility for developing technical measures and long-term stock management plans, and less discarding of unwanted fish. In the coming months, we will press hard in negotiations to ensure that we achieve our objective and get a CFP that is fit for purpose for the next decade.

With regard to compliance and the land parcel identification system; as you are aware, we are expecting the Commission to publish its formal decision confirming the area aids disallowance for 2009 soon. The European Court of Justice has not yet made any final ruling on the earlier challenges brought by us and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). As those are still proceeding, we have asked DEFRA to bring a further challenge to the European Court on that correction as well. We will continue to make considerable progress in tackling the concerns raised by the European Commission, and our priority has been to tackle those concerns that cause the highest level of disallowance.

To date, our focus has been on our remapping exercise and enhancing our on-the-spot controls. The maps have now all been issued, and we are dealing with the changes from farmers. The maps are not perfect. The Commission expects farmers and the Department to work together to ensure that they are correct. The improvement of maps is, therefore, a joint effort, and farmer feedback is vital to us as we strive to minimise the risk to the fund arising from that issue. Although feedback from farmers has been generally positive, inevitably, there will be some farmers whose maps will not be correct, given that we have amended about 750,000 fields. I ask farmers to work with us on these issues, check their maps thoroughly and tell us about any problems. We want to ensure that the maps are as accurate as possible, so that the 2013 single application forms are pre-printed with accurate information. That is important to farmers as it will help to avoid delays with payments later in the year.

As we start a new year, the key for the agrifood industry is to grasp the opportunities that lie ahead. As you know, the Agri-Food Strategy Board, established last year by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and me, and chaired by Tony O'Neill, is due to report later this year with an industry-led action plan that will deliver growth for the sector. I am pleased that the board has been engaging with a wide range of stakeholders, and I await the report with interest. I expect it to focus on the significant opportunities that exist in external markets, how to grow the local industry while respecting the rich natural environment and heritage, and innovative solutions to further strengthen relationships throughout the entire supply chain.

At the Balmoral show in May last year, I announced that the Forest Service should relocate its headquarters to County Fermanagh. I believe that that relocation will have benefits for the agency and the county, not least because of the importance of our forests to County Fermanagh and their role as an important part of the rural economy. The move aims to bring more public sector employment to the county and will allow closer on-the-ground experience of what is happening in timber processing and recreation in forests in the west.

Work is now under way to identify possible sites for the relocation and to prepare a project plan to make the move by summer 2014. Land and Property Services has now provided a list of possible locations and properties for consideration for the new Forest Service headquarters in County Fermanagh. Key staff are being recruited to the Forest Service relocation project team. The project team will produce a formal business plan that will identify a preferred option for my consideration.

Work is progressing on the programme of work needed to advance the relocation of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) headquarters to a rural location, including the development of the draft economic appraisal, the equality impact assessment and a staff survey. I remain committed to delivering the relocation of DARD headquarters.

Since its roll-out in 2009, axis 3 has supported over 1,412 projects, with grant aid of £26.4 million already paid to project promoters. Additional match funding of £20.1 million has been levered in, representing a total investment in rural areas of over £46 million. Recently, letters of offer worth almost £7 million have been issued for strategic projects, and more will follow. The average monthly investment in quality-of-life projects is £1.6 million in the 2012-13 financial year. Again, that is expected to rise significantly in 2013.

To date, despite the economic climate, axis 3 has assisted 290 farm businesses to diversify, providing much-needed additional income to the farm household and the local rural economy. Additionally, investments have supported 234 microenterprises and created 288 new jobs, providing further economic and quality-of-life stimulus in rural communities.

Tourism is important to the rural economy, and, so far, 89 tourism actions have been supported, which will have an impact on tourist spend, thereby generating additional income for other businesses in the investment area. Through the more community-orientated measures, projects have been supported to purpose-build or adapt facilities in community halls and villages, which provide much-needed access to improved services for older people, women and young people in the community. Investments predicated on developing social capital have seen projects directly benefiting children and young people receive 12% of the total grant assistance. I have also announced a new investment of £5 million in rural broadband. That will be targeted at areas that do not currently have fixed-wire broadband.

I am very pleased with the progress made in relation to the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation framework, which is on course to meet its target spend of £4 million for this financial year. A range of initiatives under the framework are under way, which all provide valuable assistance to addressing rural poverty and isolation, including the assisted rural travel scheme; support for the rural support charity; support for rural community development; the maximising access in rural areas (MARA) project; the farm family health checks programme; the connecting elderly rural isolated project; the rural bore wells scheme; the youth employability programme; the young entrepreneurs project; and fuel poverty energy efficiency work.

The rural challenge programme closed its call for applications on 14 December, and 155 applications have been received. That is obviously a very encouraging endorsement of the need for such interventions in our rural areas and of the role played by volunteers wanting to improve their communities.

Poultry litter is another issue, which we are debating in the Chamber today. Finding a sustainable solution for the long-term management of poultry litter is vital for the poultry industry and the agrifood sector. Last year, DARD and AFBI conducted a review of alternative technologies, which was published in April 2012. Following that review, I, along with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, announced the launch of the small business research initiative (SBRI) competition in November. The competition is designed to develop solutions for the sustainable utilisation of poultry litter. There has been an encouraging level of interest in the SBRI so far. By early January, 45 organisations had registered for the competition, and a recent open day for potential applications was attended by 64 delegates from 46 organisations. The closing date for applications is 20 February.

Contracts for phase one, which is the proof of concept stage, will be awarded in May. Phase two, which is the development of prototype stage, will commence in autumn 2013. The response is very encouraging, and I am hopeful that a solution or solutions will emerge that the industry will be able to adopt.

Last but not least, I am delighted that recruitment into the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise's (CAFRE) education and training programmes continues to grow. Last week, the CAFRE director highlighted to the Committee that enrolments have grown by 20% in the past 10 years, with the most significant increase being in agriculture and food disciplines.

During a period of record unemployment, with almost 19% of 18- to 24-year-olds unemployed, it is good to see that 91% of CAFRE graduates were in employment or continuing with their education six months after leaving the college last summer.

With the agrifood sector proving to be one of the more resilient sectors of our local economy, it is vital that it continues to develop through innovation. Recently, I was delighted to announce proposals for a new food innovation centre at Loughry. We aim to deliver that by 2015, at an estimated cost of £1.8 million, funded from the jobs in the economy budget. The new facility will support Loughry's food education, training and industry development programmes and will increase the level of innovation and product development in the agrifood sector.

Mr Chairman, that was a very quick run through because I know that we are limited for time. I tried to cover the main key priorities in the Department.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much for your presentation, Minister. With regard to your multiple priorities for the coming year, we would not expect anything less. With the best will in the world, we can have all the priorities we want and all the strategic planning that we want, but, particularly in DARD and the role that you play, Minister, you will have to deal with crises if they come along. Hopefully, they will not. One issue that has been on your table in the past number of weeks is the crisis with regard to horse meat and burgers. What systems and procedures are in place in Northern Ireland to ensure that such cross-contamination of meat products does not occur? Can you tell the Committee whether local or imported horses are being slaughtered and processed in Northern Ireland?

**Mrs O'Neill:** It is a very topical issue, so I expected you to raise it. As regards the systems and procedures in place, product authenticity is the responsibility of the Food Standards Agency (FSA), which, as you know, comes under the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Although there is no evidence that anything has taken place, FSA has initiated a four-point plan on the back of what has happened in the South. We are very much engaged in that plan, making sure that it is implemented. Obviously, this is a food confidence issue, and given that we have a very clean, green image as regards food production, we do not want that image to be in any sort of danger. Just to be clear, it is legal to slaughter and sell horse meat in Ireland and in Britain provided that it is done in an approved abattoir and that the meat carries an official stamp declaring it fit for human consumption. A limited number of horses were slaughtered in the plant here that were for export to mainland Europe, but that establishment ceased operations this week, so no horse meat is being processed here. I just want to make that very clear.

My officials, environmental health officers and councils are all involved in carrying out audits to ensure that we have the highest standards and that everybody meets the assurances that we offer. I know that the Committee also shares my view that we are a long promoter of the use of local produce, and the local produce that we have here has a very strong track record in respect of people's support for it.

**Mr T Clarke:** Is that a race track?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Sorry? Oh, I missed the joke, sorry. Given that we have a very strong track record in our use of quality assurance systems, it is important that we promote that we have that product and that people are not fearful of local produce, because there are enough checks and balances in place. That said, we are fully engaging with the FSA and its four-point plan to make sure that people are doubly assured that what they are buying is safe. No one should be buying anything that is, if you like, not what it says on the tin.

**Mr Irwin:** I was going to touch on the same issue, but the Chairman covered it. Instead, I will ask about axis 3 of the rural development programme and the regional strategic projects that the Minister will take forward with the local action groups (LAGs). I see some difficulties with much of the rural development programme and, for instance, in the area covered by the Southern Organisation for Action in Rural Areas (SOAR), which I sit on, £1.1 million was decommitted for a number of reasons. SOAR did a survey, which found that approximately 30% of the funds had been decommitted because of the red tape and bureaucracy surrounding the programme. Does the Minister intend to ensure that there is more openness in the new round and make the funds more easily accessible as in other parts of Europe? This is especially so with our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland, where there is not as much red tape.

As regards the money that was earmarked is concerned, unfortunately, as we now have strategic projects that will be used to get rid of the money rather than it being sent it back to Europe, it seems unfair that that money could not have been used to create business and jobs in Northern Ireland.

I think that many in the LAGs are unhappy with the course of action taken by the Department — your Department — over the past few years. Very early on, many LAGs made their concerns clear to the Department and highlighted the difficulties that there could be. I feel that the Department did not take action to deal with those concerns or make the guidelines clearer and more easily accessible to applicants.

I would like an assurance from the Minister that, in any new round of rural development moneys, the guidelines will be made clearer and the red tape and bureaucracy will be reduced. That will mean that money can be spent by local businesses and those who wish to avail themselves of it.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I assure the member that my aim is to make sure that we spend every penny to the best effect for rural communities. That is our thinking behind any decision on how moneys are spent or on how we change things throughout the rest of the programme. We will continue to engage with the LAGs and the joint council committee (JCC); that is key. They are the people who operate the programmes and encounter all the problems that you and others have identified down through the years.

We are in an excellent position to shape the new programme. In a way, we nearly inherited the last one, and we now have a good opportunity to shape the new programme and learn from the lessons that were clearly identified in the last one. That is particularly so with red tape, bureaucracy, and all the things that go with it. We are already engaged in a process of engagement with stakeholders, and we are trying to make that as wide as possible. I can assure you that I am listening firmly to all the views being expressed throughout that engagement. I believe that you should listen to the people who are on the ground delivering the programmes. They have encountered all those things at first hand. The Department continues to engage with all the LAGs throughout the whole process.

Despite your feelings, I think that strategic projects are positive. As I detailed in my initial contribution, a number of projects have been identified that will benefit from strategic projects. That is all very positive. Something like £6.5 million worth of letters of offer have been issued. That is positive, and that is good money being spent in the wider rural community on a wide range of projects. I hope that that will continue, and I hope that we will get to the end of the programme having spent every penny in the rural community. I do not want to hand back one penny to Europe at the end of the programme. That is where I am coming from on all of this.

I totally agree with the point about reducing red tape and bureaucracy and making the new programme fit for purpose.

**Mr Irwin:** I hope that that is the case. Thank you.

**Mrs Dobson:** Minister, I would like to focus on reducing bureaucracy for farmers. As the animal and public health information system (APHIS) has been so successful, can you explain why it is still necessary for farmers to keep written herd books or opt for an expensive second tier of software, which many farmers have told me is very difficult to operate and rarely works? So much time and money has been spent on APHIS. Do you understand that doubling up the work impacts on the farmers? Is there really any point in your Department computerising systems, at considerable cost to the taxpayer, to make things easier for farmers, if they still have to use the old system as well as the new one? When will APHIS finally be paperless? Do you have a target that you are working towards?

**Mrs O'Neill:** OK. I am always interested in trying to reduce red tape and improve things. I have always made it clear that we want farmers to come forward and give us practical examples of where we can change things. As to why we have written herd books and APHIS, I will ask Bert to come in. The core of all the things that we do is to make sure that we can stand over the high welfare standards that we have. It puts us in a very good place with the £1 billion export trade that we have. That is the thinking behind the core of all that we try to do, but if there are any practical, simple examples of things that are nonsense, we are always happy to look at them, and we encourage farmers to come forward. Bert, do you want to pick up on the written herd books, and so on?

**Mr Bert Houston (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development):** Yes. Clearly, the keeping of a herd book and herd records is the responsibility of the herd keeper, under EU legislation. Where we can, we have tried to make APHIS and information from it available to help farmers to do that. Some of the software packages currently download and upload information to APHIS, and we approve those packages as an effective herd record. In doing that, we have to ensure that the record is auditable, and that it is possible for someone to come along and say, yes, that is what happened and it

was not changed yesterday or whatever. Or, if a change was made, there should be a track record of the change. It is maybe not just as simple as it appears at first. Certainly, we try to do whatever we can to facilitate the farming community in meeting its legislative requirements, especially where they are providing information to us and we hold it on APHIS.

**Mrs Dobson:** When do you see it moving to paperless, then?

**Mr Houston:** Sorry, it is already paperless in some ways, in that those farmers who have herd management programmes that can download from and contribute to APHIS —

**Mrs Dobson:** Herd farmers tell me that the programmes are very difficult, riddled with problems and very difficult to work. They are not happy. That is what I hear through my constituency service: that those other options are just unworkable.

**Mr Houston:** All we can do is to try to work with the suppliers to provide the information for the herd farmers. If the farming community is finding that difficult, it would be helpful if they fed that back to suppliers. I imagine that the suppliers would also be very keen to make their software packages attractive to farmers. There is self-help involved there. We can easily make APHIS information available to software packages.

**Mrs Dobson:** Do you appreciate the frustrations out there?

**Mr Houston:** I understand that, surely.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I was just going to say that Jo-Anne talked about how we measure it. The current programme runs until 31 March. I have asked officials to devise a new action plan for after that date, but we will talk more to the Committee about that in the time ahead.

**Mr Byrne:** First, in relation to the decision last week by the Agriculture Committee in Brussels, whereby the modern flexible farm policy might mean that no individual farmer would get less than 65% of the EU average, has any calculation been done by the Department as to how that might affect our farmers in general? Secondly, in relation to the CAP negotiations, how can DARD maximise regional variations among the UK Ministers of Agriculture in relation to the Irish type of agriculture that the Republic is trying to press?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I am sorry; I did not pick up the second point.

**Mr Byrne:** What is being done to try to maximise the regional variations that we might need here, among the UK devolved Ministers and DEFRA, so that our agriculture package will not be much different from what the Republic will get for its farmers?

**Mrs O'Neill:** OK. As to your first point, on the European Parliament Committee's plan, that is mainly about diverting support to new member states. We are actually on the average, so it will not have an impact on us because of where we sit. We are on an average amount. That is really more for new member states. Is that not right, Mark?

**Dr Mark Browne (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development):** That is right. The proposal that the European Parliament put forward is to move those furthest away from the average quicker towards the average, and then to have that backstop of all of them being — and it is at member-state level, not farm level — at least 65% of the average. The UK sits just slightly below the average, and, therefore, if anything there might be a very marginal gain. There would not be any negative impact with that proposal.

**Mrs O'Neill:** We are arguing strongly for regional flexibility under CAP reform to allow us to bring forward some things that we think suit the local industry. To compare us to the South, last time round it had —

**Mr Byrne:** Yes, given that our agriculture practice is much aligned to what is happening in the Republic in farm size, etc.

**Mrs O'Neill:** In the current programme, the South of Ireland achieved a much higher share of the rural development programme pillar 2 funding. So that is something that we are very much arguing for this time round again. That funding allowed them to do a number of schemes that left farmers in this part of the island quite frustrated as to why we could not. It comes down to the fact that they had more moneys to be able to do that. We are arguing strongly for a higher proportion of those moneys so that if we have regional flexibility, we will be able to bring forward projects and do things that suit our own industry.

**Mr Byrne:** I have one further comment regarding your first answer.

**The Chairperson:** If you are quick, Joe, because we are pushed for time.

**Mr Byrne:** Can the Minister confirm or otherwise whether imported meat from Poland passed through a cold store in Northern Ireland belonging to a food processing company?

**Mrs O'Neill:** No.

**Mr Gerry Lavery (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development):** We certainly were not involved in the incident, and the meat has not been traced through Northern Ireland.

**Mr Byrne:** So, categorically, no plant or cold store in Northern Ireland was used to —

**Mr Lavery:** None has been uncovered so far by the investigation, and Simon Coveney announced that the investigation was concluded. So, as far as we can tell, no, we were not in any way concerned.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Minister Coveney announced on Saturday evening that investigations had ascertained that the horse meat came to be found in the products as a result of the importation of beef as a raw material from Poland. We have not been involved in any of that.

**Mr McAleer:** I was glad to note your decision a number of weeks ago, Minister, to invest in the regional sub-office for the Rivers Agency in Omagh. Can you give any indication of progress on that and how long it may be before it is developed and functional?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Absolutely; I am pleased to say that only days ago — 25 January — work started on preparing the site for the new accommodation. As you said, it is the new Rivers Agency accommodation at St Julian's Road in Omagh. Construction is going to start in July this year, and the whole thing is programmed to take about 12 months to complete. So, the proposed construction of a new Omagh regional office on an existing Rivers Agency site will obviously provide a boost to the local economy. As a local MLA, you will obviously welcome that. The accommodation that we had was just not satisfactory, and this is a good opportunity to have a new office built there, and I know that it is something that, as you said, has been welcomed in the area.

**Mr Buchanan:** Minister, you talk about the work being done under axis 3 and about tackling poverty in rural areas. We must do that in a balanced way that benefits the farming community and those in need. How can you explain how awarding £1 million towards floodlighting and an environmental scheme at a GAA pitch in west Tyrone tackles rural poverty in the farming community and benefits farming families, who are financially on their knees? A number of them cannot even get their single farm payments through. How can that be justified?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I am very interested in making sure that we support not only the farming community but the wider rural community, and I think that the member should also be interested in that, given that he represents a rural community. All the supports that go out are decisions of the local action groups and the joint council committee. That is how the decision-making is done. The member is very aware of the bottom-up LEADER approach. That is how the decision was taken. It is not a decision for me. The application obviously met the scheme criteria and rules, so I am content that the application is one that should be considered along with all the other applications that come forward. However, the member needs to be mindful that all these contributions to the wider rural community enhance and have an impact on that whole community. Quite often — again, as the member will be aware because he represents a rural community — the GAA can be at the heart of that community. The community hall could be multipurpose, for all sorts of things. So I ask the member to take that on board. However, it met the scheme rules, so it is up to the LAG and the JCC to take that decision.

**Mr Buchanan:** With all due respect, I do not want to dwell on this, but there were difficulties and problems with getting it through. My understanding is that sport does not really qualify through axis 3 and the anti-poverty strategy. Although the LAGs had difficulties and concerns about it, it was pushed through by the Minister.

**Mrs O'Neill:** The decision was taken by the LAGs and the JCC to award all the applications and programmes that came forward in their area.

**Mr David Small (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development):** It is worth putting that in context. Out of the £500 million rural development programme, well over £400 million is targeted directly at farmers through the less favoured area compensatory allowances scheme, the agrienvironment schemes or the farm diversification scheme. Although some funds under axis 3 are being targeted towards rural development and community development projects like the ones that we have talked about, the vast bulk of investment is going towards the farming community in the wider context.

**Mr Clarke:** Where it should be.

**Mr McMullan:** Thank you, Minister, for your report. One of the things that I want to hit on is the single farm payment and CAP. One of the things that has come through my constituency office quite a lot this past while is enquiries from the farming community about the talk from the coalition Government and this whole thing about having a referendum on Europe and leaving Europe, etc, etc. The worrying thing about that, do you agree, is it would have a massive effect on the farming community? Our MEPs in Europe are singing from the same hymn sheet; they all seem to agree on fighting for the retention of the single farm payment as we have it. We are the same here. There seems to be a difference in some of our MPs at Westminster, who seem to be siding with the coalition Government on this. What would be the major effect on the farming industry here if we left Europe, which is what the coalition Government are talking about? It would have a massive effect here on payments through the rural development programme; there would be less money to go into those programmes. Is that correct?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Absolutely. Taking it purely from the agriculture end of things, we are talking about the withdrawal of approximately £300 million of single farm payments. We are talking about £500 million over the course of the programme for the rural development programme. It would have a fairly substantial impact on the local rural economy and community. Any decision in that regard would need to be taken very seriously in conjunction with talking to those people. It would be very rash of anybody to make a call to withdraw from Europe at this time. You need more of a debate around the topic. It is also an issue for the member state; it is not an issue for us locally. My job is to make sure that we fight strong and hard to maintain the money that we have and for the income and support that we need for our farming community and our wider rural community. That is where I see my role.

**Mr Clarke:** The Deputy Chair asked about the beef coming from Poland. The answer from the Department, or maybe the Minister, referred to Coveney in what is happening here. Since when did his remit include Northern Ireland? I thought that you had the responsibility for Northern Ireland, Minister. The response was that Mr Coveney assured you that there was nothing here.

**Mrs O'Neill:** The horse meat issue was discovered by the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI). That was when we were first alerted to the issue. I make no apology for working in tandem with my counterparts, whether that be in Dublin, England, Scotland or Wales. The member has nothing to fear. I assure —

**Mr Clarke:** The question was about up here, not to do with the South.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I assure the member, as I said earlier in response to the Chair's question, that we continue to work with the FSAI and the Food Standards Agency, which is under the remit of the Health Department. The investigation is being taken forward by FSAI, so, obviously, we need to communicate with it and Minister Coveney, who is responsible for how it is all being played out.

**Mr Clarke:** Well, he is not responsible for Northern Ireland. That is the point that I am making.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Obviously.

**Mr Clarke:** Well, just in terms of your response.

**Mr Swann:** Thanks, Minister. The Committee ran a stakeholder workshop event on the rural development programme about eight or nine months ago. A number of departmental officials attended it. Concerns that were highlighted were really in regard to joined-upness, from planning, NIE and DARD. It was mainly to do with 3-1 projects, such as wind turbines and solar panel projects. Has there been any development since those concerns were raised in the workshops? Has there been delivery on the ground? Everybody else has mentioned constituency issues, especially with regard to solar panels on farms.

**Mrs O'Neill:** That is an issue that comes up. David, do you want to pick up on the discussions that we have had with the JCC chairs?

**Mr Small:** It is an issue that has come up. I am aware of a number of individuals who have applied and stumbled over the rules. I have asked for advice on the rules myself. The rules appear to be quite clear to me, but the one stumbling block appears to be the need to export any new additional electricity generated to the grid and the ability to demonstrate that all of it is going to the grid. That is simply one of the axis 3 operating rules.

So the rules are quite clear, but it appears that a number of individuals have found, for whatever reason, complying with that to be difficult. They have run into some difficulties with the time taken to get a certificate from NIE to confirm that the electricity is going direct to the grid and is not going back on to the farm. At the same time, there have been a number of successful applications for solar panels. Those particular projects have progressed well. We have also discussed planning issues with the Planning Service. That discussion and its outworkings have been quite positive.

We will occasionally face individual cases where, for whatever reason, the rules have tripped someone up or someone has not fully complied with the rules. Unfortunately, when that happens, we have to apply the rules. That is something that we ought to keep in mind: if we find a measure that is proving difficult for some reason, we should certainly look at it to make sure that we do not repeat that if there is a way of avoiding it. However, as I said, there have been some successful projects coming through for a range of renewable energy opportunities, including solar panels.

**Mr Swann:** Whereabouts?

**Mr Small:** I do not have the detail, but I asked the question myself.

**Mr Swann:** Will you get me the details?

**Mr Small:** Yes, I will.

**Mr Swann:** Thanks.

**Mr Hazzard:** I thank the Minister and her officials for their briefing. Minister, you touched briefly on the importance of regionalisation over the next few years. What sort of role will that play in strengthening your hand in the agriculture industry here in Ireland in years ahead? Are there any specific areas where we are looking to strengthen our hand with the links in Europe? That is obviously not to take away from the very important role of Europe, which you touched on, and our link with it.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Regionalisation is going to be key for us when it comes to being able to suit the needs of our industry. We have a piece of work going on with the Agri-Food Strategy Board, which is looking at all the various sectors and their challenges and barriers to growth. How can we work in partnership with this Administration and the industry? That will obviously throw up an action plan with targets and areas of work that we need to focus on. So, regionalisation is going to give us a good hand in being able to tailor supports for the industry. Also, an increased share of pillar 2 funding will give us an opportunity to tailor support to meet the needs of the industry. So, we are in a good position if we can get the financial framework and all the detail agreed to look at the needs of the industry that we represent and tailor things to suit them.

**The Chairperson:** There are no more questions. We are tight for time here, and we are just finished on time, which is good - a few minutes to spare. I thank Gerry Lavery and wish him all the best in his

new role. I thank him for all his work with the Committee and his presentations to it over the past number of years in his role as acting permanent secretary. Gerry, we have always enjoyed having you along here. At times, we have had robust debate, which is always healthy for democracy and the work of the Assembly. So, again, I wish you all the best in your forthcoming roles.

**Mr Lavery:** That is very kind. I look forward to appearing before the Committee in a new guise.

**The Chairperson:** Minister, I am sure we will see you again unless there is a reshuffle or an election. I wish you all the best. Thank you very much for your attendance here today.