



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural  
Development

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Severe Weather: DARD Update

16 April 2013

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

### Severe Weather: DARD Update

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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  
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson  
Mr William Irwin  
Mr Declan McAleer  
Mr Kieran McCarthy  
Mr Oliver McMullan  
Mr Ian Milne  
Mr Robin Swann

**Witnesses:**

Mr John Fay	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Robert Huey	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mrs Colette McMaster	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

**The Chairperson:** I welcome Colette McMaster, assistant secretary, Robert Huey, a deputy chief veterinary officer, and John Fay, assistant secretary. You are all very welcome to the Committee. Thank you very much for your presence. Colette is starting off with a presentation, and then we will have questions.

**Mrs Colette McMaster (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development):** Thank you for giving the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) the opportunity to make this presentation to update the Committee and answer questions on the actions taken to assist farmers in the areas worst affected by the recent severe weather event. The Department provided written updates to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development on 25 March, 2 April and 10 April. The Committee also received a briefing from the permanent secretary and senior officials on 28 March. We intend to update the Committee on the position outlined in the most recent written update from the Department of 10 April 2013. With me are Robert Huey, who is a deputy chief veterinary officer, and John Fay, director of the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE).

The Committee is aware that the immediate priority after the snowstorm of the weekend of 22 to 24 March was to assist farmers to provide their livestock with fodder. John Fay and I were part of the Department's incident management team during that period, and the written update provided to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development by the Department on 2 April 2013 outlined the position at that time.

As those immediate welfare and access issues have receded, the Department's current priorities are the collection and disposal of animals that died as a direct result of the snowstorm and the development of the linked hardship scheme. Robert Huey is leading on the Department's collection and disposal operation.

I will outline the measures to address hardship arising from the snowstorm. On 28 March, the Minister secured the agreement of the Executive on hardship funding to assist farmers in the areas worst affected. The first element of that is that DARD will pay for the costs of collection and disposal of fallen stock that died as a direct result of the snowstorm.

The second element of the hardship funding proposals that the Minister will bring to the Executive seek to mitigate the costs of livestock losses arising from the snowstorm. All farmers severely affected by the recent weather event are potentially eligible for hardship funding. The primary criteria are that farmers must have been severely affected by livestock losses arising from the recent snowstorm and have any fallen livestock collected by approved renderers between 2 and 19 April. The date of 19 April is being kept under review, depending on the speed of the thaw.

So that those who were potentially hardest hit would have immediate help, a list of postcodes was identified from calls for urgent assistance to the DARD helpline. All farmers in those areas will have their fallen stock collected and disposed of by those arrangements. Although there is a list of published postcodes, it does not exclude farmers from other areas who suffered severe livestock losses as a result of the snowstorm. We appreciate that there are smaller discrete areas in other locations in Northern Ireland where farmers have been equally affected.

Any farmers who suffered severe livestock losses due to the severe weather but are not in the published postcode areas should ring the DARD helpline and provide information confirming that position. This will be assessed from other calls received on the helpline and from information provided by DARD staff responding to the calls on the ground.

Robert Huey will update the Committee on the progress of the collection and disposal scheme. I will then outline the work that is under way to develop proposals for the hardship scheme. We will seek to answer your questions on those areas. In addition, John Fay will seek to answer any questions on the operational support that DARD provided to farmers to help them to access fodder for their livestock. I will now hand over to Robert Huey.

**Mr Robert Huey (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development):** Thanks very much, Colette. The first calls received by the DARD helpline on the subject of fallen stock were on Wednesday 27 March. You are aware that the Minister sought Executive approval for the scheme on 28 March. The scheme was announced on Friday 29 March and opened on Tuesday 2 April. I will run you through that timeline. When we first considered putting in place a scheme to remove dead stock from farms, we had very simple principles. We wanted it to be simple and practical, and we had to think of good governance because after the scheme comes the auditors, so we have to be sure that we are giving the right public money to the right people.

That is why we came to the conclusion that the easiest way to do this was to let farmers follow what they were used to doing normally, which is to make contact with their usual renderer and organise collection themselves. Renderers have received something like 1,450 calls from farmers, some of which are, of course, repeat calls. DARD has dealt with some 552 calls to the helpline on fallen stock issues. So that was a good way to get the vast majority of the calls dealt with directly with the renderer and not put an unnecessary step in the way.

To make as many farmers eligible as quickly as possible, we decided very early on to use postcodes. When picking the postcode option, we knew that it was a crude weapon, but it was a way in which we could make the maximum number of farmers eligible in the quickest possible time, and I think that it has worked quite well. The message had to go out that just because farmers did not come under these postcodes did not mean that they were not eligible. That caused a little confusion, but I think that the message did get out. I will give you an idea of the numbers: 289 farmers have been approved through that process, 23 were found to be ineligible and 11 are still being dealt with. The process has become quite streamlined. Most farmers who ring the helpline to enquire about eligibility are dealt with within 24 hours. If a visit to the farm is required, they are dealt with within 48 hours.

So that you have the most up-to-date figures, I will talk about the number of sheep lifted through the scheme until 2.00pm today. We have lifted 20,179 sheep, of which 15,195 are lambs and 4,962 are ewes. To date, 603 cattle have been lifted, of which 225 were calves under three months of age. The

total number of animals came from approximately 790 farms. I say "approximately" because the exact figure would take a lot of working out: some cattle were from sheep farms; and there have been repeat visits and so on. The approximate figure is 790, give or take one or two in either direction. So we feel that the process has worked quite well. The question now, of course, is this: what happens next? The Minister intends to make an announcement about that tomorrow, after hearing of the discussion here and taking advice.

When to close the scheme is quite an important decision. The longer it is kept open, the more animals will be collected from the eligible areas, and those may or may not be the ones that are absolutely needed. My advice is that we close the scheme but keep it open for exceptional cases because, as we heard from the gentlemen from the National Sheep Association (NSA), a large number of sheep are still out there, particularly on the high hills, but in areas that are much more distinct than the postcode areas. My advice, which is for you to consider, is to close the postcode areas but keep the scheme eligible for those who most need it. We want the money to go to those who have experienced the most hardship. That is what the Executive have asked us to do.

If members are interested, I have with me a map, which I find fascinating. It came from our colleagues in the Met Office. For the first two days of the snowstorm, they were able to give us pictures taken from a satellite every two hours, showing where the snow had fallen and to what depth, which was worked out by radar — quite how, I do not know. This map shows how the postcodes work into those areas. We did not just make this up: the postcodes correspond to the areas that we were getting phone calls from, and those were the areas that had the snow. Although there are areas within postcodes that did not have that much snow, it was the best way, I feel, of doing it as quickly as possible. Members can have a look at those maps. I think that they are fascinating things to have.

Colette will now talk a little about the hardship scheme.

**Mrs McMaster:** As I said earlier, we intend to introduce a second element of the hardship measures. This will be a hardship scheme specifically for livestock losses, which will aim to mitigate the cost to farmers of livestock losses arising from the snow. The hardship scheme will be linked to the collection and disposal scheme. It will be framed in light of the information gathered on the extent and nature of losses, which we will build up as farmers have stock removed and disposed of by the approved renderers. The overall hardship funding will be up to the maximum that is allowed under the EU state aid de minimis rules of €7,500 per farmer, including the costs of the collection and disposal of fallen animals. It is envisaged that the hardship funding will be based on a proportion of loss at individual farm level. The scheme will take account of the actual level of losses in the industry, which have not yet been quantified.

As we have to work within the rules applying to public expenditure, subordinate legislation will be required. An initial draft of the proposed legislation is being scrutinised by the Departmental Solicitor's Office. We will, in due course, bring the draft legislation to the Committee for scrutiny.

DARD officials have discussed the development of the hardship scheme with the Ulster Farmers' Union, the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association (NIAPA) and the National Sheep Association. Progress to develop the proposals continues, and further engagement with key stakeholders is planned. The Minister will bring proposals for the scheme to the Executive in due course. Details of the scheme and how to apply will be made public as soon as possible.

That is all that I want to say at this point, and we are happy to take questions.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much, Colette, for your presentation, and John and Robert for being in attendance.

We heard from a number of sources today and over the past weeks about the issues and the problems, and the impact of this crisis. You know that I am always a positive guy who looks forward, but I must bring you back because this is the first opportunity that we have had to scrutinise the Department's activity.

We held an emergency Committee meeting on the Thursday after the first horrendous weekend. Within hours of that meeting, without any officials telling us, DARD withdrew air support at a time when, I believe, it was having a real and tangible effect on the farming community. Many animals had been rescued during the previous 48 hours.

I am still of a mind, as are my constituents, that DARD withdrew that support far too soon. I can give you examples of ewes being pulled out of the snow alive only yesterday. However, air support was withdrawn by DARD at a time when, I suggest, we could have saved thousands upon thousands of animals. There was no indication from departmental officials about that decision, its rationale or why it was going to be made. However, it was made hours after leaving us in that Committee on the Thursday.

Was the decision down to cost, or did the Minister and the Department simply misinterpret the seriousness of the disaster?

**Mrs McMaster:** I suppose that what we were doing, certainly in incident management, was assessing the information as it came in and changed. During those first few days, huge numbers of calls and amounts of information were being gathered on the ground and through local intelligence. We were assessing that as we went along, and a dual approach was being taken with air support and ground support with Forest Service soft-track vehicles. It was a matter of assessing the results of that and having a look. I will pass you over to John.

**Mr John Fay (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development):** I was involved in the assessment of the decision not to continue the air support. That was based on a technical assessment because, as I heard earlier in this room, the use of helicopter support for the Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday was a godsend to those farmers who had primarily sheep in isolated areas to which they had no access. Our information and intelligence were based on the reconnaissance flights carried out by the MoD helicopter in the glens and in south Down. It highlighted the areas where there were sheep and pinpointed where even farmers did not know where their sheep were at that time, as you heard. However, through the use of that reconnaissance helicopter, we found out exactly where the sheep were. We married that with the information that we were getting from farmers on the helpline. We then passed that information to the Chinooks and the other helicopters to allow them to drop much-needed fodder exactly where the livestock was.

All the calls that we dealt with through the Tuesday, Wednesday and right up to the close of play on Thursday from farmers requesting fodder were linked to the areas where we had spotted not the livestock that was fairly close to home but the livestock that was inaccessible and on what I call high hills. I can assure you and the Committee that the technical advice that I was given by people on the ground, and the information coming back from the MoD, was that fodder was dropped in all the isolated areas where livestock was seen. The helicopters were a godsend.

I think that you will find that the majority of animals that died in this crisis were not those that we could see sitting on the tops of hills but those that were buried in snowdrifts. Had we continued with helicopter drops, we could not have saved any of those sheep.

We had assurances from my staff on the ground, the CAFRE staff and, perhaps more importantly, Forest Service staff using the soft-track machines that they could get access. The helicopters were outstanding in the initial response for welfare reasons in the high-hill areas. However, once we had all that information patched together by close of play on the Thursday, we made a technical assessment that we could deliver the rest of the fodder from the ground to livestock anywhere in the glens and in the south Down area. That was the basis of my technical advice to senior officials and the Minister.

**The Chairperson:** I accept your answer, John, and I do not dispute it. I believe that at that point you could have reached farms by using track machines. However, as you said, the onus then moves from the sheep that had been fed and were up and about on the surface to the many thousands that were buried but still alive. The Minister said that one reason why she withdrew air support was because all the public roads were open. However, we clearly know that the majority, if not all, of the farming community that were in difficulty at that time could not get out of their drives and up their hills. There was still livestock buried in the snow that could have been saved.

At that point, it comes down to speed, if there was a race between a tracked Forest Service vehicle compared with a Chinook that could have carried tons of fodder. Might I add that if we had deployed the Territorial Army (TA), we could have got to those areas with personnel as well as feed and saved thousands of animals?

**Mr Fay:** I do not know how we could have saved those animals if they were not visible. We simply did not see them; nobody saw them. Nobody knew where they were, even today. Someone asked me before I came in here about our situation on the hill farm at Greenmount. We have 70 dead sheep,

but we have 70 missing, presumed dead, sheep. I do not imagine that they will be living, but they are buried in drifts up on Glenwhirry Hill. I honestly do not think that we could have saved any more animals, whether with helicopter support or ground support. That is my technical opinion.

**The Chairperson:** Again, I put it to you that even while that decision to withdraw air support was being taken, the North West Mountain Rescue Team was pulling sheep out of the snow. So I feel that a lot more could have been done if that air support had been retained, even for a further 24 hours. I believe that it could have saved thousands of livestock. I will repeat my earlier question. Was it down to cost? How much was the air support costing per day?

**Mr Fay:** I do not know what it cost per day, but I can assure you that any views I expressed to senior officials and the Minister were purely based on technical information from farmers on the ground, my staff on the ground and aerial reconnaissance.

**Mrs McMaster:** I should add that the option to use further air support, if needed, was kept under review. That also continued to be considered from the technical aspect.

**The Chairperson:** Colette, you mentioned that the deadline is still open and could be extended. Having spoken to farmers this week, I feel that there is still so much snow in the hills that the deadline would need to be extended, although I take Robert's point about how far we go. I understand the haste of the postcode implementation, but it worries me that there are some farms in those BT areas that were not covered in snow. Were those farmers able to avail themselves of the carcass collection scheme?

**Mr Huey:** Yes. That is part of my argument for tightening up the eligible areas, in that, as the melt has happened, the proportion of farmers who are now not having difficulties — remember that the basis of the Executive instruction is hardship — has increased, and the number of farmers who are still in genuine hardship has decreased to such a level that we could deal with them on a case-by-case basis. I would not give myself the job of trying to deal with them on a case-by-case basis if I thought that it was going to swallow us. To be fair to all the farmers and to try to deal with the obvious inequity that you mention, my advice is to close the current scheme now but to keep it open for exceptional cases: keep the helpline open and keep our staff on the ground assessing when necessary, but close the postcodes because they are now too crude to do what we need to do.

**The Chairperson:** If the issue now is haste and getting the scheme closed as quickly as possible, with everybody affected being supported, has the possibility been investigated of using Forest Service personnel and track machines to locate fallen stock as the thaw continues and also using that personnel and machinery to move the stock down to accessible areas for the companies to take away? If that is the case, I apologise for not being aware of it.

**Mr Huey:** There is a lot in your question, so I will perhaps give an even wider answer. It is worth repeating that the Minister said that we do not want farmers putting themselves at risk trying to drag sheep off mountains. That is not sensible. We will look at whether there are ways in which we can verify what is up there to allow the sheep to be eligible for the scheme and for whatever mechanism is used for the hardship payment later on. For environmental reasons, we want to get the maximum number of carcasses off the hills.

What I suspect will happen is that, as the melt happens, the sheep will make for walls, as you heard from the farmers. That is where the snow is, and I suspect that we will uncover quite a number of sheep nicely lined up behind a wall at various stages of decomposition. They are in a freezer for the moment, but when the sun is on them, they will go quite quickly. We want to get the maximum number of those off the farms. We do not want farmers to put themselves at any risk, but we want to verify them. I feel that our staff can do that on a reasonable number of farms. For the purposes of the scheme, we currently have staff at every collection to count the animals. They spray the sheep and cattle and see them onto the trucks. That is part of our governance. The Department has had difficulty in counting sheep previously, and I am not getting into that again. I am very clear on that. At the same time, to go back to where I started, we need to verify. However, we do not want people putting themselves in danger. There are some sheep that people will not be able to find or recover, down ravines and so on. We do not want people to do silly things.

**The Chairperson:** We all understand the complications that any hardship fund will bring. I am sure that we all grapple with that as individual Committee members, as we do as a Committee. There is a certain sympathy for the Department and the work that will have to be done to distribute the fund fairly.

Going down the de minimis route, is there any other way that we could right-left flank the restrictions, for want of a better word, whereby we could use European development money? We know that we struggle to get money on the ground with regards to the convention of tranches. However, we know that the Minister has in the past been able to make decisions on funding strategic projects, which have sometimes amounted to multi-use games area (MUGA) or 4G pitches in council areas. Is there any way that we could divert some of the European funding to help the farming community, which is where that money was designed to go in the first place?

**Mrs McMaster:** The reason why the Minister went to the Executive, and the Executive agreed the funding, is because it is about hardship funding. It was to seek to get something out there as quickly as we could to help to mitigate the hardship. It was early and immediate, and we did not want to complicate that —

**The Chairperson:** I take that point. I would not want to complicate that. The hardship fund is what it should be: it is for a hardship. However, there will be a legacy from the crisis. It is about stock; it is about breeding; it is about the condition of buildings. It is not only a number. One of the most serious things will be the impact on the mental health of those in the farming community. For those four reasons alone, off the top of my head, is there anything that we could put into a legacy fund through rural development money? There could be support, not now and not next week for hardship, but for the legacy of the crisis, which people could avail themselves of in six months' time, or a tranche could open in three months' time and run until nine months, so that those people could get their life and their business back up and running.

**Mrs McMaster:** Absolutely. I listened to the NSA and heard about the issues that people have, and I know that it is very clear to everybody who has heard about people's difficulties that there will be not only immediate difficulties but long-term difficulties. The hardship proposals are for immediate difficulties. In the Minister's statement to the Assembly this week, she that she is conscious of the longer-term issues that will affect farmers, and she intends to meet the NSA, the Ulster Farmers' Union and NIAPA to discuss the approach that will be needed in the next year. It is recognised that there are longer-term issues.

To come back to the de minimis hardship fund, the reason for going down that route is that it was something that we wanted to bring forward, if we could, as quickly as possible so that it could be available as early as possible. That route seemed to be the most appropriate way. It also meant keeping the scheme as simple as possible. We talked earlier about the issues and tailoring the funding to individual circumstances and so on. It is difficult to balance those things, but ultimately, to get funding in place early, we probably tried to look for something that was as simple and transparent as we could make it.

**The Chairperson:** Something has just come into my head, and I want to ask this question before I open it up to members. I was speaking to a constituent of mine, a farmer from the Shillanavogy area in Glenwhirry; you will know the farm up there very well. He has yet to phone DARD because he is still waiting to get a total, or at least to find the majority of his flock. If we close the scheme, how does that leave people like him?

**Mr Huey:** Do not do that.

**Mrs McMaster:** We had heard that people are waiting until they can recover everything before they contact us. We are trying to encourage them to make the call. The scheme is open until 19 April, and they should use it now. Some people might have been concerned that there was going to be one collection only, and that when you telephoned, that was your collection, but that is not the case. There have been repeat collections from farmers.

**The Chairperson:** The message must go out that farmers must telephone as soon as possible and not wait.

**Mrs McMaster:** Absolutely. We put out a press article on 12 April, and that is the message that we are seeking to get across.

**The Chairperson:** You will be glad to know that I advised that farmer to do that.

**Mr Huey:** A very specific concern of mine is the fact that good farmers are busy at this time of the year, and the last thing that they are thinking about is ringing the Department, but they must. It is as simple as that.

**Mr Byrne:** I welcome the presentation by Colette, Robert and John. Robert gave figures detailing the number of sheep and cattle that have been collected by the rendering companies. Given the current pro rata charges, how much of the £5 million hardship aid cash will have already been taken up?

**Mr Huey:** The sums have not yet been done. However, as a starter for 10, when talking to the renderers at the outset — I told you the speed at which this negotiation was done in the first place — our starting place was what the farmers would normally have to pay. The renderers are very aware of the situation. It is not in their interests to make money out of the farmers, nor do they wish to be seen to do so. To be fair to the renderers, they have had more work than normal because of the additional checks and balances, and we have put a couple of administrative staff into both rendering companies to help them with that and to try to keep that work down. That money does not get costed — maybe I should not say that.

**Mr Byrne:** It is notional.

**Mr Huey:** It is notional. Thanks, Joe. That is the figure that we started with, and we work our way back. A sheep is about £14, and a bovine is somewhere around £90 to £100, which is the figure that they normally take. You must remember that a lot of those carcasses will not be in the best order, and it is not the sort of stuff that they really want a great deal of. They have to work that in with their normal business and get the right mixture to make the right products at the end. The renderers are working very closely with us and have been nothing but co-operative from the first telephone call.

**Mr Byrne:** The reality is that most of the £5 million will be eaten up by the rendering companies, given the charging system. When will the first farmer get the first cash aid cheque?

**Mrs McMaster:** The hardship funding has two elements. The first part is the costs that are being met in the collection and disposal scheme, and that is already happening for anybody who is taking advantage of it.

**Mr Byrne:** The renderers will be paid, not the farmers.

**Mrs McMaster:** Yes, but the farmers would otherwise be paying for the collection and removal of dead carcasses, so DARD is picking that up directly. That is the first part. The second element is the hardship scheme, which we talked about earlier. We are framing that, and we need to know the final volumes that come through in the collection and disposal scheme to know the numbers that we are dealing with. We heard from the National Sheep Association about the other animals that are out there that people do not know about yet.

**Mr Byrne:** I take it that no farmer has had a cash cheque yet.

**Mrs McMaster:** No, not at all. We will not finalise the details of the hardship scheme until the collection and disposal scheme is closed. It is linked to that scheme.

**Mr Byrne:** You mean the hardship scheme minus the cost of collection by the rendering companies.

**Mrs McMaster:** Yes. They are both considered to be state aid, so they have to come out of that overall state aid capped amount. The Minister will bring the proposals for the hardship scheme to the Executive. Following that, we hope to be able to announce the details of the scheme as early as we can.

**Mr Huey:** On a quick sum, Joe, we have spent about £110,000 so far, if you take it at the flat rates of the renderers, so we have a fair bit to go yet.



**Mr Byrne:** The second element that Colette referred to is the compensation fund, which I think is a separate and additional fund that you are hoping for.

**Mrs McMaster:** It is a hardship fund. It is not intended to be compensation as such. It is for hardship in that it is aimed at helping to address the losses.

**Mr Byrne:** Is it separate from the £5 million?

**Mrs McMaster:** No, it is from within that. It is within what can be paid under the de minimis state aid EU rules, which is a maximum of €7,500 per farmer. So, overall, the two elements that a farmer obtains — any collection and disposal costs and any hardship payment — cannot exceed that amount at an individual level.

**Mrs Dobson:** Colette, I want to elaborate on the fallen stock scheme, which the Deputy Chair touched on. It is mentioned in your briefing paper, and you confirmed for us what the Minister said last week, that the cost of collection of the limited hardship scheme will fall to the farmers. Robert, you started to talk about this. How much, roughly, will hill farmers have to pay for the collection of their lambs and, indeed, their cattle?

**Mr Huey:** I will clarify the way that this is intended to work: farmers will pay nothing; DARD will pick up the bill.

**Mrs Dobson:** Ultimately, farmers will pay.

**Mr Huey:** It will come off their total payment.

**Mrs Dobson:** They will still, ultimately, pay out of their —

**Mr Huey:** The details of exactly what the renderers will charge us for this service have not yet been worked out. They will be worked out when we have the full details. It will be no more than what they would charge a farmer. Under the fallen stock scheme, if an individual farmer were to have a particular disaster on his farm such as 20 cattle being killed by lightning under a tree or a number of pigs being electrocuted in the house, there is an allowance for special rates. The price of a lamb is about £1.95, depending on which renderer you go to. The price of a ewe is around £14, and the price of a bovine is £90 to £100, depending on what size it is and so on. Those are the basic figures, and by multiplying those up in about two seconds without the aid of a calculator, I think that it is about £110,000. That is where we have got to so far. The balance between what each farmer saves from not having to pay for the disposal of his animals and what he gets through hardship funding depends on the make-up of the hardship scheme.

**Mrs McMaster:** This is additional funding. The Minister went to the Executive, and the Executive agreed it so that it is not a cost that is to be borne by farmers. It is additional funding that is being provided to help to cover that and to go towards mitigating the losses.

**Mrs Dobson:** Robert, you said something that has shocked me but, I suppose, not surprised me. You said that the details have not been worked out for the renderers. Given the thousands of animals that are being lifted, did DARD not enter into negotiations with the contractors to ensure that the lowest prices were payable for the collectors? We already know what the farmers will get in compensation, so was there no negotiation, given the vast quantity?

**Mr Huey:** On 27 March, the first farmer rang to say that he had a problem with dead stock. On 28 March, the Executive met, and, on 29 March, the scheme was announced, which was opened on 2 April. That is fairly good going.

**Mrs Dobson:** That is not what I am asking. I am asking about the price per collection.

**Mr Huey:** The exact details of the costs will be left until we have the full details, but there was a heads of agreement with the two renderers who wished to participate on the general area. The general area was on the terms of the fallen stock scheme, which was already in place.

**Mrs Dobson:** There were no negotiations whatsoever, given that thousands of animals were lifted.

**Mr Huey:** No, that is not what I said at all.

**Mrs Dobson:** Were there negotiations with the contractors to ensure that the lowest prices were payable to the collectors?

**Mr Huey:** Not with the collectors, but with the two rendering companies. There were discussions.

**Mrs Dobson:** Did you negotiate a price with the collectors who were lifting the animals, given that thousands of animals are being lifted and that the farmers, ultimately, will have the cost taken out of their hardship fund?

**Mr Huey:** We have discussed the general prices within a framework. The final price has not yet been worked out.

**Mrs Dobson:** You do not know? You did not discuss, then the final price?

**Mr Huey:** We have not yet got to the position of knowing the quantities and, therefore, being able to agree a final price.

**Mrs Dobson:** But you have known that it would run into thousands of animals. Surely it would have been prudent to have negotiated a price. Ultimately, farmers are going to pay the price. We know the maximum that the farmers are getting, and that is not going to come anywhere close to what is going to keep a lot of them in business, yet there was not —

**Mr Huey:** Jo-Anne, if you were to ask me now how many more animals will enter the scheme before it closes, I can honestly tell you that I have no idea. I had much less of an idea 10 days ago.

**Mrs Dobson:** Even given the thousands? So much per ewe for collecting. So I think it would have been prudent, given the vast scale of this, to have used DARD's powers to negotiate the payment for collection in advance. To me, that would have made good business sense.

**Mr Huey:** In the time available, we agreed that the renderers would participate in the scheme at all, and we agreed an outline price —

**Mrs Dobson:** An outline price?

**Mr Huey:** An outline framework, based on the current fallen stock collection scheme prices, which was reasonable in what we would pay. We did not get into details, because we had no idea about the volume or the number of stock of various classes that there would be. Therefore, we found it impossible to come to an exact negotiated settlement through a normal procurement process that we would normally have followed. The normal procurement process was set aside in the interests of getting a scheme on the ground quickly.

**Mrs Dobson:** I find it unbelievable that there was no price negotiated

**Mr Huey:** We did not go out for tender in the way that we normally do.

**Mrs Dobson:** I find it incredible that, given the volume, no price was negotiated for collection. Anyway, I will move on, but that shocked me.

Why do you think that the Minister called the collection scheme the "second element" of the hardship measures, Colette? It was called that in a recent press release, but it will be paid for out of the same pot and the same compensation scheme. Why was it called the second element?

**Mrs McMaster:** I think what she has talked about is two elements of the hardship funding.

**Mrs Dobson:** It is coming out of the same pot.

**Mrs McMaster:** The first element is the collection and disposal scheme, and the second element is the hardship payment that will follow. That was the basis on which she went to the Executive, and that is the way that she announced it following Executive approval. It is the two elements of that, the collection and disposal scheme being the first.

**Mrs Dobson:** They are the same thing.

**Mrs McMaster:** Yes; it is a package of hardship funding measures that includes those two elements.

**Mrs Dobson:** If I may, I want to raise another quick point — it follows on from something that the Chair raised. Again, it was a postcode lottery. Of the 200 calls that were made to the helpline from outside the published postcode areas, 186 were valid. Robert, I am quite concerned that you described picking the postcodes as a "crude weapon" that had "worked quite well".

Like the Chair, I am very concerned about those farmers who have not yet rung the helpline. Colette, I think that it was you who said that the press release went out on 12 April, and obviously that message is not getting through to a lot of farmers. It is very difficult to know how many farmers have been let down by this, but I think that there will be so many. Can you elaborate any more on this crude weapon that has worked quite well and why it was chosen?

**Mrs McMaster:** As Robert said, it was chosen in the first instance so that the collection and disposal could get under way straight away. On the basis of the phone calls and the evidence that we had on the ground, we knew that there were widespread problems in certain areas. It was put in place to ensure that progress could be made and that operations could get off the ground quickly. It was never the intention to rule anyone else out —

**Mrs Dobson:** But now, three weeks later —

**Mrs McMaster:** There was some confusion from that, but we clarified that. If there are still people out there who are not aware of it — we want farmers to be aware that it is there, and we have put out a further press article. Reviewing the date when the scheme closes — it currently remains open until 19 April, as Robert said; we will be reviewing that — will be an opportunity for further publicity. Certainly we would welcome any further encouragement from the Committee to ensure that —

**Mrs Dobson:** I just want to know what contact there is. I understand the initial urgency, but it has been three weeks now. When a farmer does ring and is accepted into the scheme, is his postcode automatically included in the scheme? Are all the other farmers in the area contacted?

**Mr Huey:** No. Outside the postcode area, it is done on an individual farmer basis. However, if a farmer has been approved and his neighbour calls in, that farmer obviously does not require a visit because we will have been out on the ground, we will have seen what the area is there, we will have talked to other farmers in the area and we will have looked at our maps.

**Mrs Dobson:** So neighbours would be automatically included?

**Mr Huey:** Nothing is automatic; they still have to call in. If a farmer phones in, then if his neighbour rings in, there is no need for a call, so he can be approved within 24 hours.

**Mrs Dobson:** But not everyone is ringing in; that is the issue. Not everyone is getting the message.

**Mr Huey:** Yes, but not everyone within a very close area. We all know that literally within 200 yards of hardship there can be a green field. That is why I said that the postcode was a crude tool that has worked quite well. I am quite content with that statement.

Outside those areas, however, you can see that most of the Province was in glorious black, according to the map, and there was no snow. We did it individually. In some parts of Joe's constituency, up in the Sperrin valley — in the Glenelly valley, for example — it was very easy to say it is the Glenelly valley — that whole area. Therefore, anyone who rang in from the Glenelly valley did not need a visit; that was obvious. If you lived between Sperrin and Plumbridge, you were in difficulty.

I have to emphasise that, outside the postcode areas, it is up to each farmer to call in. Just because your neighbour is in, that does not mean that you are in automatically. That is quite an important point that you have brought out, Jo-Anne.

**Mrs Dobson:** But I think we need to do more. As the Chair said, not all farmers are ringing in. The message obviously is not getting out there, and I am very concerned about the ones who are being left behind and will be let down.

**Mr Huey:** If and when the scheme is closed, we will keep the phone lines open and we will be dealing with exceptional cases. You should judge me on what we have done before and on how we have dealt with this. We do not intend to leave farmers high and dry, but there will come a time when we will have to close the scheme completely. I see this as being done on a step-by-step basis; we will close the postcodes, keep the helpline open for a period and, after such-and-such a date, we say sorry, but if you have not got it by now, you are too late.

When those figures are there it allows Colette to get on with the next step. She cannot get on properly with the detail of the hardship scheme until we know the quantum of the problem— the number of farms and the number of stock. That will allow Colette to start working on the detail.

**Mrs Dobson:** Colette talked about a press release. Do you have other ways of getting that message out and contacting the farmers?

**Mrs McMaster:** Well, we are talking to the key stakeholders. I know that it is something they are seeking to get out there, because they are obviously in contact with their members. We are trying to get those messages out, and we have done that through the media. The Minister has done that as well. If there is any other way — if there is an opportunity you are suggesting, or whatever — any way of getting that message out there is probably going to be useful at this stage to encourage farmers.

**Mrs Dobson:** I will take up your offer and come back to you on that.

**Mr Huey:** The numbers of phone calls might help to give some reassurance. Sunday was the first day on which we had no calls at all, whereas the Sunday before we had quite a number. We had 27 calls yesterday, compared with 70 or 80 at the peak. Whether that is because, as you say, Jo-Anne, people are not calling or because most people have got on to us now, it is hard to say.

My hope is that most people have got in and that we will be able to deal with the rest under exception. I just hope that I am not giving myself a very big job. The decision has not been made yet, but I foresee that there will be no guillotine. There will be no immediate guillotine — postcodes close, tough. You may have to go through a little more effort; you may have to call us, and we will come out and see you sort out your individual case. However, we have to bring this to an orderly close at the right time in order to get on with the hardship, which is the next stage of the process.

**The Chairperson:** That is a very important point. People who I talk to in north Antrim and east Antrim know that they have to phone and they know that their neighbours have phoned. However, they have been waiting for a total number, and they are waiting and waiting for the thaw that will not come. I have expressed the view that they need to be ringing.

**Mr Swann:** Robert, you said that parts of the map were a glorious black. No harm to you, but that is Lough Neagh, and the day that snow lies on Lough Neagh, we are all in trouble.

**Mr Huey:** Fermanagh is a black area.

**Mr Swann:** I have a couple of simple questions and, hopefully, simple answers. Are our renderers fit to cope, process-wise, with the volume of dead stock that they are getting?

**Mr Huey:** Generally, yes. There has been some comment about Foyle having difficulty, but, generally, the feedback I am getting is that, yes, they can.

**Mr Swann:** Is the Department happy enough with that?

**Mr Huey:** Yes.

**Mr Swann:** Did the Department receive any calls for helicopter support after the helicopters were withdrawn?

**Mr Fay:** No.

**Mr Swann:** Is that a categorical no, John?

**Mr Fay:** Categorically, all the — well, how will I put it?

**Mr Swann:** No is fine.

**Mr Fay:** I would love it to be as simple as that, but it is not. All the requests that we had, based on the farm information on the ground and the information from the reconnaissance flights — fly-overs where the reconnaissance helicopter was there with one of my members of staff in it — and in every area where they identified sheep and livestock on the high hills, fodder was dropped. By the close of play on the Thursday, based on all the information that we had received from the reconnaissance and the farmers on the ground, who were saying to us that they had sheep stuck up in the Mournes, in Slieve Croob or the glens, we had matched the co-ordinates and dropped fodder there. There were still outstanding requests for fodder, and we said to those people on the helpline that we could drop fodder to their livestock by soft track from tomorrow onwards. That was the case. So, that is why I said no.

I am definitely clear about that, based on the intelligence and the information that we had and the fact that we delivered what we said we would deliver. Soft track machines and helicopters were suspended but kept under review. There were two soft track machines in the south Down area and two in the glens area, and they continued to satisfy farmers' needs. We also had surplus bales of hay sitting in Ballykinler army camp, and there was no point in us taking them back. So we had two Land Rovers and trailers dropping them to local farmers who did not have livestock far away from the farm but were quite close. Some of them were in quite a desperate situation. It was brought as close to their farms as possible, given that the roads had just been cleared on the Friday. My staff finished dropping all the bales that we had allocated at Aldergrove and at Ballykinler at about 8.00 pm on Good Friday, and, thereafter, soft tracks picked up farmers' feed for a few days, if I recall correctly, and brought it to their own stock, which was generally not that far away, to be fair.

**Mrs McMaster:** We got quite a number of calls to the helpline from farmers asking if we could point them in the direction of where they could get feed. We were able to do that, because quite a lot of people had phoned in offering to supply feed, and it meant that quite a lot of responses were actually dealt with by putting people in touch.

**Mr Fay:** I should have said that at the outset. Some of the CAFRE advisory staff talked to the Ulster Farmers' Union on the Monday afternoon, and we asked the UFU whether it would be happy enough — I think, actually, it was a suggestion that came from someone in the UFU that it could text 7,000 members to ask about fodder, and would we be interested in that? We said yes. That happened, and we got almost 200 calls. Apart from the emergency work that we were doing between helicopters and soft tracks, we were discovering on the helpline that a lot of farmers were short of feed simply because they could not get the livestock out of the houses. They simply could not get them out. They could not get access to it right up to the end of that week. So we did match them. There were some very generous offers, and there was one very generous offer of 1,000 bales of hay in south Down, and it was another godsend. There is no doubt about that. One of the DARD advisers in the area — we did not want to get involved too directly in those situations, and, to be fair, the farming community sorted most of that out itself. Farmers were helping farmers. We simply co-ordinated the distribution of that, so anybody in the south Down area who wanted to avail themselves of some of those 1,000 bales of hay contacted the local CAFRE beef and sheep adviser, and he allocated them based on need. You had to go to a certain point in Hilltown and pick it up. That happened on Tuesday, and, by Friday, it was gone. In the glens, there were individual offers, and a lot of those people did not want their names to be brought out in the open. A lot of people offered different things to help, and they were sorted out locally.

**Mr Swann:** You mentioned the helpline a couple of times. Who were the operators of the helpline? Did they receive additional training to deal with the calls that were coming in?

**Mrs McMaster:** The helpline was manned 24 hours a day from 25 March, and it drew in DARD staff who volunteered to work on the helpline. Before they went on the helpline, they were taken through the sorts of calls that were coming in and the sort of questions to ask, because it was about gathering information.

**Mr Swann:** I have to raise a small constituency matter, if the helpline is staying open. One individual farmer rang me to get help with the helpline because the operators hung up on him twice because he was deaf and was using Typetalk.

**Mr Huey:** I am aware of that case.

**Mr Swann:** I have raised that with you. If we are keeping that helpline open, we need to be sure that it is there. That man came on to me in complete desperation. He was not in a good place mentally in the first place. His phrase was that he felt two feet tall. If you have taken that on board, I am happy that I will get a response.

You mentioned that there were 23 ineligible farmers. Can you give me a rough indication why? I know that they were outside the main postcodes.

**Mr Huey:** There is a range of reasons, from people who just did not have snow to people who did not have hardship. These decisions are not always clear-cut, but the only thing that I can have some reassurance that we got it right most of the time is that we have not had that many appeals. We have had two or three that we have dealt with, and one of those has been successful. Somebody has gone back round the process again and asked to be looked at again. We have sufficient information available, and we have people on the ground. People go out and ask specific questions, and we look at the map and look at what snow was there. The default position is to rule people in and not rule people out, but still be fair. That is where we are coming from.

**Mr Swann:** The last point is the de minimis problem — the €7,500. The concern is that the more of that allocation per farm that is eaten up by the collection of dead stock, the less that farmer will be able to avail himself of replacement stock. He is going to be hit twice because he is going to lose more of that de minimis money having his dead stock taken away, and there will be less money available for him to restock. The various other packages that we could look for outside the EU that will get us over the de minimis threshold, which the Chair referred to, will be a big benefit to farmers.

**Mr Buchanan:** Thank you for coming to the Committee. It is good to see you here. We can be critical of DARD and what has and has not been done, but we are where we are. A storm has arisen. Farmers are in dire need, and we need to see how we can go forward and help those farmers. Some are in dire straits and need immediate help. We have heard about the hardship funds, the rendering that is coming out of it and the compensation. It seems to be all part of one scheme. That causes concern because, at the end of the day, it appears that the farmer is going to be left with very little — precious little — when it comes to whatever money they are going to get. One thing I would like some clarification on is this: when exactly will the first farmer get that money in his hand? That is the big issue. We met farmers today, and really what they need is to have the money in their hands. They realise that the compensation, hardship payments or whatever money it is will not be adequate to rebuild their farms, but it will be a help. It will be the first step on the ladder for them to get them back into rebuilding their businesses. We need some clarity on that. When can we expect farmers who are in dire need to get the money into their hands?

**Mrs McMaster:** At this stage, we cannot give a definitive time for that. We really want to get there as early as possible.

**Mr Buchanan:** But when will that be? Will that be in a week's time, a month's time, two month's time or six months' time? You are bound to have some sort of indication as to when that might be. To always leave it open-ended is not good enough. It leaves the farmers in limbo, and they do not know when it is going to be forthcoming. If we could say that it will be two months before they get it, at least they will know that they can look forward to two months' time, when they are going to get something. To leave it open-ended is not good enough.

**Mrs McMaster:** What it will involve, among other things, is that we need to know the final numbers in there. We need to know that to help us look at the scheme and finalise the design of our proposals to go to the Executive. We will have to work through subordinate legislation. We will bring that forward,

and there is a process for that. We want to look at how we can streamline that and make that process go quickly, on the basis that this is an emergency situation. So there are things that we are looking at and on which we are taking legal advice. We have not got the timeline absolutely there yet. We will obviously want to bring it back to the Committee, because we will be bringing the subordinate legislation to you. We will work through that as soon as possible. What we would like to be able to do is to have the scheme out there in the next couple of months. That is where we are trying to get to. That was the point of going the de minimis route, so that it will not take a prolonged period to get approval.

**Mr Buchanan:** You talk about final numbers. In some areas, there are still probably sheep under snow in huge drifts. It could be another month before that snow goes away, maybe more before those sheep are found. If you are talking about final numbers, and we have to wait until those are got, it creates huge difficulties. It could be another month or six weeks down the line before that is brought to fruition.

**Mrs McMaster:** There are a lot of issues. We are hearing a lot of issues from the stakeholders and the NSA and so on today. We need to take them away and think about how we can design something that can get out there as quickly as possible. There is quite a bit of work still to be done on the design. We are aiming to keep it as simple as possible at this stage, so that we can have a scheme in place and off the ground —

**Mr Buchanan:** If it is going to run on for some time, is it not possible to bring it forward in two stages? You simply give all the farmers who are affected a certain amount of money and then, when you have the final figures in, whatever way you are working the rest of the scheme, you can pay them the second tranche of that hardship payment or whatever they are going to get. Is that not an option that you could look at if it is going to be quite some time before those farmers receive the payments that they need to kick-start their businesses and get onto the first rung of the ladder in rebuilding their businesses.

**Mrs McMaster:** We have not ruled anything in or out at this stage. What we are trying to do is design something as simple as possible. If we can get a delivery mechanism that is as simple as possible and can do this without a two-stage — if it is possible to do it in one stage, we will.

**Mr Buchanan:** Yes, but with all due respect, that is open-ended, and we do not know when that is going to be. Leaving that aside, we are looking at the hardship funding for this. What about the hardship funding for potato farmers, who lost quite a number of acres of potatoes in 2010? Remember that they also contribute to the agrifood industry. They are feeling somewhat sore at the moment that, for two years or more, they have been looking for some type of help and assistance and have received nothing. Is the Department, in looking at this, looking at the other in tandem with it, or has any thought been given to that lobbying that has continued for some time?

**Mrs McMaster:** We are aware of the case that was looked at previously. What happened was that a case was made at that point for hardship funding to be provided. The issue at the time was that funding was not available for that. So, that is not something that we can consider now as part of this hardship scheme, which relates to this specific event that has just happened. It is not possible to go back to pay the hardship to those retrospective cases.

**Mr Buchanan:** There were farmers at that time who did not recover from that. They lost their business and went completely out of business. They have a case here as well, which the Department has perhaps neglected and may need to look at again.

**Mrs McMaster:** At this stage, this particular hardship payment is linked to the livestock losses related specifically to the recent snowstorms. That is the scope of this hardship funding on which we are working.

**Mr Buchanan:** Fair enough; I will leave it at that.

**Mr McMullan:** First of all, I thank your staff for manning the phones 24 hours, which was not the nicest of jobs to have to do. I am on record as phoning up quite a lot, to the point of some people perhaps being fed up listening to me, but may I say that they dealt with it very well indeed. With some of them you knew that it was a new thing for them, and I think that it all worked out very well indeed.

The postcode thing, now; going back to the postcodes that were outside the postcode areas, we had a couple of incidents in my area — outside the glens and the Glenarm area — where you have a pretty long road with two postcodes on it. When that was pointed out, it was quickly dealt with, and those that were outside the postcode that was published were taken into the postcode with it because they were on the same road, etc. All those examples were dealt with very speedily, and can I say that when I phoned in and put the glens, Torr, Glendun, Glengariff and most of Glenarm on to that, that was done. Then when the people themselves rang in, as you quite rightly said, Robert, they were added in. However, they had to ring in themselves. So, I congratulate you on how speedily you did that.

It also has to be mentioned that the rendering companies themselves have done a very speedy job, because it landed on them practically first thing after the holidays. I spoke to the owners or managers of both plants, and they were given all the help that they could. The one we got sorted out, actually, was the hen house. We got the hens all lifted. But it is quite clear that rendering plants cannot cope with a big volume at the one time, and the way it was coming in actually suited their programme of work to get it done. That is all I can say. I just congratulate your staff on the way that they dealt with it. There were some mistakes; God almighty, there had to be mistakes in a case like that. But, speaking to the farmers and that there and to those people who used the helpline, I found that 99-9% were happy with the whole thing. There were a few mistakes, but nothing outside the realms of people being only human and not machines.

**Mr Huey:** First, thanks for that, Oliver. Secondly, it was quite stressful, too, on both John's staff and mine who were out on the ground. They are dealing with people who are under stress and are in stressful situations. We have given those staff the rural support cards to hand out to farmers. I was concerned that they would be faced with a situation that they did not know how to deal with: farmers in distress. At least with the cards, they had somewhere to point people towards.

**Mr McMullan:** Very well done. The stress on the staff should not be lost in the discussion.

**The Chairperson:** You are absolutely right, Oliver.

**Mr McMullan:** We all recognise that, Chair. I was talking to one young fella who answered the phone early in the morning. God love him: once we got talking he was all right, but it must have been a daunting situation for him on the other end of the phone.

**Mr Irwin:** This storm has been, probably, one in 50 or maybe one in 100 years. We had members of the National Sheep Association in, and Campbell Tweed said that it was worse than 1963, so it is probably more than 50 years since something like this.

I am disappointed. Maybe there is no way around it, but farmers initially thought that the dead animals would be lifted by the Department for free. That was the initial feeling from farmers on the ground. Now we find out that it will be deducted from any hardship payment. If someone has a large number of dead animals, and I am sure that there are farmers that do, it is going to leave any hardship payment small. There may be no way around that, but the Department should be looking very closely at that.

Am I right in saying that any hardship payment will only be paid for verified dead animals lifted from a farm and sprayed? I think you said that. For instance, sheep that have aborted due to the cold weather will not be taken into account: it will only be dead animals that have been verified. Is that the case?

**Mr Huey:** There has been flexibility, William, without opening the door completely, for farmers who genuinely did not realise they had to wait for the Department man to get there and had the animals collected before, and for various other cases that I do not want to go into the detail of. In those cases, we go back to the other end: to the renderer. The renderer, of course, has his own way of quantifying the number of livestock, and we do it that way. We find a way to verify where we can. That has had to be done in a number of cases. We put a couple of people in to audit our figures against the renderers' figures to make sure that they are correct and that the numbers that we are expecting and those that the renderers are recording are the same. We have found a great deal of correlation.

If someone has got losses that they can quantify in some other way, I will accept photographs. We will work with people to try and get stock into the scheme and make them eligible for the hardship payment. But we just cannot write a blank cheque, William; we have to have things verifiable.



**Mr Irwin:** I fully understand that. What I am saying is that other related losses, such as sheep losing their lambs due to the cold weather, will not be taken into account. It will only be dead animals; that is what I am saying.

**Mr Huey:** We are using the dead animal as an indicator of the hardship on the farm. So, the quantity of dead animals is at the top of a pyramid, and there is lots of other stuff going on below. That is something that we can count and verify: it gives you a measure.

**Mr Irwin:** It is going to be very difficult just to say, "You lost exactly this, that and the other."

**Mr Huey:** That is why we are very keen to make the point that this is not compensation.

**The Chairperson:** Oliver, are you heading out? We are going to lose quorum, unfortunately.

**Mr McMullan:** No, I am going to come back in again.

**The Chairperson:** Oh, that is OK. It is just for the rest of the business. Sorry for the interruption there, folks.

**Mr McMullan:** I am just going to get my circulation going.

**The Chairperson:** That is OK. Lucky you.

**Mr Irwin:** I was involved at the time of the potato and vegetable growers, which was mentioned by my colleague here. A lot of those people were disappointed, because crops were assessed and you had to produce five years' worth of accounts. Expectations were built up, and they were left with nothing. That was very disappointing. I am not sure who to blame, but the Department must not have made a strong enough case to the Executive at that time. At the very last ditch, money was made available, but it was too late. I had one man on to me just the other day who actually went out of business. That was him finished. Lessons must be learned. That should not happen. These people still feel that they are entitled. However, I do not think that, under any de minimis scheme, you can go back in time. I think that it probably has to be done within a year. Did CAFRE lose any animals on any of its farms?

**Mr Fay:** We did, William. We have a hill farm up in Glenwhirry on the edge of the glens of Antrim. We keep about 1,100 ewes up there. When the storm hit on the Friday, we had just under 600 sheep still out. Some of those were actually lamb out, as part of the different systems that we are demonstrating. Again, as the NSA said, up to today, we had 70 dead sheep and another 70 missing. We are probably looking at the loss of 140 or 150.

**The Chairperson:** That brings me to a very good point. If we are using the dead stock as a quantum, are we using the percentage loss? As was put to us today, you could have a farmer with a herd of 2,000 who loses 100, or a farmer with 200 who loses 100. For all sorts of breeding purposes and everything else, that could be catastrophic. Is that being inputted into the mix?

**Mrs McMaster:** It is verifiable losses that I think it comes down to. For the scheme to stand up to EU scrutiny, it will come down to verifiable losses and whatever evidence there is.

**The Chairperson:** So, it is basically what we see strewn across the road waiting to be picked up.

**Mrs McMaster:** It could be that or building up information. Robert mentioned photographs and other evidence that can be verified.

**Mr Huey:** It is about how we define verifiable loss. Give me something that I can verify.

**The Chairperson:** It does not measure the percentage loss.

**Mr Huey:** No.

**Mr Fay:** I can see where a sheep farmer would be coming from on the practical side, but that is just another complication, as Colette said. At least what you have here in dead stock is totally verifiable.

When you start to bring other percentages in, I can see where you are going in terms of lower thresholds, higher thresholds and all of those sorts of things. I can see from a few different sheep farmers' perspectives. However, it would complicate it from DARD's point of view.

**Mr Huey:** We heard what the sheep farmers said today, and it was very useful. They want it to be transparent, and they want it to be fairer. So do we, but how do we get there? If this is done on a scale, we know what the bad one looks like. It is about making sure that the money goes to the people who most need it.

**The Chairperson:** Tom Buchanan teased this answer out of you, Colette. I have spoken to my constituents and to other farmers who rang me because I am Chair of the Agriculture Committee. I got phone calls from all over the Province. At this point, their mind is on fairness and speed. That is a formula that you will have to use in your work. It would be unacceptable if it took a couple of months for this scheme to roll out. I take Robert's point about not being able to negotiate a price for the amount of dead animals when we do not know the total numbers of dead animals. There are over 20,000 dead stock at the present time. The thaw, albeit it has been slow, means that it is now really only isolated areas that have snow. We should be able to put a formula in place to let Colette and her team go forward with a scheme that is fair and timely.

I must give credit to all the emergency services because, in the depth of this crisis, I feared that we would have deaths. However, I say this with the most serious tone that I can: if we do not put a scheme in place quickly enough to relieve the pressure on the farming community, we could have deaths. I believe that it is that stark. They need someone to look on them favourably. They are getting a lot of bad press from other quarters of business. It is so stark that we really need something. I expected a couple of weeks; I did not expect to hear that it could be a couple of months. The Minister has been able to use emergency legislation in other ways and for other issues. It is as important as that. I know that you might have to speak to the Executive and get agreement. I do not know if that needs to be done now that we have already got an agreement with the Executive that we can move forward. I know that the Minister will be looking at the debate in this Committee. I appeal to the Minister: make this decision as fairly and as quickly as possible. We need this money to be distributed as fairly and as quickly as possible. It would be unacceptable if it took a couple of months.

As there are no further questions, I thank you very much for your attendance today. This is a very serious issue. We keep hitting crisis after crisis, and they seem to get more severe. A crisis in the farming community is not the nicest thing to deal with, not least for us and certainly not you. You want to be getting on with the business that you are tasked and employed to do. Unfortunately, we seem to move from crisis to crisis, especially in the agricultural world. I repeat what Oliver said: please take back the Committee's gratitude to all your staff, especially those who have been involved in the snow crisis, from the highest level right to the people on the ground — the Forest Service, the Rivers Agency and the vets. We really appreciate the work that they have done alongside all the other emergency services in coping with this most severe crisis. Thank you very much.