



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural  
Development

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Forest Service Business Plan 2013-14:  
Forest Service Briefing

30 April 2013

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

### Forest Service Business Plan 2013-14: Forest Service Briefing

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

Mr Paul Frew (Chairperson)  
Mr Thomas Buchanan  
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson  
Mr William Irwin  
Mr Declan McAleer  
Mr Oliver McMullan  
Mr Ian Milne  
Mr Robin Swann

**Witnesses:**

Mr Marcus McAuley	Forest Service
Mr John Joe O'Boyle	Forest Service

**The Chairperson:** I welcome John Joe O'Boyle, director of forestry, and Marcus McAuley, principal officer. John, are you starting off with a presentation?

**Mr John Joe O'Boyle (Forest Service):** Yes. I will give you a brief presentation and overview of the business plan and then take any comments or queries that members may have.

**The Chairperson:** OK. Thank you very much.

**Mr O'Boyle:** First of all, I welcome the opportunity to present the business plan to the Committee. The business plan sets out the key strategic objectives and targets for the 2013-14 business year. I will outline the priorities that that work will include this year. An important part of that work will be to continue to encourage and promote forestry expansion. As members of the Committee are aware, that is an ongoing issue for us. We will also continue to manage the forests in a way that produces income, protects the environment and delivers on social and recreational agendas for the wider use of the forest.

An important piece of work that we will continue to do is that we will seek to have that sustainable management of those forests verified through external audit of our performance to verify that we are managing the forests in a sound and proper way. As part of that, we need to continue to collect and analyse data around the condition and state of our forests so that we make the right planning decisions and forward plans for the forest around that. Also, in this year's business plan, very specifically, we have a challenging piece of work on moving forward on the recreational and social use strategy work, particularly around the £4 million that was secured over a two-year period under the jobs and economy initiative. So, in this year's business plan, we plan to utilise the first year's share of £2 million of that to develop infrastructure in forests in support of recreation, social use and tourism in

forests. We will, of course, continue to manage our business and deliver services in a cost-effective and customer-focused way.

The other quite big piece of work that we have to take on this year is to develop the plans to move the Forest Service headquarters off to Fermanagh. The work on that will be quite focused this year. On the other big piece of business plan work etc that we have been doing in previous years, we are now in a position where we are ready to develop plans and look for the best opportunities to exploit forestry land for wind farm development, which also secures income from the forests.

Those are the strategic business priorities for the year, and the targets are drawn up. I do not intend to go through all of the targets specifically, but I will mention a few. They are drawn up to support those business priorities. Before I go there, I should say that the business priorities that I have outlined in the Forest Service business plan are very directly linked to the Executive's Programme for Government priorities of growing a sustainable economy; investing in the future; protecting people and the environment; creating safer communities; building a strong and shared community by improving access; and delivering high-quality public services. All of the priorities that I have outlined in this Forest Service business plan support and link very directly to the Programme for Government.

To focus on those main key target areas, as I said, we have the afforestation issue and meeting our aims around woodland expansion. We have set a target of creating at least 250 hectares of woodland, and we see that as being around what we believe the market will come forward with in the year. We recognise that that is not sufficient to meet what we would like it to be, so, in addition to that, we are planning to operate in the supporting targets a pilot scheme aimed at testing how we would take forward a further 100 hectares of woodland establishment there as well.

On the 250 hectares and the woodland expansion programme, our plan is to incur expenditure of £1.9 million in supporting those pieces of work that I have outlined. With regard to income from timber harvesting, we have budgeted for £7.9 million on an income for forests, and there are a number of supporting targets that roll up to achieve that particular income target, which includes supplying 400,000 cubic metres of timber to the timber trade.

Those are largely the highlights from the business plan and the targets. I want to reinforce the point about the relocation to Fermanagh. We need to take that forward. A project manager has been appointed to develop that work for us, as there has for the wind farm work going forward.

In budgetary terms, we supplied a table for your information. It contains a breakdown of how the overall budget looks, compared with last year's budget. Members can have a look at that. The thing to highlight is that, largely, the budget position is similar to the previous year, with the exception of the £2 million that we have taken on to utilise the jobs and economy initiative and to improve the forest infrastructure, and also the timber revaluation issue. There is always a revaluation of forest assets based on the rate at which the trees are growing and the value of timber in the marketplace. Forest valuation is based on a fair market value, and as the market value of timber sales fluctuates, that has a bearing on the value of the asset. So, there is always an annual adjustment of that valuation. Those two things combined — the £2 million for the jobs and economy initiative and the £2.5 million revaluation of the forest estate — is the main difference to highlight between previous budget figures and what we expect to go forward.

**The Chairperson:** OK. Thank you very much for your presentation. I have a couple of questions. As regards your key and supporting targets and milestones, we see the differences here and the new targets for this coming year. Your key target will always be to create at least 250 hectares of woodland, as was the target last year. How many hectares of new woodland was actually created last year?

**Mr O'Boyle:** Just over the 250. We met the target, but only just.

**The Chairperson:** It also states that you plan to incur expenditure of at least £1.951 million on forestry projects.

**Mr O'Boyle:** That is right.

**The Chairperson:** Last year, it was planned to incur £1.397 million. How much was actually incurred?

**Mr O'Boyle:** I do not have the exact figure in front of me, but the difference between the two figures is to cater for the pilot scheme that we want to run on the 100 hectares. That is the difference between the two figures.

**The Chairperson:** So, the difference between £1.3 million and £1.9 is to try to cater for and enhance.—

**Mr O'Boyle:** That is not all of the difference, but that explains quite a bit of the difference.

**The Chairperson:** You want that to try to increase that 250 hectares.

**Mr O'Boyle:** Correct.

**The Chairperson:** You want at least another 100 hectares.

**Mr O'Boyle:** That is right.

**The Chairperson:** I cannot sum it up here, but if we were to achieve 350 hectares this year, and if we were to keep that going for the forthcoming years, how close would we be to hitting our main Programme for Government target of what I think was doubling our woodland by the middle of the century?

**Mr O'Boyle:** What you are saying is quite right. The policy position on that is to attempt to increase the woodland cover in Northern Ireland to 12%. At the time when that policy was set, woodland cover was estimated to be about 6%, so that is where the terminology of doubling up comes from. The aim, or the policy objective, is to get that up to 12%. Since then, we have done quite a lot of work on the baseline data as part of our commitments under the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 2010. The current woodland cover in Northern Ireland is about 8%, so we still need to step it up from 8% to 12% to meet that policy objective.

Figures like 250 or even 350 hectares, over even a period of 20-odd years, still falls short of that, as anybody can see. That is why we are looking specifically at this through a pilot scheme to understand better what the constraints are on achieving that, and what we could potentially learn that we could seek to implement in successive years to get closer to that target.

**The Chairperson:** Regarding the investment you are making and the research you are doing to try to get to that target of doubling the woodland cover, are you considering factors such as the common agricultural policy (CAP), and CAP reform? How big of an interest and bearing is that having on your research?

**Mr O'Boyle:** There is no doubt that it will have quite a big bearing. The outworking of a new CAP will also have a big bearing on the demand from private landowners to plant woodland. Largely, it is down to what individual landowners see as the competing supports and requirements from the CAP and the grant schemes. That is where we hope the pilot scheme will help us to understand a little bit better what issues are very directly CAP-related and what other issues might be more culturally or societally related — maybe ageing population issues and things like that. We hope to learn more about the different factors that are involved, and which are directly CAP-related and which might not be. There might be ways of looking differently at the different constraints.

**The Chairperson:** Yes. The collection and analysis of data is very important when you meet crises like Chalara. Where are we with the woodland register? Is it correct that a woodland register has been published?

**Mr O'Boyle:** We have done the work on a woodland register, and we are going to publish. We published an indicative early one. We have done more work since then, and we have now got to the point where we have done almost as much as is doable. That is not to say that, if you looked hard enough and far enough, you might not find very small bits of woodland that you would add on. However, we will have a fairly final position — final is the wrong word; we will have a fairly comprehensive position — to report in June. This summer we will publish an updated woodland register including the work that we have done more recently.

**The Chairperson:** Will that become the woodland base map, or is that something different?

**Mr O'Boyle:** No. That will become, in effect, a geographic information system layer of where the woodlands are situated and their size. It will give us details of the amount of woodland that we have and where it is located on a county basis, geographically, etc.

**The Chairperson:** OK. Although it is not detailed — and if it is, forgive me, but it does not seem to be detailed — the extent of the crises and the effect they have had on the Department. When I say "crises", I am talking about, first of all, the Chalara and the work that is ongoing there, and then also the work during the albeit briefer but no less intensive period of the snow crisis, when a lot of your personnel were deployed. How has that affected your business plan, your business cases and the day-to-day running of the Forest Service?

**Mr O'Boyle:** There is no question that it affects the day-to-day running. It means that we are prioritising on a fairly quick and rapid reaction process — there is no doubt about that. Last year has not affected the high-level business plan targets like the generating of income, the timber sales, etc, nor has it changed the details of the woodland expansion. It is fair to say that, with regard to Chalara, a lot of the work on legislation issues, surveillance programmes and all of that sort of thing has had to be picked up by senior officers. It is largely dealt with on the basis of reprioritising and perhaps utilising some more services from the private sector to supply support and backup services. If we take our focus off something that we had planned to do directly to do some of those emergencies, we have to find a way to support the necessary work elsewhere.

**The Chairperson:** I suppose Chalara is the most important issue for the Forest Service, but what has been impacted on the most with regard to the day-to-day running? Is it registration, licensing or the work of the wardens or the forestry rangers? What has been impacted on the most as a result of the emergencies?

**Mr O'Boyle:** With regard to the snow, the things that have impacted the most have been our capacity — I suppose the two things go hand in hand, because the people we would have been deploying to work on the snow issue would have been the people who would normally have been associated with things like the re-establishment and the planting of forests. In some ways, those people were diverted to do work like this because planting trees, etc, in those conditions was not doable anyway. So that is a reprioritisation issue.

Most of the tree disease issues that we work with on Chalara are about the management of the tree disease from a plant health point of view. To a large degree, it is not really disturbing the actual work in the forests. Most of the trees that we have been dealing with and taking out of the forest, etc, have been on private sector sites. The work continues to go on in the forests. Yes, we are utilising some resources to aid the landlords in terms of the removal of the trees, but again that is dealt with by reprioritising.

To answer your question, I suppose Chalara has affected us to a degree with regard to the deployment of industrial staff and machinery, etc, to remove trees from private woodlands in support of the landowners, and we have been engaged in that to make sure that, from a disease control point of view, we nip it in the bud as quickly as we can so that we do not increase the risk of the disease getting out of control.

As I said earlier, the other area of impact on us as an agency is the amount of senior staff management time that is involved in the various strategic management aspect of this from a plant health point of view, the tactical management side and the different levels at which we manage the incident. Therefore, the deployment of our senior staff into those areas has certainly occupied some of our senior management time.

**The Chairperson:** If the crisis continues at its current level, do you think that Forest Service will have to employ more personnel in the long term?

**Mr O'Boyle:** I think that depends on what scale the disease thing continues to —

**The Chairperson:** What would happen if it were to stay at the same level and not increase and have to be managed at that level?

**Mr O'Boyle:** At this level, it is manageable in terms of the operational bit, such as removing trees from forests, etc. A large number of woodlands are potentially involved, and they are quite small — a large number of small woodlands. So overall, in the big picture, the hectares that are currently affected are not all that big. Nevertheless, we need to get there and do it quickly. So, at the current level, from the point of view of industrial resource, for argument's sake, or that type of aspect of it, it is quite manageable.

Alongside that, we need to continue to do the work that we are doing now, which is the ongoing surveillance, testing and laboratory diagnostics. All those issues do not fall to us; some are picked up elsewhere in the Department. Other branches of the Department are also inputting to this. The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) is the laboratory for doing the analysis. So resources are being utilised across quite a section of the Department, and AFBI.

**Mr Buchanan:** In moving your headquarters to Fermanagh, have you sufficient infrastructure in place, or will that entail any new build that would have to come on stream?

**Mr O'Boyle:** The simple answer to your question is that it will involve some building. We do not have the capacity or the buildings there to move into. Our business case at the moment is work that is ongoing, and we need to look at where the best options are, etc. The answer to your question is yes, we will need accommodation in the west for our headquarters. There is already a regional office in Enniskillen but, as it stands, that would not be sufficient to take the headquarters function there.

**Mr Buchanan:** OK. In seeking to raise the percentage of woodland from 8% to 12% over the next number of years, have you any more private land coming on stream? Are there private individuals who are keen to plant their ground or anything, to try and increase the percentage of woodland and help you hit the target?

**Mr O'Boyle:** In recent years, demand from the private sector has been reasonably static, around the 200 to 250 hectare mark. So we are not actually not delivering on demand; we are not getting that demand. Prior to that, demand would have been higher. What we are seeing now, for the last three or four years, is a lower level of demand from private landowners than we would have seen five or six years ago. There is a lower demand and at this stage.

**Mr Buchanan:** I note that, in your presentation, you talked about seeking:

*"the best opportunities to exploit forestry land for wind farm development".*

If you are going to look at that, it means automatically that forest will have to be removed and not replanted, does it not? Therefore, that would take up forestry land, and you would have to get other land to compensate.

**Mr O'Boyle:** Well, that is a fair point. In terms of exploiting forest land for wind farms, some of the forestry land is not all planted with trees, for environmental reasons. So there is some open land in forests as well, and that, potentially, can be exploited without affecting the area of land that is actually planted under trees. Also, it is probably worth explaining that, in putting wind farms into forests, you may well be felling quite small areas, relatively speaking, simply to stand the turbines in, but you are not actually taking the forest away from around the wind farm, so the turbines are standing in a matrix of woodland, rather than clearing the forest away. So there are ways and models around wind farms and wind turbines coexisting in a forest setting. Those are the kinds of things that we will consider in taking the programme forward.

Also, within a forestry programme there is always an ongoing requirement from the sustainable management obligations that we have here. It may well be that, in a certain circumstance, a particular piece of forest land or whatever has a particular environmental value. Some areas that were planted in the past as woodland may well deliver better public benefits if the trees were taken off that area and it was moved more towards a conservation return or something like that. Again, that might create opportunities for wind farms to co-exist in areas like that. It is about working through those options as opposed to working on the basis that it is either the trees or the wind farms. We are looking at both together.

**Mrs Dobson:** Apologies for missing your presentation. Quite a few of my constituents are at the multiple sclerosis event, so I had somewhere very important that I wanted to be.

I will start by following on from Tom's question. In the past, the Minister has expressed disappointment at the failure to achieve your target for creating new woodland, and said that it needs to be kept under continual review. How would you rate your current performance against your target to create 250 hectares in 2011-13?

**Mr O'Boyle:** We did achieve our target of 250, but only just, as I said earlier, in the last year. Given the demand that we envisage and the information that we have available to us, in the current situation we do not see ourselves being able to set a target much higher than that for next year. We have set the target again at 250 hectares. However, in addition to that, we have given ourselves a supporting target to run a pilot scheme to test how we would go about achieving a further 100 hectares in order to determine what the real constraints are around the demand for woodland expansion.

**Mrs Dobson:** In 2008-2011, you had a target to create an average of 550 hectares of new woodland, which you did not achieve.

**Mr O'Boyle:** That is correct.

**Mrs Dobson:** Why tread water for next year and keep to 250 hectares? Is that a lack of ambition or a lack of ability? What is the rationale behind that?

**Mr O'Boyle:** The 550 hectares that you referred to was the result of a numerical calculation. From memory, I think that it was 1,650 hectares over the three-year CSR period. Obviously, when you divide that, it is 550 hectares. It was a PSA target of 1,650 hectares over three years, which, as I say, drilled down into 550 each year. At that time, that was roughly mirroring the demand that we were seeing, but, since then, we see that the demand is a lot lower and more akin to the 200-250 hectares at this stage.

**Mrs Dobson:** I have another quick point, if I may, Chair. Target 15 is to implement the requirement set out in the monitoring plan for ancient woodland sites. How does that differ from your current approach to protecting ancient woodlands? Have you been working alongside organisations such as the Woodland Trust in an effort to ensure that those are best protected? How closely do you engage with organisations that have an interest in protecting the woodland environment?

**Mr O'Boyle:** We work with a lot of other organisations, including NIEA. That communication happens as part of the reviews that we carry out on a cyclical basis for all of our forest management areas. We continually carry out reviews of the management of all forest areas, and that obviously includes the ancient woodland sites. That happens for any individual forest around every five years, so we get round to each site on a cyclical basis of around five years. There is a full programme of consultation with all the relevant stakeholders. Each forest site — each individual forest block, in some cases — has its own stakeholder representation because the type of forest at one forest can be quite different from the type at another. So, on the basis of how relevant the issues are and the types of forest, the stakeholders are identified, notified and brought to what we refer to as a formal consultation meeting to take their views on building the plan and setting out and agreeing what monitoring needs to be done as part of that. The specific action that we have there —

**Mrs Dobson:** What is the difference between your target and your current approach?

**Mr O'Boyle:** That activity is in the business plan because that has been highlighted to us by the external auditors who we employ to give us feedback on where there might be any weaknesses in our approach to sustainable management. We have highlighted to ourselves that we should have more systematic and formal recording. It is about a recording process as opposed to protection of ancient woodlands. The action is meant to close out the evidence of that being done. We have been notified — in effect, informed — that we should do a little bit more in that regard, and we are committing to putting that in place now to meet the requirements identified by the external auditors.

**Mr McAleer:** I note that your report makes reference to the social and recreational potential of the forest, and you have some good targets. I want to ask a question about security, because you will be well aware of the incident in Gortin forest in my part of the world, where a fishing line and so on was put across to harm the mountain bikers. If you are looking at measures to avert such things in future, are you working with the police or anyone else to try to stamp out that sort of behaviour?

**Mr O'Boyle:** From time to time, that kind of thing happens. It is probably wrong to wrap it up as antisocial-type behaviour, but, yes, that sort of thing happens. We work immediately and directly with the PSNI on those incidents. Things like illegal dumping in forests cause us quite a lot of expenditure as well. The issue that you raise causes us concerns about other users' safety. So, there is a need for us to take action and deal with that, and we deal with the relevant people, such as NIEA. NIEA is quite heavily involved with us on illegal dumping and pollution issues.

**Mr McAleer:** I want to go back to the mountain biking incident. It is probably one of the most sinister examples of antisocial behaviour that I have come across in recent times. Are you looking at developing specific measures to address that, given the potential for serious injury and death? That obviously will not be peculiar to Gortin forest; it may well happen in other forests.

**Mr O'Boyle:** As you say, we need to deal with that sort of thing with the police. We are the landowner in that example. We also engage with other people who are ready to become sub-operating partners, if you want to call them that, for the likes of councils. They take a lead in operating those sorts of situations. There is a collective need for all the people engaged to come together and to put something effective in place there as far as possible. I agree.

**Mr Milne:** Jo-Anne asked the question that I wanted to ask, which was about ancient woodlands. In the case of Drumlamp, a historical site in the Magherafelt District Council area, how is that going to be returned to its natural habitat? The trees were planted 50 or 60 years ago and are now mature trees ready for harvesting. Are we talking about cutting those trees and getting rid of them, and letting that whole area return to its natural habitat in its own way, or is it a stage by stage approach?

**Mr O'Boyle:** It is probably more the latter. In any of these forest sites, the first thing we need to do is to make sure that where there are remnant features of important biodiversity, or whatever it happens to be, those are protected and we do not carry out operations in a way that further destroys them. That is one stage, the initial stage, that we need to take. Another stage is looking at the rotation of the trees, how long they have been growing and how many years it would be until they reach maturity. There are then decisions to be made around whether the trees continue to grow or should be managed; for example, should they be thinned differently or managed differently to make sure — for argument's sake and to give a simple example — that more light is allowed to come through the tree canopy and onto the forest floor? All those decisions are made, as I referred to earlier, as part of the planning and consultation issues. We would then set out a plan for the management of all those areas going forward. We are scrutinised — we scrutinise internally and then subject that to external audit — against those plans and any of the steps, which you referred to, that we might be proposing to take. We need to have a sufficiently robust monitoring process in place to make sure that we are actually delivering against the plans. That is the point that I was making earlier, about the external audit having highlighted that we could have a more evidence-based monitoring approach in place.

**Mr Irwin:** I apologise for not being here for your presentation.

I know that you have had difficulty meeting targets on forestry cover over recent years. I can understand why; some farmers do not particularly want to plough planted land for trees. Has there been any change in grant aid in recent times to encourage the planting of more trees? I know that there was some talk of change, but I am not so sure that that happened.

**Mr O'Boyle:** There was change. The grants were adjusted. However, overall, that adjustment was not particularly substantial. It was not a seismic adjustment, but the grants were adjusted and reviewed, I think, two years ago. In that adjustment, there was not a big step that changed anything fundamental.

**Mr Irwin:** Do you believe that that needs to happen to encourage farmers, if we are to attain the targets?

**Mr O'Boyle:** That is a difficult thing to say. We need to be as clear as we can on which of the factors that are affecting the demand from the private sector are, for example, financially related or because of uncertainties around CAP issues, and which of them are maybe more cultural and social.

**Mr Irwin:** There are probably a number of issues.



**The Chairperson:** I want to explore one or two other aspects, including the relocation of Forest Service HQ, which Tom touched on. You have appointed a programme manager to oversee that. Was that an internal or external appointment? Was somebody brought in from outside Forest Service?

**Mr O'Boyle:** The person is new to Forest Service, but they are a civil servant.

**The Chairperson:** I understand. They were not of the Forest Service, so they are coming in, if you like, fresh.

**Mr O'Boyle:** They are coming onto our staff.

**The Chairperson:** Is that full time or just to see out that project?

**Mr O'Boyle:** At this stage, it is to take the project through.

**The Chairperson:** And then they might go off again.

**Mr O'Boyle:** Or have another role within Forest Service.

**The Chairperson:** So, that has not been established yet.

Have Forest Service personnel been surveyed to get their views on relocation?

**Mr O'Boyle:** That is part of the project work that the project manager is taking on. There are a number of strands to that project. One is the buildings issue that we referred to. Another is the staffing issue. There is also the transitional arrangements issue around when we need to make the move and how we build capacity so that we do not lose key staff when do so. The personnel issues, including the transitional arrangements that go with that, all have to be built in. We have met trade unions regarding this issue, at least twice if not more. We have given a commitment to the trade unions that we will keep talking to our staff and will keep our staff aware of where we are with the situation and of the issues in respect of relocation.

**The Chairperson:** What is the mood of Forest Service staff about this decision?

**Mr O'Boyle:** I do not know whether or not there is a single mood, and I would not like to speculate. However, the necessary personnel management approach will be taken to find employment in the Belfast area for those staff who will not be able to be based in Enniskillen or for whom that does not suit. A due personnel management process will be employed to ensure that any staff who do not end up as part of the move to Fermanagh are handled and redeployed in an appropriate way.

**The Chairperson:** You have four regional offices; is that right? You have one in Fermanagh and one in Garvagh.

**Mr O'Boyle:** We have one in Garvagh, one in Castlewellan, and then Belfast.

**The Chairperson:** Could it be that you will enhance all those hubs? You have technical staff in those locations that cover an area.

**Mr O'Boyle:** There are small numbers of administrative staff in those places as well.

**The Chairperson:** They will obviously have to be retained to keep the hub functioning. Are we talking about the relocation from Belfast to Fermanagh of clerical staff more than of technicians and people in tree surgeon-type positions?

**Mr O'Boyle:** You grasp it quite correctly, but I will explain it. Technical and industrial staff are already deployed around the country. In effect, they report to the most logistically suitable office; that is how it already works. There is a small number of administrative support staff in those regional offices to service the existing need. The move to Fermanagh will involve technical foresters who are currently based in the headquarters in Belfast. Those staff will move to Fermanagh or one of the other existing offices depending on where is most appropriate to the job that they do. Some people do different jobs

as they move through their career, so they may well become employed in the most suitable office. It is the administrative staff who are based in Belfast for whom it is least likely to be suitable to be based in Enniskillen as support staff. Some of the administrative staff based in Belfast will probably transfer with us to Enniskillen. Others will be redeployed either in the Department or elsewhere in the Civil Service.

**The Chairperson:** I know that the project manager will have been given a very restrictive remit in establishing a site in Fermanagh. Is it actually his job to establish the site? If so, what happens if he finds a site 10 miles north of County Fermanagh?

**Mr O'Boyle:** I do not want to pre-empt the business case, but it is for the project to identify the sensible business options as far as the relocation is concerned. As with any other business case, I suppose that a preferred option will come out of that. At that point, it will, in effect, be up to the Minister to decide whether to adopt the preferred option or to do otherwise.

**The Chairperson:** Is it fair to say that the project manager is looking at sites other than ones in County Fermanagh?

**Mr O'Boyle:** It is the structure of the project that is being worked on at this stage, so I do not think that we are quite at that stage yet.

**The Chairperson:** OK.

**Mr O'Boyle:** We are aware that one or two other sites around the Province may or may not be available. At this stage, the Minister's direction, as set out in her announcement, is to look at relocating the headquarters to Fermanagh.

**Mr Marcus McAuley (Forest Service):** If I may, I will add to a couple of those answers. In respect of surveying staff and the mood, you will be aware that DARD HQ is to be relocated to Ballykelly. As part of the survey for that, there were specific questions that related to Fermanagh. So, it was integrated, and we await that report.

**The Chairperson:** I was in Brussels last week, so I only heard the headlines, but is it fair to say that 85%, 86% or 87% of Forest Service staff are not happy with the move?

**Mr McAuley:** I think that that headline figure was for the total number of staff whom it did not entirely suit to move from Belfast. I only came to Forest Service last week, but one of the things that I want to look at — I have asked the project manager to look at this — is distilling the answers from the survey in respect of exactly what you asked.

There are 217 staff in the agency as a whole, many of whom are industrial staff. The working figure at the moment is that 57 will be relocated to Fermanagh.

You asked about identifying a site. As has been indicated, the work at the moment is on developing the business case. Again, I am keen to see exactly what criteria we use to come to the preferred options. That is where we are at the moment — what criteria do we apply in a thorough and open business case, which then will present the Minister with various options.

**The Chairperson:** OK. We will move on to the last subject, which is improving forest infrastructure under the jobs and economy initiative, with £2 million this year and £2 million next year. Can you assure us that that money will not be spent on the relocation of the headquarters?

**Mr O'Boyle:** Yes, I think that we can give you that assurance. That is not our plan. We certainly intend to utilise that money on the basis that it was bid for.

**The Chairperson:** Can you give us any detail on the projects? I know that there will have to be a number of projects.

**Mr O'Boyle:** Again, that is right. It is at a very early stage as well. It is actually at business case stage as well, because although we have secured the money, we still have to do the business case to, in effect, be in a position to draw down that money and utilise it.

**The Chairperson:** I am sorry, John Joe, but has that £2 million not been allocated?

**Mr O'Boyle:** It is in the budget line, but like any other capital, it is, of course, subject to a business case. We have to do a business case to make sure that we will get value for money. What I am saying is that it is not a business case for the money; it is a business case to use the money.

**The Chairperson:** So, again, it has not been allocated to projects at this point?

**Mr O'Boyle:** That is right.

**Mr McAuley:** An internal officer will be moved sideways to manage those projects and develop them.

**The Chairperson:** Is there a time pressure on that funding? Does it have to be spent before the end of the two-year period?

**Mr McAuley:** Yes.

**The Chairperson:** So, it is the £4 million —

**Mr O'Boyle:** It is £4 million over two years. At this stage, we want to spend £2 million in the first year and £2 million in the next year. It will probably be more difficult to spend £2 million in the first year than later on. Nevertheless, that is how we are treating it at this stage.

**The Chairperson:** OK. Do you have any idea of what money will be spent on the ground and what will be spent on the apparatus to get the money spent? Do you have a breakdown of the money that will be spent on management and the actual money that will be spent on the ground, or do you hope to spend the whole £4 million on projects on the ground?

**Mr O'Boyle:** That is the aim, but were something required such as a key marketing strand to something or an IT part that needs to be part of the overall project, some of the money will obviously be spent on that kind of thing.

**The Chairperson:** Sorry, I got my words wrong there. What I meant was this: can you assure us that the money will not be spent on administration? That is the word that I was looking for.

**Mr O'Boyle:** To use the example of an internal person being moved sideways, their salary does not come out of that £4 million. However, there will be a process for putting in, as I say, maybe a geographic system, depending on what the project recommends. So, there will be some administrative time in building such capacity. It is, therefore, probably wrong to say that all the money will be seen on the ground. It will be on the ground or supporting what is on the ground.

**The Chairperson:** I understand. OK. Members, that is it. Thank you very much for your time. That covered an extensive period. Thank you very much for your answers and presentation, John Joe and Marcus.