



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Review of Tree Disease and Biosecurity
Issues: Landscape Institute Briefing

14 May 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Review of Tree Disease and Biosecurity Issues: Landscape Institute Briefing

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

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

Witnesses:

Mr Peter Mullin	Landscape Institute
Mr Alan Simson	Landscape Institute

The Chairperson: I welcome Pete Mullin, policy officer, and Alan Simson from the technical group.

Mr Pete Mullin (Landscape Institute): Thank you.

Mr Alan Simson (Landscape Institute): Thank you.

The Chairperson: I will give you a few moments to get settled in. I do not know who is leading off, whether you have a presentation for us, or some brief notes —

Mr Mullin: Yes, sorry. Thank you. Pete Mullin, chair of the Landscape Institute Northern Ireland and policy officer for the institute here. I have circulated a single sheet as an introduction to move things along. Thank you for inviting us to give a presentation.

We requested to be involved in the process when it was first announced that the review of tree disease was taking place. Landscape Institute is the professional body of landscape architects. It is a chartered institute, and we have 6,000 members UK-wide. In Northern Ireland, there are about 75 chartered landscape architects and 115 members in total of all classes. As a profession, we are involved in the design, specification, management and delivery on the ground of landscape issues.

After the review was announced, I realised that you had invited along the Woodland Trust and the National Trust and various other bodies that are all very au fait with the technicalities of this particular issue. We want to focus on some other issues that we deal with that may be of interest for your research. We will not take too long to go over some of those aspects.

For the purposes of the review, a lot of this has been sparked because of the Chalara outbreak and ash dieback. As an institute, we have conducted our own research and have our own concerns. We have a technical committee based in London, which subsequently set up a biosecurity task force as part of this to help inform the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the various other working groups across the water.

Our profession deals with a number of things, including environmental impact assessments. I noted that most of your other commentators have mentioned that issues of tree disease are a concern for things like impact on the landscape, for example, but that is something that we professionally look at very closely. We are involved in the planning of annex 1 and annex 2 developments, which are large-scale developments in the countryside or in the landscape. If you are proposing something of that scale and nature, a big part of that is the requirement to do an environmental impact assessment and make recommendations in respect of a development proposal. With the increasing issue of disease in trees, it is of concern that we have 130 landscape character areas in Northern Ireland, and each of those has its own sensitivities and limitations. We have a very detailed survey of landscape character in Northern Ireland, but we do not really use the tool as a way of managing, planning and preparing the landscapes for issues such as disease arriving. Through this whole process, we are hoping that recognition will be given to that. That national landscape character assessment sits with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and has only recently been taken over by landscape architecture branch, which recently moved to NIEA from the Planning Service. They will, I hope, through this process and others, be given the tools to start to adapt that landscape character tool so that we can manage our landscapes and prepare for a crisis such as this.

The other issue that is connected to the environmental impact assessment is visual assessment. So, for example, if you are a developer and you are proposing to put a development into the landscape, quite often you will be conditioned through planning to screen planting at a development. That is fine when your planting is secure, and what we have found through this disease and others is that planting that you specify for screening might not be there. So, the institute has set out instructions to its members to assume the worst in relation to Chalara, for example — that existing ash trees in the landscape cannot be relied upon to be there if you are putting your planning application in, and new planting that you are putting in may well not be there because of other disease and other issues. We need to change the approach to planning and to start thinking about applications going in almost with a worst-case scenario — first principles of placement of development in the landscape, to rely on topography, earthworks and other things, and not necessarily to rely on planting that may or may not be there from that point of view.

I will just run through a couple of wee things and then I will let Alan talk about the technical side of things. We are involved with design and specification. A lot of your speakers and commentators to date have been government bodies, such as the Forest Service and the Woodland Trust, which is a charitable organisation. As professionals, we tend to deal with private sector as much as public sector, so we deal with advising individual farmers through to developers on how they should introduce their development into the landscape. We also deal with local communities, and our reach is reasonably wide in that sense. There is an opportunity there. Through our specifications — when we are specifying designs — we can introduce mechanisms that help to prepare for situations like the ash disease.

That occurs through our work. A lot of our work or recent study has been on “green infrastructure”. I do not know whether you have heard the term. We have released a paper — I think I have some documents with me today. It is just a position paper from the institute about providing wider green infrastructure. “Green infrastructure” is simply a term for landscape design that relates to all kinds of things, such as health and education. The next position paper, which we are working on, is on health and wellness.

Both of those papers follow a current theme that affects all of us, which is that of trying to encourage people to use the external landscape more for health and wellness benefits, and that type of thing. As part of that process, we need to be aware that more and more people will be using the outdoor landscape. That is part of the encouragement. That brings other issues of public awareness that need to be raised in how people use the outdoor space. Recent forestry Acts have included changes that allow people access to forestry lands that they would not have had previously. So, what we are doing, in effect, is opening up the countryside a little bit more. As a profession, we encourage that. However, we also need to, I suppose, educate people in how to use those resources.

As specifiers, we find difficulty. Quite often, we specify native plants of local provenance. I imagine that most landscape architects do; they certainly do in my practice. That term tends to be used a lot. We are not purists about it: as landscape professionals, we realise that native is not always best in trying to create certain effects. Maybe in an urban setting you might have to introduce trees that are better suited to that environment. However, we encourage, as much as possible, the use of locally sourced materials. There is a horticulture industry here, which is fairly weak and could be built upon. Certainly, through changes to our own structures and specification methods, we encourage, by whatever mechanisms we can through procurement, the use of locally sourced and grown materials. That does not necessarily mean that you would have to have a horticulturalist starting up for the first time and getting up to speed over the five to 10 years that it might take. It might be done by encouragement through grant assistance to well-established growers in mainland Europe or Britain to establish, if you like, a sub-office in Northern Ireland. So, what you would have would be a bit like a Tesco Express, whereby they would have their main establishment in mainland UK or Europe, but maybe for the purposes of reducing transport, creating local jobs and limiting disease spread, they could be encouraged to set up shop here. That would also help to reduce the carbon footprint and transport costs, about which we are all aware.

The final issue is education. Earlier, I mentioned public awareness. Serious consideration should be given to the idea of educating from a lower level, being A level, GCSE and school level. That is something that we, as an institute, have been encouraging with other Committees and Departments. Consideration should even be given to introducing ideas about environmental design, which brings in all kinds of facets, such as farming, the environment, sustainability and all those different terms, as an A-level or GCSE subject, rather than waiting for it to be offered at tertiary level.

That is it. There are other points, but I will not talk any more. Alan has come over from Leeds. He is a member of our technical committee in London. He is a reader at Leeds Metropolitan University. He is involved on the ground with DEFRA. He advises them on landscape architecture issues. Maybe he will want to add a few points.

Mr Simson: OK. Thank you. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I am a landscape architect and an urban forester at Leeds Metropolitan University, where I am also director of research for art, architecture and design, which, strangely enough, includes the environment. Most of my research is, I guess, with the EU, particularly on planning, design, implementation and management of all things to do with trees, which is why the Landscape Institute drafted me onto its subcommittee to look at matters of ash dieback.

First, I would like to congratulate you on your Chalara control strategy, which I think is very good. I think that you acted swiftly, and it is not in the broader environment yet here, as I understand it, which, of course, it is in England. We have similar restrictions to yours in place. There is a very common theme in that ash is a significant part of the landscape visually, culturally and economically. We would be the first to admit that we still have much to learn about that disease and, indeed, other diseases. We are working quite closely with our European colleagues, particularly those in Denmark who have been working diligently on this since 2005. So, they have had a good five or six years' head start on us, and we are learning much from them.

We have also persuaded the UK Government to try to learn a lot from Dutch elm disease from 30-odd years ago, when a lot of rhetoric was uttered but very little action took place. We are dusting off all sorts of old photographs of landscapes from 30 or 40 years ago and comparing how those landscapes looked then with how they look now. One or two people are sucking their breath in and thinking, "Crikey, we did not do much, did we?" So, hopefully, we will be able to do something about that.

Never waste a good crisis. One of the benefits of the current situation, certainly as far as the UK Government go, is being able to reinforce the importance of trees not only to ordinary people, whoever they may be, but to the landscape, for lots of reasons. As Pete said, horticulture has sort of slipped off the agenda a little bit. Its profile is not all that it might be, and one of our jobs is to put the "culture" back into horticulture, which sounds like a bit of a slogan, but I think that that is important. To that end, DEFRA, as part of the education thing, is funding a biosecurity garden at the Chelsea flower show this year. You may think, "Why on earth are you doing that?", but, given the sort of people who are there, particularly from a media point of view, it is a very useful forum to try to get this point across.

Pete mentioned green infrastructure. As I am sure you are aware, the EU published a proclamation on 6 May about green infrastructure. It suddenly decided, from the point of view of the economy, jobs, health, climate change, societal cohesion, pollution, connectivity, biodiversity, and so on, that that is a very good thing to start thinking about. Trees will be the prime articulator of that green infrastructure.

Under that proclamation, green infrastructure indicators will be required, but they will not be an obligation. There will be moneys in the rural development fund and the regional development fund for green infrastructure matters. That is important because the disease is in the public domain now, and we cannot get rid of it. We are certainly working with the UK Government to address that. It will not go away; we have to start designing woodland that is resilient. We will be applying a 10%, 20%, 30% rule, which means that, in a given area, we will plant 10% of one species, 20% of a genus, and 30% of a family. In other words, we will use far more species than we have done in the past, when we got rather lazy and planted far too few species. So, that will help a lot.

Equally, the UK Government are thinking about how to articulate that publicly in order to try to bring agriculture and forestry back together again. They went their separate ways in England 100-odd years ago. You have farmers, and you have foresters, but they do not see themselves as one, so we are trying to bring them back together. It is about land use. Whether it is for food, biomass or whatever, it is all about using the land.

We argue that landscape architects have the vision and the methodologies to provide the insight into the significant visual changes that will be brought about because of either the disease or the methods that we will have to take to make sure that we do not get the disease.

I will shut up.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you very much for your presentation, which was very useful. I have a couple of questions before I put this out to members. First, thank you for your attendance here; this has been very useful. Again, you approached us about this, and we are very thankful for that. What relationship does your group have with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) or Forest Service?

Mr Mullin: Our members tend to be diverse in their spread. Forestry Commission Scotland has several landscape architects working for it, as does Forestry Commission Wales. Ironically, the Northern Ireland Forest Service has none.

A review we did quite recently, to do with something else, found that we have a very light membership in Northern Ireland. We have landscape architects in Departments of Agriculture and other areas of government in Scotland, Wales and England, advising and producing guidelines. As a profession here, we have been like wallflowers in some ways, if you will excuse the pun. We have not, I suppose, pushed to have influence in those places that others have recognised.

We have a small public sector presence. I think five landscape architects work at NIEA, five at Belfast City Council, and none in any other council in Northern Ireland. We want to turn that around. I think the statistic was that 7% of councils in Northern Ireland had landscape architects, compared with 50% in Scotland. So, we are very thin on the ground. That causes problems with councils not having the people who are knowledgeable in that field, looking at planning applications and going onto sites to enforce, check and inspect.

We have an interest in these things. We are probably knocking a little bit on the door from the outside, like a lot of private sector professionals with a small public sector presence. We hope that that will change over time.

The Chairperson: Being architects, you are probably in a unique position in that you can look upwards and see the people you work for — your clients — whether private or public. You can then also look down at the distributors and suppliers.

Mr Mullin: Yes.

The Chairperson: The biggest problem here, and which is hard to defend against, seems to be that we do not grow enough from native seed in Northern Ireland — or Ireland, for that matter. We have to bring seed or plants in. You described the industry as weak. How do you see that changing, and what assistance will government be able to give the industry to help it to grow, be sustainable and meet the capacity and need that is out there?

We have thought about this, and we have looked at whether government could put into place a five-year plan of projects so that people can at least see the future and know what to plan for. Would that be helpful or needed?

Mr Mullin: I would agree with that. We took our eye off the ball about 20 years ago. In the 1970s, the Housing Executive had its own nurseries and produced its own plants for use in its schemes. That sort of commitment gave us the potential for a well-established industry. However, market forces gradually came into play with the opening up of Europe, which allowed capitalism to take control of that situation. The lowest price wins, so planting is coming from Europe and elsewhere.

To re-establish that sector, there needs to be a support mechanism. We can specify the plants. However, there are a number of difficulties, such as certifying it. I have specified native plants of local provenance on schemes that I have worked on. However, I challenge any landscape architect to show me the bit of paper that says that the landscape contractor has genuinely sourced those plants locally. They will not do it because, ultimately, you go along to your site inspection and there is an oak planted. You are not going to ask its origin. That part of the planning process needs to be tightened, which would start to help. I do not know whether Alan has any experience of helping to establish that industry locally.

The Chairperson: A question I will put to Alan is: have any of the local authorities in England been able to produce surety and future with regard to a five- or 10-year plan for projects?

Mr Simson: Yes. The strange thing is that the importation of plant material goes back centuries. We did some research not so long ago about the oak trees in Windsor Great Park, which are deemed to be the best English oaks there are. They are French. We have documentary evidence that they were imported by Charles II at the Restoration to plant there. We checked on that DNA, and the DNA of those oak trees comes from the south of France and goes right the way up to Scandinavia. We have checked on the DNA of oak trees that we can identify in the Domesday Book, and you would expect them all to be the same, but they are not.

So we do not really understand what local provenance means. There is a move to try to source plant material far more locally. One of the problems with that is, of course, climate change. Certainly, if you are growing trees for timber — particularly slow-growing trees such as oak, for example — if you choose the provenance from just down the road, in 120 years' time, it is probably going to have starshake, and will not be very much use for you as a timber tree. In Yorkshire, for example, we have been specifying for some years now that if you plant oak for timber, at least 20% of the provenance should be from as far south as Bordeaux or somewhere like that.

Equally, of course, there are EU passports for disease-free stock, which have not always been implemented as much as they should have been, and clearly they have to be. There is no doubt about that. One of the issues is the fact that if you want to create places that people want to invest in from overseas, you want that investment to stay, and you want healthy, happy people, we do have to start planting trees, for lots of reasons, which you know as well as I do. We probably have not got as good a stock, even in England, as we should. I came back from Italy on Sunday, where I was visiting Vannucci and Peverelli nurseries, which export to England. Most of their stuff is actually now going to Arab countries, believe it or not, and Dubai, where they are planting trees at £10,000 a throw, which we are not doing, because that is where they deem that all the investment is going to go.

Clearly, we are not going to do that, but I think that we have to take the calibre of the environment seriously for jobs, investment and all the things that are critical now. That means that we have to box a little bit more cleverly than we have been in how we source all plant material, not just trees, but particularly trees. I think that we should have seen this coming. We have known that this disease was coming for 10 years and we did nothing when we should have done.

Mr Mullin: In planning, we could turn to the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 and see that a commitment has been made to increase our woodland cover in Northern Ireland. We have the lowest in Europe, so, in a way, the only way is up. I realise that there are issues with clashes between agricultural production and woodland, but really there needs to be a holistic approach to that. The current approach is very much on a voluntary basis. Landowners will come and get some grant assistance if they choose and they have a bit of land that they can apply for. There needs to be, possibly through the landscape character assessment, identification on a national level of some kind of strategy that could be put in place that would help to achieve the Act's ambition. What that also does is help to guarantee a certain amount of planting taking place on an annual basis. If you were a producer, you would then know that there is a commitment to double the amount of woodland over the next 10, 15 or 20 years, so you could make plans on that basis. It is about securing commitments from the Executive to help to deliver those sorts of strategies, rather than the current system, under

which there might be a farmer in Limavady, one in Fermanagh and one in County Down who apply for the woodland grant. There is no joined-up thinking in that. There might be regions that are less important for food production and agriculture, but that would work very well as woodland areas.

The Chairperson: I am interested in your 10%, 20% and 30% rule. Is that a plan to make sure that stock is not all of the same type, or is there a defence element in those plans? Is there some way that you could position breeds of trees that could guard against or stop infection?

Mr Simson: That would probably be difficult. Interestingly, when Denmark started investigating its native ash trees, it discovered 39 different strains of DNA. Nobody knows why. Some of those will be resilient, and Denmark thinks that, within 20 years, possibly less, it will have disease-resistant ash commercially available. In England, as you may know, 25,000 young trees have just been planted in Norfolk and Suffolk, which is where most of the disease currently is, in order to have them infected as soon as possible. Once we see which ones are resistant, we can hopefully start breeding some resilient stock within a generation, which is probably how long it will take.

The idea behind planting as many species as possible is that, usually, viruses and funguses attack families. This has been an interesting case so far in that it has mainly attacked ash. Within the ash family are privet, forsythia, and all sorts of things. Those have not been attacked as yet, and we have no reason to believe that they will be. That makes this quite an interesting disease.

The architect Philip Johnson wrote a treatise in 1968, 'Why we want our cities ugly'. He said that everything has to be a number, and that if it is not a number, it does not exist. I used to hate him for saying that, but I think I am beginning to agree. It is interesting that the only local authority in the UK to have an economic inventory of its trees using the iTree system, which has now been approved, is Torbay in the south of England. The economic value of the trees, just in that local authority, is £288 million. That has changed things quite dramatically, for a number of reasons. They are not just cosmetic; they are a fundamental economic part of the functioning of that local authority. Other local authorities are beginning to think, "Yikes. We need to do similar sorts of things."

The interesting thing about the UK is the question of forestry and timber. Timber imports are third after oil and food, and are worth very many millions of pounds. Now that forestry has moved down from the hills in England and Wales to the lowlands, the situation has changed from when you used to bang in several million Sitka spruce and just carry on. It is a much more sophisticated game now, and it involves the dreaded word "design", however you want to define it, because someone has to make decisions about what to put in and where, and how you accommodate people, and so on. It is becoming a much more sophisticated game than it used to be.

The Chairperson: I am not suggesting that this is a good idea at the moment, but do you have an inkling that, especially where we have road projects neighbouring population centres, we will do away with tree-planting altogether and create concrete walls to keep traffic noise down, etc?

Mr Simson: Quite the reverse. We just had a report from Letchworth, which is one of the old garden city centres, on the health of the general populous in garden cities and new towns. I would not say they are significantly better — that would not be true — but they are better. Our Government have done a "length of an arm and half a brick" sort of calculation on what they could save on expenditure in the NHS, and it is billions. We are working with them at the moment on all the new housing that is about to be inflicted on people in England, if they did but know it, and they want a 21st century version of garden cities so that kids can cycle to school and all the rest of the other things that have stopped happening over the past generation and which need to start happening again. Equally, we need to get kids outside, as I am sure you know. Short-sightedness in the young is around 15% higher than it used to be, primarily because they do not get out enough. They are looking at screens, and all that caper. Why have we inflicted that on them? Bodyguard parenting is one thing, and it is quite important, but somehow we have to design an environment where people can live, love, work, play, and all the rest of it, so that we get kids outside and know that there will be more greenery, not less.

Mr Mullin: On the subject of green architecture, members of our institute have carried out a lot of recent research on health and wellness, and have looked at mental health and the benefits of community woodlands. You mentioned introducing trees in an urban setting, and there is real recognisable value in that.

Mrs Dobson: Thank you for your presentation. Could you expand on what you would like to see DARD do to conform to the principles of the European Landscape Convention, especially with regard

to the implementation of policies that protect our landscape? I was interested to hear you say, Alan, that we should have seen this coming. You said that we have known that this disease was coming for 10 years, and did nothing. The convention was adopted 13 years ago. Do you feel that DARD could have done much more since then and possibly prevented ash dieback, had certain protections been in place?

Mr Simson: I do not think so. We do not know why funguses suddenly turn quite as malignant as they do. This disease has come from China. Chinese and Asian ash have it, but it does not affect them in the slightest. However, for some unknown reason, it started spreading westward. We are not alone: lots of other countries did not see it coming either. That is primarily because one of the problems is that the environment — however you want to define it — does not always have strong political traction. We were not as clever as we should have been in putting things together. We still teach people in silos in universities; everything is in a little silo. Some issues — the environment is one — are cross-cutting and affect absolutely everything to some degree. The list is as long as your arm. Sometimes, we see these issues as individual things to deal with when we have the time, but we never have the time.

Could we have stopped it? No; I do not think so. As far as I am aware, the disease has come to Northern Ireland because of imported stock that was infected. Certainly, that was the case in England, but it has also been coming in on the wind. You only have to look at the billions of spores in the autumn. If you go to Denmark and shake the leaves on the trees, a brown cloud literally goes up, and it is just gone in the wind. We could not have done anything about that.

Mrs Dobson: What did you mean then when you said that we should have seen this coming and that we have known that the disease was coming for 10 years?

Mr Simson: We should have started implementing the EU health passport on imports. We should have considered that perhaps we could have gone a little bit further ourselves and possibly helped the horticultural industry, not necessarily financially, but just encouraged it to play a part. Also, we still see that horrible word "landscaping" creeping into everything — it should be stricken from the record. We have a landscape, not landscaping. It is not very good in some places, but that word implies that it is just a green cosmetic; that you make all the key decisions and then some twit like me comes along and does the green bits. We seem to think that that is how it should be done in many places.

I recently came back from China, where landscape architects and urban foresters have been trying to reverse the development process. Normally, we decide on the roads, put in the buildings and then do the green bit. We are trying to reverse that by looking at the landscape and working out its hydrology. You put in the forest network, and then the buildings and roads. We could build roads on the moon if we wanted to; I hope we do not. Using that methodology, you find that you put in fewer roads. We did a workshop recently that showed savings of about 30% on road infrastructure because, once you know where the buildings are, you can service them.

We have carried on with the way we do things without sitting down and thinking about whether, just because we have always done things like that, we should carry on doing them that way.

Mrs Dobson: So, knowing that this was coming, we should have implemented better plant health checks at ports much earlier.

Mr Simson: I think so. The tendering system does not help in so far as you always accept the lowest tender unless you have a very good reason not to. I can pick up the phone at 4.00 pm on a Friday and have a 42-ton truck outside my door at 10.00 am on Monday, full of eastern European tree stock. I cannot do that with a UK nursery; it will tell me that the stock will be there in five or six weeks, but I can get it from abroad in 48 hours, if I wanted to. We have done that because it is the cheapest way of doing it. Sometimes, going for the lowest tender —

Mrs Dobson: Is that not being a bit blinkered?

Mr Simson: Yes, but if you are working for a local authority and you are told that, even though you selected the lowest tender, you should go for the next one or two up, you will ask whether there was any point in going out to tender at all. It devalues the tendering system. As Pete mentioned, we probably have to draw up a tighter specification but without upsetting the EU by simply saying that we should not import anything from abroad, because it will jump up and down and say that that is contrary to free trade. However, there are ways of righting this and using much more local stock.

Mrs Dobson: Are those not common sense measures?

Mr Simson: I find that common sense is quite rare.

Mr Mullin: The issues surrounding carbon footprints can be built into these things. If you build those sorts of issues into a project, straight away it makes more sense to supply something locally than it does to ship it from the continent. That could be factored into any specification, I would imagine.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the presentation. I am not so sure that landscape contractors in Northern Ireland always provide the right advice to would-be developers about the type of plants and trees that should be put in to improve the landscape. I was with an applicant last week who had a problem with a house. The trees that were recommended were 12 metres tall.

Mr Mullin: Twelve-metre trees?

Mr Byrne: Yes, to provide cover, but that is unrealistic. I also want to ask about overall air quality and photosynthesis. What is the general thinking these days about trees and vegetation in relation to carbon dioxide and the production of oxygen? What is the level of quality of oxygen in the air?

Mr Mullin: I will answer the first part of the question. It is really down to the specification. I mentioned that our industry is having to think about planning applications, and not relying fully on planting going in. There is, perhaps, a first principle about placement that needs to be thought about: whether the location is the right place for development and whether plants should be established in a low-lying site where the topography and land form is better suited for integration. That is the first principle. The second is —

Mr Byrne: The house I mentioned has been built, and they are looking for post-approval.

Mr Mullin: I do not know the particular situation. Quite often, when screen-planting, I recommend smaller growing stock because that can get going quite quickly. You might have a situation in which there is a particular sensitivity — I am not sure — and you would specify larger stock in that instance.

Mr Simson: Sometimes, there is a need to plant large trees. I have planted very big ones that have required cranes to bring in. Sometimes, the reason for that is purely that, from day one, things have to look good. I would even go so far as to say that, as far as economic investment is concerned, when the cameras are there, it is no good just having a little stick and saying, "Come back in 30 years and it will look great." The building is operational from day one, so a version of the landscape has to be operational from day one. That is rarely applied but, because we can do it, we sometimes have to do it.

From the climate change point of view, the larger the tree that is planted, the better, because it can take in far more carbon dioxide. There are issues to do with tree species. The horticultural industry has to be a little bit careful, because, as we discussed earlier, a lot of the new designer trees — for want of a better phrase — are male. One of the problems with that is that they produce too much pollen, which will affect you if you suffer from asthma or upper respiratory tract problems. A lot of the new trees that are coming on the market, particularly from America, strangely enough, are male because we do not like them dropping fruit on the ground and making a mess. The problem then is in the air. The science of these things is something that we have to get a grip on far more than we have.

Mr Mullin: That ties in with your second question, which was to do with air-cleaning properties. The larger species tend to be better at reducing carbon dioxide. There is a practice, largely in housing — I had recent experience of this when working on guidance — whereby there is a tendency not to plant species that will grow into big trees. A lot of small and medium-sized trees are planted because of concerns about long-term maintenance. There are very good reasons for planting larger trees. Basically, they purify a greater amount of air.

Mr Swann: My party colleague Jo-Anne Dobson mentioned the point that we should have known about this 10 years ago. We had Forest Service in front of us last week. Officials said that they are keeping an eye on 20 or 30 different tree diseases that are potentially coming across Europe. Do you think that the steps being taken now are enough to prevent those from reaching our shores?

Mr Simson: Hopefully. However, in my discussions with DEFRA, I said that 4,500 tons of freight comes through the Channel Tunnel every day, and I asked whether it was going to do anything about that. It said no. I said that 80,000 vehicles come across the Channel every week, and I asked whether it would do anything about that. It said no. We can do as much as we can, but you may well have seen photographs of trucks that have come through the Channel Tunnel, covered in caterpillars. Nothing is being done about that yet.

The steps that are being taken on ash dieback are good. They should be implemented for other diseases as well. We have been importing timber since the 7th century into this country. It goes back that far. We still do, because we do not grow enough of our own. We have to be a little bit careful about bringing stuff in willy-nilly. There is a lot that we can do. It is difficult to say whether that will be enough to keep things out completely. We have so few plant pathologists; I think we had two. The money is now there, and we want to train more. As I said, we took our eye off the ball, and this should come as a bit of a wake-up call that this should not happen again.

The Chairperson: Finally, Alan, I have a question on something that we have not yet picked up on. You commended DARD's Chalara plan and mentioned that the disease is not in the wider environment yet. We are out and about, detecting species that have been infected. Is it only by luck, if you believe in luck, that it has not yet spread to the wider environment? Secondly, are we concentrating too much on detecting the species that are infected, or should we be keeping an eye out for it coming through the wider environment?

Mr Simson: We do not know how fast this disease spreads. The tabloid press in England was suggesting that every ash tree was going to die within about 48 hours. That was never going to be the case, and it may be 20 years or more before it even crosses the mainland. We do not know. It is important to be observant. Training, as well as having volunteers, is important. I am amazed that, in some other countries that have the disease — Italy, for example — there is nothing in place. Italy has some amazing and historic landscapes, which could just get trashed. I think that you have taken the right course of action with this disease. Some of the PR about the wheels and bikes, etc, is good, because the more people see things, the more they will think "Ah, yes". It does make people think. Sometimes, we underestimate how useful and clever ordinary people are. They just need the right information given to them in the right way. It is amazing how responsive people are. Sometimes, we treat them with the attitude that they do not know anything, and we pay a price for that.

I think that, at the moment, you have done as good a job as you can. You have the timber measures in place as well, which is important. That dawned on France a little too late, but it is in place here. There are problems that will have to settle down about planting from provenance just down the road. It will not be as simple as that. The fact that it will be an all-Ireland policy is probably a good idea, and I commend you on that as well. You have taken the right steps in a very short space of time, which is what needed to be done.

The Chairperson: OK. There are no further questions. Thank you both for very much for your presentation, your time and your answers, which were very informative and worthwhile.