



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Common Agricultural Policy, Rural
Development Programme, Tuberculosis and
Agrifood: Ministerial Briefing

17 September 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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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 William Irwin
Mr Declan McAleer
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Ian Milne
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Mrs O'Neill	Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development
Ms Rosemary Agnew	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Ms Kate Davey	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Andrew Elliott	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Bert Houston	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Gerry Lavery	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Dr John Speers	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

The Chairperson: I welcome the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Michelle O'Neill, along with Gerry Lavery, deputy secretary; John Speers, acting deputy secretary; Bert Houston, the Chief Veterinary Officer; Andrew Elliott, director of rural payments; and Rosemary Agnew, principal officer. You are all very welcome. We will move to questions once the Minister has briefed us. I remind members that, as agreed, we will follow a format of one question each, followed by a supplementary if required. I have discretion as to what people ask. If you abide by that, members, we will try to get through as much as possible and try to get all your questions asked. If, for some reason, we do not get all your questions asked, we will certainly write to the Minister and her team seeking answers. Without further ado, Minister, the floor is yours.

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Thank you. I am delighted to be here again in front of the Committee. I am will take this in two sections. If you wish, I will run through some introductory comments, take questions and then focus on TB, given the Committee's interest in that subject.

I will kick off with the Agri-Food Strategy Board report 'Going for Growth'. Obviously, I was delighted that we were able to secure the inclusion of agrifood as a priority sector in the North's economic

strategy and the Executive's commitment to develop and implement a longer-term strategic plan for the sector as part of the Programme for Government. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I tasked the board to deliver a growth strategy for the agrifood sector, and it has delivered. The strategy board's vision is to grow a sustainable, profitable and integrated agrifood supply chain, focused on delivering the needs of the market. Obviously, we all aspire to that vision for the industry. You will be aware of the challenging targets set by the Agri-Food Strategy Board: to create 15,000 additional jobs, to grow sales by 60% to £7 billion, to increase sales outside the North to £1.5 billion; and to grow value added to £1 billion. It is good that the industry has a very high level of ambition.

I am pleased that the report recognises the requirement for all parts of the supply chain to be sustainable and profitable. The board has also highlighted the importance of building relationships with new markets. I have long been an advocate of supporting our local produce and increasing awareness of the fantastic high-quality food that is grown, produced and processed here. I am therefore pleased to have the opportunity to visit China later this month, where I will be making a strong case for further exports from the North to that country. I am also planning to host a joint event with the Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC) in late November to highlight the robust systems and processes that we have in place and to promote our local traceable quality-assured meat to new and existing customers.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I have been considering the recommendations of the board, along with relevant colleagues. The report makes over 100 recommendations that cover seven cross-cutting themes and 10 sub-sectors. The number and breadth of the recommendations mean that, inevitably, responsibility for them rests with an equally wide range of organisations and agencies. Over 80 of the recommendations involve the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), either as the lead agency or as a partner in delivery. Since the launch of the plan, all relevant Departments have been assessing the recommendations, including their funding implications. That work is being overseen at senior level by an interdepartmental steering group that is co-chaired by DARD and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and comprises members from the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP); Invest NI; the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL); the Department of the Environment (DOE); the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS); and the Food Standards Agency (FSA). It is through that joint working that we can address some of the challenges that the report presents. For example, a view will have to be taken on the recommendations for structural changes in the way in which we organise marketing and funding for innovation. Careful consideration will also need to be given to the potential for a farm business improvement scheme and how best to incentivise improvements in efficiency and production.

Industry has a key role to play in developing the plan, as well as in its delivery. I understand that the board is reconvening its sectoral subgroups to agree the way forward on the industry-led recommendations. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I plan to seek Executive endorsement for the proposed way forward in response to the board's report in the near future. I look forward to working closely with the strategy board, ministerial colleagues and other stakeholders to deliver on the agreed response to the 'Going for Growth' document.

I will now move to common agricultural policy reform. I am pleased to say that, as the Committee will be aware, political agreement between the EU Council and representatives of the main political groups in the European Parliament was reached on 26 June 2013. Work to reflect that agreement in legal texts is continuing and is expected to conclude by the end of this year. Detailed EU implementing regulations will be worked on early next year. The new system of direct payments will begin on 1 January 2015.

I and others fought hard for changes to the initial CAP reform proposals that were published in November 2011, and it is fair to say that much was achieved during the negotiations, particularly on ensuring flexibility so that all reforms could be implemented at a regional level and all decisions could be independent of those taken in other regions. I am glad to say that amendments simplifying greening and increasing flexibility in moving to flat-rate direct payments were also secured. Clearly, as we move forward in considering implementation, decisions will have to be made on the areas where we have some discretion.

A significant change from the current CAP regime is that the single farm payment will be replaced by three new compulsory payments: the basic payment, greening and the young farmer payment. Additional optional payments are also available. I am pleased to report that work has begun to prepare for the implementation of these complex new reforms. Consultation has already begun on the

pillar 2 issues of the new rural development programme (RDP), and I will launch a consultation on direct payments shortly. I look forward to engaging again with stakeholders and the Committee on the implementation options.

I now turn to the new rural development programme for 2014-20. The current rural development programme has been a key source of support for our farming, environmental and rural sectors over the past six years. Schemes such as the farm modernisation programme and the processing and marketing grant scheme have been very popular, and it is testament to our farm and agrifood businesses that so many have continued to invest and improve against a backdrop of global economic uncertainty. Although there remains much to be achieved under the current programme, my Department is working to develop its successor.

It is crucial that our next rural development programme builds on those successes and that we learn lessons from its predecessor. I want to see a programme that not only meets the needs of our agrifood businesses but significantly strengthens their competitiveness, protects and enhances our environment and enriches the lives of all our rural dwellers. It will be important to construct effective measures in agrienvironment and wider financial support for industry, as well as considering a balanced approach to delivery of the new programme.

It is likely that the available budget may be reduced in real terms, compared with the current programme. It is therefore more important than ever that we produce a programme that is responsive to the needs of industry, as efficient as possible and achieves maximum value for money. Listening to and understanding the needs of our stakeholders is essential to achieving that outcome. The public consultation on the new RDP is an important opportunity for everyone to have their say and help us shape the programme into one that delivers the best outcomes for those who live or work in rural areas.

That concludes my opening comments on some of the key priorities of the Department. I am happy to take questions, as are my officials.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, Minister. As always, members have compiled a list of questions. We will get to the agrifood strategy and the new RDP during questions, but I will lead off by asking you about the more topical issue of the CAP reform negotiations that took place last week with Ministers in the EU on advance payments. Can you give us a wee bit more detail about those negotiations? Were you or DARD involved, and, if so, how?

Mrs O'Neill: It is, obviously, a topical issue. Given the economic climate, farmers want to see part payments, as do I. I want to make that very clear to the Committee. We have been involved in a process of improving systems to a certain point but, unfortunately, we are not there yet. However, a lot of progress has been made over the past number of years, particularly around improving the mapping system, which, as the Committee will be well aware, is an issue that was identified by Europe. It took them a long time to identify it as an issue, but it has been a key priority. The remapping of 750,000 fields has been a massive piece of work. We have also been involved in using technology and trying to encourage people to make their applications online. That also improves things.

We are also ramping up the number of remote control sensing investigations that we do. We have moved from somewhere in the region of 750 to about 1,100. We are working our way through that process. That is going to put us in a better position because Europe dictates that you have to have validation processes completed before you can move to advance payments. I am actively working to reach that position. Unfortunately, this year, we are not in that position, but I can give the Committee an assurance that we are working to make sure that all payments are issued as early as possible so that we can improve our payment timetable and get as many payments as possible out in December and January. We will be publishing a timetable for that in November. People can watch out for that.

There has been a lot of publicity around which other member states are making advance payments. Europe drafted legislation that allows member states to make part payments but, before you can be in a position to do that, you have to complete all your validation processes. It is not true to say that every member state and everywhere else in Europe is doing this; that is factually incorrect. That is not to say that that is OK, but I am just making the point that it is not correct. A number of areas, such as Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, England and Scotland are not making advance payments, but I know that, like ourselves, most areas are working to get to that point.

The Chairperson: Are the countries that are not making advance payments in a position to do so if they wish?

Mrs O'Neill: I will let Andrew pick up on the detail of other countries.

Mr Andrew Elliott (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): Some of them are, but there are downsides to advance payments for systems, as well as upsides. It puts more pressure on a paying agency to complete all its controls in a timely way. You then incur a risk of having committed to do it, but, if you have any delay in your controls, perhaps not being in a position to do so. Some of the very high-performing member states, such as Germany, etc, choose not to do it. In some other member states, such as the South of Ireland, it has become an important part of their practice. They have maximised the use of controls, remote sensing and significantly increased their online systems in order to leave themselves in a position where it is easier for them to commit to it. That is a direction of travel for us.

The Chairperson: Before I hand over to members, let me ask this: how can you assure us and the agriculture businesses out there that Northern Ireland will not be at a disadvantage in Europe, particularly when we are in direct competition with our nearest rivals, the Irish Republic? Can you assure us that we will not be at a disadvantage?

Mrs O'Neill: If you are talking about the competitiveness element, we, obviously, want to support the industry, and we will. I think that the new rural development programme gives us an opportunity to tailor supports that will help us to get that competitive edge. With regard to advance payments, I am working to reach the point at which we will have payments made as early as possible, as I said. I can assure the Committee that we expect to bring payments forward as quickly as possible this year. As I said, the timetable will be published in November.

Mr Swann: Thank you very much, Minister. Thanks for letting me in first, Chair. DEL questions are at 2.00 pm. Minister, some of your officials, along with the Ulster Farmers' Union, met with commissioner Dacian Cioloş earlier today in Brussels. Have you any update on the outcome of that meeting? I know that Jim Nicholson was able to facilitate that.

Mrs O'Neill: They were discussing the active farmer issue. Obviously, we are very keen to continue to drive that issue. It has very much been at the core of all our negotiations over the past number of years. Unfortunately, when we came to the end of the negotiations at the start of the summer, the active farmer issue was still not where we wanted it to be. We have continued to lobby the Commission. Two weeks ago, when I was in Brussels, we took an opportunity to do that, and there was the meeting today that you mentioned. Commissioner Cioloş was certainly in listening mode and, I think, took on board the points that we raised on the active farmer issue. This needs to be dealt with and sorted out. We need money going to active farmers and not to people who are just landowners. I am quite pleased with the progress, and, having spoken to officials after the meeting, I know that they are pretty much pleased with the position that we are now in. We now have other areas to take forward on the advice of commissioner Cioloş.

Mr Swann: I will follow up on definitions, which you mentioned, Minister. Can you clarify where the Department stands on its definition of new entrants versus young farmers in the new scheme? Who will be eligible? There is concern in the country among farmers about whether they should make their sons the head of business now or whether they should wait. Is there any update on that?

Mrs O'Neill: That is a fair enough comment. Obviously, given the age profile of the farming community, we want to be able to encourage new entrants. We want to be able to have the supports in place for young farmers. Rosemary will pick up on the definition.

Ms Rosemary Agnew (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): Mr Swann, as I think you are aware, there are two definitions in the pillar 1 and pillar 2 proposals. The definition in pillar 1 for direct payment support is for a young farmer, under 40, who was set up as head of holding within the previous five years. It also indicates that member states or regions have the opportunity to add additional objective criteria associated with skills or training. The Department may bring that forward in its consultation later. The Minister referred to that. Under pillar 2, there are two definitions. One of them is very restrictive in that a new entrant is defined as someone under 40 who is set up as head of holding for the first time. The second one, which would give them the opportunity to avail themselves of higher grant rates, is that they have been set up as head of holding within the previous five years.

Obviously, the definition of head of holding requires some clarity, and we will be looking in the implementing and delegated Acts for clarity on that. We have already raised that issue. Although I cannot give you a definitive answer, it is something that we are very alert to, and we trying to seek further clarification. We are likely to come forward with a consultation document to seek views on how we define that, moving forward.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Minister and her officials. Chairman, I support what you said earlier — I support the general thrust of trying to get Northern Ireland to a position where it can make advance payments, like other regions.

Minister, you mentioned that 80 of the recommendations in the Agri-Food Strategy Board report fall under the remit of DARD. Obviously, there is also a requirement for funding of £250 million over the next three to seven years. Where are we in relation to an effective implementation plan? Can it be delivered? Who will drive it and who will make it happen?

Mrs O'Neill: As you said, there are very many recommendations and many people who need to come to the table with what they can deliver. There are demands on DARD, DETI, DEL, and the industry itself. I am pleased, from the industry's perspective, that the board is getting together again to see how industry will deliver. Minister Foster and I are actively working our way through the recommendations. We are looking at how we can introduce the supports that the document asks for. To my mind, a lot of the recommendations are doable, including the financial requirements. We are serious about growing the agrifood industry and the Executive have now put a focus on supporting it and recognise it is a key industry. Therefore, when Arlene and I bring our action plan to the Executive table, probably in late October, I expect that we will get agreement for the measures that we will outline. We want to be responsive. This was not just a nice piece of work that we had the industry do. It is work that is the result of industry and government working in partnership, and its success will be dependent on both partners delivering.

Mr Byrne: Further to that, will the Agri-Food Strategy Board be stood down? Does it have a role in implementation? Secondly, the most important part of the food chain is the first link, which, at the moment, is the farmer. How we will we ensure that they can meet the growth targets that are proposed?

Mrs O'Neill: One of the key things to have come out of the document is that there is recognition that there is only one supply chain. That is very positive. In order for the whole supply chain to be successful, we need to value equally everyone who takes part in it, and that includes the farmer. We have heard the debate about farm gate prices and that the farmer is the person who is continually squeezed. This work shows that there is a will for that not to be the case in the future. From DARD's perspective, we now have to shape the supports that we can take forward under the new rural development programme. We must look at the challenges that are set out, those that we gather when we are consulting with stakeholders, and also those put by the Agri-Food Strategy Board, which will be in place for another two years to see through the implementation of the plan. After that, we can make a call about whether it is needed.

Mr Byrne: Is there a need for some regulation or requirement to ensure that the primary producer gets his fair share of the cake?

Mrs O'Neill: We are all mindful that people should get their fair share of the cake. I will meet with the groceries code adjudicator on Monday week to raise that point. It remains to be seen how effective that meeting will be. I will certainly be pressing that case with her.

Mr Irwin: I declare an interest as a farmer who receives a single farm payment. On advance payments, we are all aware that, in recent years, the problem has been with those farms that have had inspections and have had to wait for months on end — maybe six or seven months — before they receive their payment. In the event of advance payments becoming available, will those farmers that have had inspections receive an advance payment?

Mr A Elliott: The answer is no. Unless the inspection has been completed and the claim validated, they will not receive an advance payment.

Mr Irwin: So, in other words, the major problem that exists for those farmers will not be addressed by advance payments. Is that correct?

Mr A Elliott: It will be addressed in other ways.

Mrs O'Neill: Do want us to elaborate on that?

Mr Irwin: Yes, I would not mind if you were to elaborate on that.

Mr A Elliott: A major part of the challenge facing us over the past couple of years has been implementing the changes to controls while, at the same time, not allowing the payments to slip any further. Last year, we gained on the year before; we saw improvements. If we can keep building on that and get more of the inspections completed in December and January, it means that inspections will cease to become a cause of concern for farmers — other than the content of the inspection itself. We need to get to a point where the lion's share of inspections occur much more quickly, alongside the other payments. We can achieve that without advance payments.

Mr Irwin: One concern for many farmers is that farms had been inspected and were given a clean bill of health, but it still took ages for the payment to come through. In my eyes, there should be a simplified system. Where an inspection is clear, that payment should be fast-tracked. It should not be sitting in a pile for months on end before it is looked at by officials.

Mr A Elliott: We are looking at that, particularly in the context of the control of remote sensing cases this year. Some of those will come through clear and, hopefully, payments will go through very quickly.

Miss M McIlveen: What is your long-term vision for the Northern Ireland fishing fleet in the context of the 'Going for Growth' programme?

Mrs O'Neill: As you can see in the document, fishing was a key component of the discussions. Put simply, we want to see a sustainable and thriving fishing industry in the future. Some of the targets in the document will obviously be relevant to the fishing industry. Given the fact that we are in the middle of common fisheries policy (CFP) reform, that and the European Fisheries Fund (EFF) — all those issues — will be key vehicles and tools to enable us to support the fishing industry in the future.

Miss M McIlveen: Can I refer you to your statement in July, when you announced assistance for the fishing fleet? You allocated approximately £500,000 for immediate need. Can you share some of the detail of how that money has been allocated? What is the average share to the boats likely to be? Have you received any feedback from the industry in relation to that fund, positive or negative?

Mrs O'Neill: John will pick up on the detail, but, obviously, that was welcomed by the industry. It was in a particularly negative situation, given the weather. As you said in the Chamber, prevailing winds and other issues were relevant. John, will you pick up on the feedback on that? Have you a breakdown of the figures?

Dr John Speers (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): I do, Minister. The scheme is about providing support and assistance to cover landing fees and harbour dues at the three fishing harbours. Information was gathered from the NI Fishery Harbour Authority on individual boats, fees and harbour dues. Some 300 letters inviting claims were issued to the fishing industry over August and into September. So far, 78 claims have been received since those 300 letters of entitlement inviting claims were sent out.

Miss M McIlveen: In that statement, you also mentioned that a loan fund was being explored. Where are you with that?

Dr Speers: We are still in discussions about how the loan fund might operate and the extent to which the industry itself is in a position to make repayments. There is some discussion with the industry about the shape and form of that loan fund, and, obviously, we are in discussions with colleagues in DFP about the fund's structure.

Mrs O'Neill: When we bring forward a scheme, we need to be in a position where the industry is able to avail itself of it. If the industry does not have the ability to match fund or to make the investment that it needs to take forward the scheme, that would be an issue. It is not something that you can turn around very quickly, but, as John says, we are working on it.

The other issue is that we are in the lead-in to December, when we will go out again for negotiations. I intend to meet the fishing industry over the next short while to identify our priorities. We will have our science published at the end of September or the start of October, and that will obviously give us, if you like, the ammunition to go to Brussels and back up the claims that we will make about rollovers or increases in catch.

Mr McAleer: Minister, did you consider a capital grant scheme as part of the new rural development programme?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes; that has certainly come up time and again, particularly on the back of the snow crisis. When I was out and about, visiting a lot of farms, I saw the poor condition of some of the farm buildings. I think that there is a lot of scope in the new rural development programme to consider whether we can bring forward a capital grant scheme to assist farmers in improving their buildings, outhouses and what have you. That issue is coming up throughout all the negotiations and in most of the discussions and meetings that we are having with stakeholders. People want to see investment in that area, and I am certainly very keen for that to happen. It is fair to say that I will wait until the end of the consultation on the rural development programme before I make any decisions, and I will talk to the Committee about it at that stage. I believe that that is needed, and I am very keen to bring something forward.

Mr Milne: Thank you, Minister, for coming today. In respect of international trade, can you tell us more about the trip to China that is planned for next week?

Mrs O'Neill: I am going to China on Sunday. We are flying to Beijing and then on to Ningxia. I will have the opportunity to speak at the Sino-European Agricultural Seminar, the whole focus of which is food safety and traceability. I think that that is a brilliant opportunity for me to go out and talk up our excellent traceability in food production and to build the relationships that we are trying to establish with China. While I am there, I will also have the opportunity to raise the issue of barriers to trade in pork products. I am delighted that we have been able to secure a meeting with the director general there who is responsible for approving our local pork plants and allowing them to export to China. That is a key part of my short visit. While I am there for, I think, four days of meetings, I will really talk up what we have to offer, because we obviously have a very good message.

The Chairperson: Minister, we wish you all the best in your endeavours — adventures, maybe — in China. Of course, it represents a massive opportunity for our industry. Some of our processors are looking to open up new markets in those countries, so it is vital that we are out there, pushing Northern Ireland's needs. May I bring you back to the agrifood strategy? I am a Ballymena man, so it is all about money. We have £400 million, which the strategy asks the Government to provide. We also have £1.3 billion, which industry is to provide. My questions are about the content and origin of that money. Can we be assured — again, it has yet to be decided by you and the Executive — that that £400 million will be new government money, not rural development or European money but Northern Ireland produce? On the flip side, what is your definition of, or what do you see as, the industry? If it has to inject £1.3 billion into the plan, have you any concerns about capacity? Banks would say that, at present, they do not see industry capacity to generate that amount of money in loans, because the current capital is simply not worth that. If industry cannot inject £1.3 billion but the Government put in £400 million and, ultimately, some of the recommendations fail, where do we go from there, and what do we do? To make that more concise: where is the government money coming from? Is it new? What is industry, and how is it ever going to raise that capital?

Mrs O'Neill: The definition of "industry" includes everybody, from farmers through to processors to the people who make the packaging for the agrifood industry. I suppose that it is a very broad definition. I have no doubt that it will be very challenging for the industry to come up with the financial contributions that have been suggested. It will be very challenging for the Executive to come up with what has been suggested, given the economic climate. It will be a mixture of moneys: the rural development programme, because some of the asks are about supporting farmers, capital buildings and improving people's farms. It can be a practical way to help farmers to be more efficient.

Things such as agrifood loan schemes, business support schemes and the processing and marketing grant scheme are all positive contributions. A lot of the material in the agrifood strategy report is not necessarily new. It could be about how we do business and how we tailor support. We will take a step back and look at all the avenues and envelopes that are open to us and see what we can do, particularly with European moneys and the rural development programme. The Executive have a target for Horizon 2020 and increasing our drawdowns for research and development and innovation.

That is another avenue where we are so not reaching our potential. To me, a range of funding sources will come from different areas. Gerry, is there anything to add to that on finance?

Mr Lavery: There are a couple of points. We have a number of processes ahead of us. We have a budget for 2015-16, and we then have the four-year Budget beyond that. That gives us the national public expenditure round that we will be bidding into. We cannot pre-empt the Executive's decisions on that national process. In parallel, the Minister has launched consultations on the rural development programme, which spans that period.

You are posing two questions. First, why would you not use European funding if you can get it as part of meeting the Agri-Food Strategy Board's demand for, say, £250 million? Secondly, if you do not use it for that, you give yourself and the industry a headache. How do you absorb that European funding? It is sitting there saying that it needs to be drawn down. How are you going to absorb it if you do not absorb it on the most important and highest priority action? So there is a very strong case that I think would command support not only in the Department but in the Executive and within finance, if you were to target more European funding for the agrifood sector, which has outperformed any other sector during the recession. We would be cutting off our nose to spite our face if we said that all this has to be new and additional money and that none of it can be European. You would diminish your case.

The Chairperson: Please do not think that that is what I am saying. To be clear: you are saying that European funding is falling on the industry side for the industry to draw down.

Mr Lavery: That is what is known as a syllogism: not all cats are grey. You have a very strong case, and you should certainly be taking advantage of that to bid for European funding for the industry. However, that does not mean that only the industry will get European funding. There will be other commanding cases for European funding, and some of that is set out in the consultation.

The Chairperson: To be clear: with every funding stream that is available now and is planned for the future that industry can glean or draw down, it is firmly on the industry side of the bargain, which is £1.3 billion. However, with the £400 million from the Executive, if that is the agreed figure and if the Executive can glean new funding from Europe, that is fine and good, and we should do that. However, surely we are not saying that the money that we have drawn down already is that £400 million.

Mrs O'Neill: We will be drawing down the money. We are out to consultation at the minute on the rural development programme. We will listen to what everybody says, including the views of stakeholders, on how the money could be spent. It comes back to my original point: it could simply be about better ways of doing things or tailoring support. We need to be open-minded and creative about how we spend the money. I may be picking up the fact that you are fearful that there will be losers. I do not see that being the case. In shaping the new programme, we will be very mindful of the needs of the whole rural community and not just those involved in business.

Mr Byrne: I welcome your answer, Minister, about the grant aid scheme for farm buildings. It is fair to say that farmers feel that some of the rural development money should be directed towards that.

My question is about the agrifood strategy and the funding that the Chairman mentioned. How are we going to achieve the growth rates in primary farm production if herd numbers are falling, and there is the possibility of a disconnect between area-based payments and stocking rates? Have we finalised whether we want the relationship between stocking rates and area-based payments?

Ms R Agnew: I think that you are asking whether the Minister will bring forward a coupled support scheme. I do not want to take away from what the Minister might wish to say, but I think that she will be consulting on that. It is a recommendation of the Agri-Food Strategy Board that the Government should consider bringing forward a coupled support scheme and, in deciding what to do with area-based payments and pillar 1, the Minister will, hopefully, consult on that shortly.

Mr Byrne: It has not been refined just yet?

Mrs O'Neill: It is an option that is open to us as a result of the negotiation, but I would not take a call on that until such time as I have finished the consultation and listened to people's views. There was some consultation at the start of the previous programme, and, as I was led to believe, it was not

favoured. However, I am open to listening to people's views as part of the consultation and to decide whether we want to use the option that is open to us.

Mr Byrne: It is important to keep our eye on the ball. If we want to maintain and sustain herd numbers, particularly in less-favoured areas (LFAs), there will have to be some sort of coupling.

Mr Irwin: I declare an interest as a farmer. I would welcome a farm business improvement scheme. It has been many years since there has been such a scheme. Within that, there needs to be a land improvement scheme. That is important because we have had a few very bad years of wet weather, and land damage has been very high across Northern Ireland.

In the past, there was much criticism of schemes that were rolled out by the Department. Will the Department give us an assurance that it will look at how Scotland and England, for instance, roll out their grant schemes? I am told that those schemes are very workable. Will the Department assure us that there will not be layer on layer of red tape, as has been the case in the past, in particular with the farm modernisation scheme for which people had to apply as many as three times but were not successful? That was very unfair.

Mrs O'Neill: There are many pressures on the Department, particularly around CAP reform, remapping, and so on. If there is an easy way to do something, and someone else has done it, I do not want to reinvent the wheel. We will certainly look at other areas, and I know that Scotland has a capital grant scheme. If there are better or simpler ways to do things, we will not be shy about looking at them.

Mr Irwin: It is important that we look at other areas.

The Chairperson: I want to ask you about CAP reform and all its complications. I know that the Department has given much serious thought to that issue and to the RDP and its complications. However, you have fundamentals: pillar 1 and pillar 2. Have you come to a decision on that, or are you content with the process of consultation to date on the RDP, all the issues around the CAP and the tensions between pillar 1 and pillar 2?

Mrs O'Neill: The simple answer is no. I have not yet come to a position on it. I am in listening mode, and I will take on board the views that are expressed as part of the consultation. We are working with a reduced budget for pillar 1 and pillar 2. We were already unhappy with our allocation for pillar 2, so there are issues. We will have to be creative about how we shape the new programme, given the reduced amount of money. I do not have a position at the moment. I am open to listening to views on the way forward, and it would be wrong to say anything different at this stage. I have an open mind.

The Chairperson: It seems that the system for the new rural development programme is completely different from the axes that we currently have. We had problems with axis 3, particularly at the start, in getting the system set up and running to deliver money. It is fair to say that if you judge the first half of the programme against the second half, you will get totally different readings. How can you ensure that, whatever programme is put in place to deliver the funding and which is similar to axis 3 at present, we can get a rolling start and do not have to spend a year or a year and a half trying to second-guess the Department, Europe, all the auditors, the remit and the entire framework? Can you assure us that we can reach a point at which we start to deliver money?

Mrs O'Neill: That is certainly the intention. As you know, dealing with Europe is very complex, and they will not even be in a position to agree member states' plans until, perhaps, the middle of next year. When I was in Brussels two weeks ago, I took the opportunity to speak to people from DG Agri — I think that it was Jean-Bernard, I am not sure

Ms R Agnew: It was Jean-Bernard Benhaiem.

Mrs O'Neill: I spoke to the relevant people. *[Laughter.]* I asked them whether they would engage with us, even though our programme is in draft form, and work with us on it so that we are not sitting at the end waiting for Europe to agree a plan that we have worked up only for them to come back with problems that would delay the start of the programme. We are mindful of that and the problems that we encountered in the previous programme.

Ms R Agnew: The only missing link in what the Minister said is that we are still waiting for finalisation of the legal texts. It will probably be the end of this year before the primary legal texts are finalised, and, thereafter, there are implementing and delegated acts to be finalised. Each time we hear anything from Brussels, the timeline for agreeing those texts seems to be extending, and, until all the legal text is agreed, it will give the Minister significant challenges in implementing pillar 1 and pillar 2.

The Chairperson: We will move on to the second part of the meeting, which is on bovine TB. We welcome Kate Davey, the acting assistant secretary in DARD.

Mrs O'Neill: When I addressed the Committee last January, I said that, in light of the October 2012 TB herd incidence peak of 7.46%, I had directed officials to bring forward to me a package of possible additional measures by the end of June to strengthen our current TB programme. Substantial work had been completed to identify and evaluate new measures that would enhance our current TB control programme, and I will return to the package of measures later. I am happy to say that, since that peak, TB herd incidence has fallen to 6.63% by 31 July. We welcome that, but there are no grounds to be complacent.

Goal 3 of my Department's 2012-2020 strategic plan is to enhance animal, fish and plant health and animal welfare on an all-island basis. The plan lists one of the measures of success as a clear direction for the eradication of tuberculosis, and one of the key actions is to work with stakeholders to develop a long-term strategy for the eradication of TB in cattle. In addition, the Agri-Food Strategy Board endorsed that measure by recommending in the recent report that the Government and industry work together to support a range of animal health and welfare measures, including an agreed strategy to deliver a significant reduction in bovine TB.

With all that in mind, I believe that the time is now right to establish a mechanism to progress that objective even further. I will establish a Government/industry strategic partnership to develop a long-term strategy to eradicate TB from the cattle population here. Work is ongoing to determine how that strategic partnership should be established. However, I intend that the group will be up and running in the next couple of months. Although TB eradication will obviously be a long-term strategy, the group will be given a clear deadline by which to develop the strategy. I will also task it to produce an action plan to implement the strategy, and that plan should outline the cost of implementing the various elements, detail how those elements will be funded and agree who will lead on their implementation. I want the strategy to be produced within 12 months of the establishment of the partnership. However, stakeholders will have to be realistic and accept that, as everybody in this Committee knows, there is no quick fix to TB and that it is likely to take a substantial time to achieve eradication here. I am sure that you are aware that the draft English strategy estimates that it will take 25 years before the whole of England is free from bovine TB.

I want the strategy to be all-embracing and to address all the issues, such as TB compensation, improving biosecurity, improving communications with farmers and vets, and developing our ability to address the wildlife factor. The strategy should also seek to re-energise the relationships with all industry stakeholders and consider, as appropriate, the enhancement of primary and secondary legislation and consider other means to tackle and eradicate the disease. Although I do not want to pre-empt what will be in the long-term strategy, I want to be in a position to support and help to implement the various elements. To that end, my officials will try to ensure that everything is put in place to support any proposals that come forward. I have asked, for example, that we ensure that the next rural development programme includes measures that allow us to provide training and equipment to help farmers to improve their biosecurity. I also propose a change in secondary legislation to allow trained laypersons to vaccinate badgers for TB. That would allow, for example, environmental organisations or interested farmers to vaccinate badgers under licence on their own land, should that be part of a long-term strategy. I should emphasise that such measures are to facilitate the implementation of the strategy, not to pre-empt its outcome. Any proposed changes to legislation, of course, will be subject to the normal scrutiny by this Committee and to full public consultation.

The strategic approach will complement our annual EU Commission-approved TB eradication programme, which details the current testing regime and describes the current policy and research context. However, as it is an annual programme, it does not provide the longer-term strategic direction, so the partnership's work will provide that additional dimension and support and will help ensure continuing EU Commission approval and funding.

I said that I would return to the package of possible additional measures. In the light of the imminent creation of the government/industry strategic partnership, I do not believe that the time is right to consult on a package of additional controls. However, that may be necessary in the long term in order

to strengthen the current TB programme. I therefore intend to have the strategic partnership assess the merits of each proposed measure and to consider whether any other immediate actions can be taken and whether any should be added to the package before it is finalised for consultation. That would represent an early, time-limited aspect of the strategic partnership's work. Following the partnership's assessment of the measures, my officials will present the proposals to the Committee prior to public consultation.

I intend to progress as a priority action the introduction of high biosecure alternative control herds (ACHs) before the coming winter. Those enhanced biosecure herds will be able to receive cattle moved under licence from TB restricted herds, which is something that the industry has been looking for to help address overstocking and fodder constraints following TB breakdown. Cattle will leave ACH premises only when they are going directly to slaughter.

From January next year, I intend to tighten proportionately the cross-compliance rules to encourage timely TB herd testing. From 1 January, a financial penalty will be applied to any herd keepers in the 1% selected for cross-compliance inspection with TB herd tests more than one month overdue. I shall review the position again in mid-2014 to consider whether any further tightening is appropriate and/or whether it should be applied to all herd keepers rather than the 1% selected for inspection. I have also decided not to proceed with the introduction of TB lay testing at this time. However, I will reassess that following the wider TB testing procurement exercise. I wish to seek, through the new re-tendering process with private veterinary practitioners (PVPs), to achieve an enhanced delivery of the TB testing service alongside the provision of general and bespoke biosecurity advice. I remain committed to the test and vaccinate or remove (TVR) wildlife intervention research. The study that is designed for TVR is very complex and, obviously, vital. We will have only one chance with TVR, and we have to get it absolutely right. There are a number of preparatory phases that must be completed before the main elements of TVR can begin. I can advise Committee members that we have made a lot of good progress with those plans.

The results of modelling will help to ensure that the subsequent design is scientifically robust and identifies the most appropriate size and location of areas for inclusion in the study. Good progress has also been made with the badger sett surveying work. Some 75% of the Banbridge and Rathfriland area and 61% of the area near Castlewellan have already been surveyed. We will soon invite other landowners to participate. Surveying of the remainder of those areas will commence again later in the autumn.

The badger ecological studies to gather baseline monitoring data on normal badger movements are also planned to commence later this year. That information will help us monitor whether there is any adverse perturbation effect during the TVR study.

Work is ongoing on the outline business case. When it has been completed and assessed by DARD economists, it will be submitted to DFP. Subject to DFP approval of the business case and securing the necessary licences and funding, the actual TVR fieldwork will begin in mid-May 2014.

I appreciate that that was a lot of information, Chairperson. I apologise because I probably should have got a paper to you on what I have just outlined. I am happy to get that sent to the Committee before the end of your meeting. I am happy to take questions on the broad points.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, Minister. There was a lot of content in that. It would be good to see and digest it before any of us makes any real judgements on it. When you started to talk about your new measures, one thing that struck me was that I was not hearing anything about TVR, so I thought that it had perhaps been left aside. I am glad that you came back to TVR at the end of your presentation. My initial thought was, "Have we not been engaged with industry over the past number of years anyway?" Is that not what developed the test and vaccinate or remove scheme in the first place?

Mrs O'Neill: We have been involved with industry. That has been vital to us in the production of the eradication plans that we submit to Europe. The additional problem that we have is that that is an annual plan — we submit it year on year — and my focus has been on trying to take some action through the TVR approach that we have announced and are working on. Now that that is well under way and progress is being made, it is important that we take a step back and look at the longer-term planning around how we deal with TB. I had always had that intention, because we stated in the 2012-2020 strategic plan that we needed to look at a strategic plan around how we tackle TB. It is about building on the successes that we have had. Yes, there has been good partnership-working, but this group needs to come together and must include all the key people such as those from the

farming community and farming unions, and, from an environmental perspective, vets. A wide range of people needs to get involved in the partnership.

I do not feel that we are duplicating work that is already there. We are enhancing that work and finding a real focus for tackling TB strategically. England has a 25-year plan, while we have an eradication plan that is submitted year on year, but I think that we need to build on it a lot more. There is other positive work going on, particularly around TVR.

The Chairperson: I can agree that we need a long-term plan or strategy to tackle this. Perhaps not having one has been a failure of the Department in the past. We seem to have had testing upon testing, and you have heard me recite this so many times: all that we seem to do is measure the disease through testing and more testing. I gripe when I hear that we now have a new system in place to strategise on a new strategy that should be delivered in 12 months' time and should answer some of our questions, after which we will hopefully be able to move forward and learn from all the lessons from the past.

Minister, I believe that we need action, and what annoys me with TVR is that, although surveying and research is of course very important, farmers and the industry are asking me when anything will be implemented to the point at which they can see advancement and, out of that, a reduction in bovine TB. That cannot be seen as yet.

Mrs O'Neill: The Committee has obviously focused a lot on that area. I have heard your discussion on some of the measures that have happened to date, and I share farmers' frustration that this is a problem, but, as the Committee found through its own research, this is a complex disease. There is no off-the-shelf solution that I can take and say, "We will do this, that and the other, and that will solve the problem." Unfortunately, that is not the case. As I said, I think that some positive work is being done. We have to do the research. TVR is new. It is unique and is something that we are doing that is different from other areas that have tried and tested, or are in the process of trying and testing, other potential solutions. We will carry on with that work, but, to me, it is on top of the work that is already being taken forward, such as the EU eradication plan that allows us to draw down £5 million a year to carry forward our plans. I do not think that you can look at it from one single perspective. We will have to look at the whole ambit of ways to reach a situation whereby we can drive out the disease. That means looking at absolutely everything again. Everything is on the table; nothing is ruled out. Let us get this group together that can build on the partnership-working that has happened to date, let us make sure that all the players are around the table and let us have a longer-term vision that may enable us to say that we have a target to drive out bovine TB by a certain date. I really want the group to consider a longer-term vision.

The Chairperson: Why a new group? Do we not have something in place that can start the work almost immediately? You have the group that has worked out the voluntary scheme for bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD). I take it that that group covers all aspects of industry. Why do we need to start afresh with a new group? Surely we have people in the TVR working group whom we can progress.

Mrs O'Neill: It will be those people, but the group will also contain additional people. I will let Kate come in if there is anything to add to that. It will be made up of those people who have the expertise and who have been involved in this area of work. We have the badger stakeholder group, and the people on it have the expertise in this area. However, this is us now saying, "As opposed to looking towards just the annual plan that we have submitted, let us also sit back and take a longer-term look."

Ms Kate Davey (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): Some of those people whom you mention will be key to us, but we will also have new people in there. It will be about bringing this group together. Rather than having that group as our stakeholders, it is about a joint shared plan and a vision. We are moving it up a gear to give industry ownership and a determination in how they want TB to be eradicated. It is about trying to change the emphasis and giving industry as much ownership as government so that we get to where we need to be, which, ultimately, is eradication.

Mr Byrne: I welcome what the Minister has said. However, there is a question about the length of time that it will take before we see any meaningful results from TVR. Owen Paterson said that he sees great merit in what the Republic is doing to tackle bovine TB. I would like to hear from Bert about work done in the Republic compared with work done here.

Lastly, I am forced to ask this question: is there a tolerable or acceptable level of bovine TB? The reactors go back into the food chain, and our food processors put out largely minced beef and burger

meat. Is there an acceptable, tolerable level of incidence? The public purse is paying for this. Some people are benefiting, but there is no real desire to tackle bovine TB.

Mrs O'Neill: I will pick up on some of those points. In the TVR approach, it is so important that we get the preparatory work and modelling right, have the badger surveys and start off on a very strong footing. If that is wrong, the whole work that we are doing will be wrong. That is why we have had to take a staged approach, and Kate may want to come in on that. That is the crux of it, and that is why we have had to do it this way. It is important that we get the research right.

Ms Davey: There are windows of opportunity for us to do the work on TVR. Although I appreciate that it has taken some time, we can do the badger sett survey, which we need to do, only when there is no vegetation. Therefore, we are limited in our time available. We had to stop that work in April or May. We will recommence it over the winter when the vegetation dies back and allows us to complete the survey. We can do the ecology work, which involves tagging the badgers with collars, only before the closed season. That work will be done between now and December when the close season starts. We cannot interfere with the badgers during the close season, which runs from December through to May. Although we would love to progress it more quickly, there are things that we just cannot do, because we are not allowed to do them. However, we are progressing what is a valuable piece of work that will inform the long-term strategy.

You talked about what is happening in the South and what Owen Paterson said. We are monitoring the South's approach and the English approach. There is no point in duplicating those approaches, but we will draw on the lessons that they learn and build those into our strategy. We are taking a longer-term look at everything.

You also asked about tolerance. The Minister has said that her ultimate aim is eradication, so it is not about accepting a tolerable level of TB and allowing taxpayers to pay for that. It is about hitting TB on the head once and for all and moving towards eradication.

Mrs O'Neill: The agrifood strategy report states clearly that the industry is calling for a partnership to eradicate the disease, so even the industry does not recognise that there is a tolerable level of TB.

Mr Byrne: What about the comment that the reactors go into the food chain and that there is no great concern about that? Is there a climate of acceptance?

Mr Bert Houston (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): The Food Standards Agency is in charge of food safety policy. It is content that, under its rules, reactors can go into the food chain. Any meat that receives the FSA stamp of approval is safe to eat. That is not the issue. The real issue with TB is that it is a trade issue. It is not just that the taxpayer has to pick up the tab on an ongoing basis but that TB is a trade barrier for our live cattle. Therefore, we are keen to eradicate the disease. It is not a case of being prepared to tolerate it.

Mr Byrne: OK, Chairman. I am in listening mode.

Mr McAleer: Minister, will you tell us more about the role of alternative control herds in tackling TB?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes. Kate can back me up if I miss anything out. ACHs are something that the industry has been asking for. Farmers who have a closed herd because of a breakdown have difficulty feeding those animals and keeping them on the farm. This will be an opportunity for the animals to be moved under licence. It takes away that additional pressure on the farming community. I know that it is something that the industry has been wanting for some time. Hopefully, it is something that will be very much welcomed. Is that basically it, Kate?

Ms Davey: That is basically it. We have been working with industry. We have been trying to strike a balance, and we want to try to accommodate the farmer who is under pressure because his herd is closed down and his animals are not yet ready for slaughter. We are also putting controls in place to ensure that the general Northern Ireland herd population is not affected. We will have strict biosecure units that will control TB and move directly to slaughter.

It really is a balancing act. We have done some significant work with industry and have really progressed ACHs well.

The Chairperson: I will let you come in again, Declan, but on that —

Mr McAleer: That is OK.

The Chairperson: When one speaks to farmers, it is not only the awful stigma of TB that one hears about but the fact that farmers cannot trade their way out of the difficulties that we have faced over the years. We have been hit with many crises over the years. They were placed in a straitjacket because their cattle were down with TB. Anything that relieves that pressure is something that the Committee and I will welcome.

Ms Davey: I emphasise that it is not a new trading pattern for herds that are broken down. It is about allowing farmers, when there is a need, on a case-by-case basis, to sell animals to the likes of those units. We just want to be clear that it is not a new way for farmers to trade; it is to give them a viable outlet for the animals if they are not ready for slaughter.

Mr Irwin: My question was going to be on BVD, but I will ask one on TB. I declare an interest: a small number of animals in my herd are affected. I am aware that you, on only one occasion a year, are allowed to transfer animals to another herd that is infected. Is that right? A farmer whose herd is infected with TB can sell animals to another herd that is infected, but I think that you can do that only once.

Ms Davey: There is no real protocol for that. From a strict disease point of view, when a herd is broken down, one of the first controls is no movement. There is no effective movement. In the past, when a herd has been under significant pressure, there has been the opportunity on a one-off basis to move animals, but that is not an accepted way of doing it. As I said, it will not be a new trading pattern. It is for farmers under pressure.

Mr Houston: We try to limit the number of moves from a restricted herd under that arrangement to encourage the farmer, if he is going to make the move, to get as many of those animals off his farm in one tranche. If he continues to feed animals to another farm, he potentially continues to feed infection. If he does it just once, that clears it up for us. That does not mean that we will not do it again if the need arises, but that is reason for doing so only once. It is not a written rule but an indication that that is what we prefer.

Mr Irwin: I welcome the fact that there is a badger sett survey and that a scheme is in place, albeit late. The previous Minister announced in 2008 that there would be a wildlife survey. In my eyes, it has taken too long, and that is not getting at the Minister. The Department is more to blame than the Minister. However, it has taken for ever and a day to get there.

Departmental vets will not come out and admit it in the papers but in private discussions they openly admit to me that badgers are a real problem. The Department has to get to grips with the issue. TB will not be resolved in Northern Ireland without the badger situation being resolved. Most senior vets in the Department would admit to that privately.

Ms O'Neill: I do not think it is any secret that there is an issue with badgers, given the incidence that we have of TB. However, we have to remember that the badger is a protected species, so we have to strike a balance on the measures that we are moving forward. That is why the TVR approach is, in my opinion, the best approach, because no healthy badger is harmed. We are removing those that are not healthy, and that is the best approach. I know that you missed the start of my presentation, but what we are talking about now is a strategic partnership with industry and government, and about having a longer-term plan alongside all the other things that we are doing on TB.

Mr Irwin: BVD needs dealt with. It is a problem, there is no doubt about that. There is no compensation for the first animal in the Irish Republic, but the farmer is compensated for any other animals thereafter. Have the Department's proposals looked at that? There needs to be some form of compensation to deal with BVD effectively and to ensure that affected animals are taken out of the system.

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, absolutely. Dealing with production diseases is a key area of work that we have to be involved with, so I was pleased when the animal health and welfare group got together. We have had around eight months of the voluntary scheme, and I think that officials are coming today to talk to you about that.

The Chairperson: Straight after this.

Mrs O'Neill: Straight after this presentation, so you will have a chance to have a more in-depth conversation. We are looking towards bringing in a mandatory scheme, because, that way, we can get to the position in which we can hopefully drive out that production disease, which is costing farmers a fortune.

Mr Houston: That is quite right. We need to look at what we can do to make the scheme successful, because it is important that it be successful.

The Chairperson: Minister, once again, thank you very much for your time. I have not finished with you, but I just wanted to thank you. We appreciate the time that you are spending with us. The Committee having a good link with the Minister and the Department will always be a good thing for Northern Ireland. Now that you are in the mood for sharing and working along with the industry — *[Laughter.]*

Mrs O'Neill: I knew that a "but" was coming.

The Chairperson: — on the new strategy, why have we not had sight of the County Down biosecurity survey that was conducted by the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) all those years ago? That was never published. What is there to hide?

Ms Davey: There is absolutely nothing to hide. The report is literally just being finalised. We have not yet even given it to the Minister, because we have not got the final report from AFBI. However, we are very hopeful that it will be finalised within a matter of weeks and sent to the Minister, and, no doubt, the Minister will be happy to share it.

Mrs O'Neill: I shall send a copy to the Committee.

The Chairperson: Neither the Minister nor the Committee has had sight of that report. Perhaps you have had eyes on the report, and that may put you in a bad position, but how will it assist TVR? Will it assist TVR?

Ms Davey: It will assist a number of things. It will assist the long-term strategy. We are looking at only a small area of County Down, but there is no reason to believe that that area is not an accurate reflection of the rest of the Province. We can look at that and it can feed into the strategy. The Minister already said that we are trying to ensure that the next rural development programme has measures in place that allow us to provide training to farmers on biosecurity and to see whether we can help farmers with capital spend on equipment to ensure that their farms are biosecure. Those measures are to address comments in the draft report. I think that that is probably fair to say.

Although the report has not yet come into the public domain, your domain or the Minister's domain, officials are trying to pre-empt what is coming out of it, and to build that in. It will very much inform and help the strategy, as opposed to TVR.

The Chairperson: Minister, you have today given us new figures for TVR — 75% and 61% of land surveyed in two areas. We heard alarming figures a number of weeks ago about farmers who had yet to respond to the Department. Is that not worrying? How do we rectify that? Bovine TB is something that has plagued the farming industry for many, many years, and it has attached a real stigma and trauma to farmers. You would think that they would be jumping over themselves to get involved in TVR.

Mrs O'Neill: Quite a significant number of farmers have come forward. One of the particular problems that we have is the area that we are surveying. Farmers there were impacted on by the snow. I think that people had other things on their mind — there were immediate problems. We intend to, or we have already —

Ms Davey: We are just about to —

Mrs O'Neill: We are just about to contact those people again. Hopefully, they will be in a better position to be able to respond. I mainly put it down to the fact that they were impacted on by the snow and, as such, had other things on their mind. After we issue the new letters, we will hopefully be in a better position to not have such a low turnaround.

The Chairperson: That will be vital.

Ms Davey: I will add to that. That will be the first step in what we are going to do. We will also be contacting the people who have not responded and the people who have said no. We will contact them, with a view to seeing whether there is anything we can do to alleviate their concerns. For example, why have they said no? That will be done through visit or telephone contact. We intend to maximise as much of the area as possible. Although people have initially said no, we need to get to grips with why they said no. We will not necessarily be trying to put them under pressure to change their mind, but we will look at their concerns.

There is perhaps a concern that there will be DARD inspectors involved. However, it will not be DARD inspectors but AFBI. They are there for one thing and one thing only, and that is to get out the message that we need to get out. AFBI will be there to identify whether there are badgers on the farmers' ground and how many setts they have. That is it. It is not about DARD snooping about. Therefore, it is about trying to get that message out.

The Chairperson: Yes, there is obviously a trust/fear factor to it.

Is the Department responsive to the political fallout in England? Are you aware? Is it something that you are worried or concerned about? Could that have an effect? How do you deal with that, if it is having an effect?

Mrs O'Neill: Do you mean regarding people responding?

The Chairperson: Regarding the political fallout from the badger cull.

Mrs O'Neill: Obviously it is an issue. That is why it would be very difficult for us to go down that route. As we always used to say, we would end up in court. It would never go anywhere.

The Chairperson: Is it impacting on the responses to TVR?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not know whether I would put it down to that, to be honest. I believe that it is just the timing. As I said, we will be in a better position to say whether that is right in about three or four weeks' time.

The Chairperson: No other members have questions. Thank you, Minister, and your staff for coming along today and answering our questions. If we have anything further, we will no doubt get it to you.

Mrs O'Neill: Before the Committee's meeting is over, I will make sure that you get a copy of what I said at the start.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you.