



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Bovine TB: DARD Update

15 October 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
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr William Irwin
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Declan McAleer
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Ian Milne

Witnesses:

Mrs Kate Davey	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Colin Hart	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Roly Harwood	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Ian McKee	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

The Chairperson: I welcome Kate Davey, acting assistant secretary; Colin Hart, deputy chief veterinary officer; Roly Harwood, senior veterinary officer; and Ian McKee, principal officer. You are very welcome to the Committee, as always. You are no strangers to the Committee, and it is very good to see you again. Members have already had a chance to read the briefing paper, Kate. I am sure that you will be leading off for us, but, as we have already had a chance to read the briefing paper, I ask you to be concise in addressing the Committee. It would be helpful of you to outline the main issues or provide new information that is not in your briefing paper. I remind members to keep their two questions concise. If there is time, we will do another round of questions, if that is cleared by all members. Kate, I will give you about five minutes, if that is in order.

Mrs Kate Davey (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): Chairman, thank you for giving us the opportunity to update the Committee. As you asked, I will keep it brief. We provided a comprehensive briefing, and, really, there has not been an awful lot of new information, if any, since that. So, it will be short and sweet.

Our Minister provided you with a comprehensive update on bovine TB when she attended the Committee on 17 September. She advised you of her plans to establish a government/industry strategic partnership to develop a long-term strategy to eradicate TB. Work is ongoing to put those arrangements in place before the end of the year. We were originally scheduled to brief you about the additional package of measures. As the Minister said in her presentation, she really wants the strategic partnership to assess the merits of those measures before she puts the proposals to you.

Today gives us the opportunity to discuss the issues that you see as being relevant. Those are: the Food and Environment Research Agency (FERA) report; the test, vaccinate and remove (TVR) research project; the alternative control herds; and the TB biosecurity report. I hope that Committee members found the briefing that we provided informative. I will run through the key issues in the four areas, starting with the FERA report.

As a bit of background, in October 2012, the then Food and Environment Research Agency was commissioned to produce mathematical modelling to inform the TVR design. The Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) provided relevant information to FERA at that stage, including farm business information, TB herd incidence and badger population data, so that comparative simulations could be run for a generic Northern Ireland position and in a high TB prevalence area. I appreciate that the resulting report is extremely technical and detailed. However, it indicates that the optimum location to perform a TVR intervention, if an initial biannual treatment was performed, is in a high TB incidence area like County Down, where there is also high badger and cattle density. The report indicates that TVR has the potential to statistically significantly provide a positive impact by reducing the number of infected badgers and, possibly, cattle herd breakdowns. However, the computer model cannot simulate the risk of perturbation caused by low levels of badger removal, as in the TVR intervention. That is because there is basically no field data on the level of badger removal necessary to create the perturbation effect. The report indicates that any risk of potential negative perturbation would be mitigated by performing two TVR treatments in the first year. That is the current plan. We intend to conduct baseline ecological monitoring to help us assess whether TVR causes significant perturbation.

The FERA report has helped the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's (DARD) epidemiologist design the TVR mandate. However, other factors are also taken into account in the TVR design, such as the preliminary results from the badger sett survey. That suggests that badger sett density in County Down is some 10% less than was earlier believed to be the case.

You will also be aware that DEFRA has revised downwards the badger population estimates in its two badger cull areas. In the light of that, we are currently considering whether an additional area — that is, a second intervention area — needs to be included in the TVR to increase the opportunity for a statistically robust outcome. Contingency arrangements have already been scoped and, if necessary, that area of land can be surveyed in the new year.

That leads me very nicely to TVR itself and the badger sett survey work. That is already under way, as you know, and we have already written to farmers and landowners to get more participation in the survey. You will be interested to know that we have now secured permission in respect of 77% of the land in Banbridge and Rathfriland and 66% of the land in the Castlewellan area. Those figures have been updated from the briefing that we provided earlier. Arrangements are being put in place for DARD staff to visit herdkeepers who have yet to give permission, and also those who have declined, to encourage greater participation.

The Castlewellan area will of course be the first focus of our visits, and I am confident that we will receive a 70%-plus participation rate in that area. As I said, we have already received sufficient permissions in the Banbridge and Rathfriland area. However, we do still intend to visit those farmers so that we can maximise the participation in those areas. That will add to the overall benefit of the research. We also plan to write to some 30 to 40 farmers in those two areas to seek their permission for the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) to conduct badger ecology surveys on their farm. That is really to establish the normal baseline for badger movement and social group size, etc. That will be taken forward in the very near future.

In summary, work is progressing well on the TVR research project. The outline business case is currently being finalised and will be considered by the DARD economists. Subject to their assessment, it will be forwarded to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). As our Minister has often said, subject to DFP approval of the business case and securing the necessary licences and funding required, the actual TVR intervention work will start in mid-2014.

I will move quickly on to alternative control herds. The proposal to introduce alternative control herds is basically in line with a long-standing desire on the part of our cattle industry. These will be non-grazing herds dedicated to supplying animals directly to slaughter. We are therefore seeking to incentivise high biosecurity in those herds with an opportunity to reduce the level of testing in the herds. Cattle will only be able to leave alternative control herd premises to go directly to slaughter in Northern Ireland. DARD has approached the development of those herds from a disease control principle first and foremost, recognising the need to introduce robust and demonstrable high

biosecurity measures that are capable of accommodating high-risk movements from TB breakdown herds.

The introduction of alternative control herds must not increase the risk of TB in neighbouring herds. That is the principle that we have applied throughout. Alternative control herds will be designated with officially tuberculosis-free withdrawn (OTW) herd status, so, basically, they will be considered as breakdown herds. There will be no, or very limited, TB testing in them, and we will accept cattle from both TB-free and, on a case-by-case basis, TB breakdown herds. As I said, they will only move directly to slaughter.

I appreciate the urgency in getting those arrangements in place, but we do not want to rush it and compromise either animal or public health, so we have been working very closely with the industry to put the arrangements in place. In the coming weeks we will be in a position to announce the requirements for alternative control herds, and we hope to be in a position to start approving them in four to six weeks. We have worked very closely with our industry in developing the proposals, and it is very happy with the arrangements that we are talking about.

I will now move on to the TB biosecurity report. I will actually start again with an apology to the Committee for the delay in getting the report to you. It is just being finalised by AFBI, but we have provided you with a very accurate summary of what the key findings of that report will be. We hope to have that report later this month. I am not going to go through the key findings, but I will say that no single factor stands out that causes TB. However, a clear message comes forward, which is that there is a great deal of room for improvement in respect of on-farm biosecurity. We also appreciate that, although a small number of farmers in County Down participated in the study, there is no reason to believe that on-farm biosecurity is any different in other parts of Northern Ireland. Work now needs to be done to help and encourage farmers to improve their biosecurity. To that end, the Department is already working to ensure that the next rural development programme includes measures that allow us to provide training and, possibly, further capital equipment to help farmers to improve their biosecurity. When the report is published, we will meet stakeholders to assess how and what can be done to help raise standards of biosecurity on farms.

Before I conclude, there is one further issue to cover, and that is our normal TB testing programme. While I appreciate that it has often been said that DARD does nothing other than test and measure, it is important that we continue to remain compliant with our EU statutory requirements and we continue to receive our co-funding. That requires us to test. The testing of live cattle and the removal of the positive animals and the restriction of TB breakdown farms until they are clear is an accepted worldwide method of TB eradication. The testing regime that we implement here is in line with the trade directive 64/432/EEC, hence, we have annual testing. The good news is that our testing levels have fallen again for August to 6.47%. However, for us to change our testing requirements, the levels would have to fall as low as 2%, and we do not see that happening in the very near future.

That is a quick run through the key issues. We are very happy to take questions that you may have.

The Chairperson: Thanks, Kate. I gave you a bit more time because you were covering a lot of bases there.

Mrs Davey: I appreciate that.

The Chairperson: There is no problem. I will go straight into questions, as some of us have to leave at 2.00 pm. When the Minister was here, she talked about the establishment of a government/industry strategic partnership, which was planned for the next few months, and which would produce a strategy within 12 months of coming into place. Is this not government again kicking this into touch and basically buying time?

Mrs Davey: No, it is not. We have a very good eradication programme in place, but we feel that there is an extra measure. Our eradication programme is dealing with the short term and year on year. It was part of the DARD strategic plan for 2012-20 that we would develop a partnership and put a long-term strategy in place, and we feel that the time is right to do that. So, it is not a delaying tactic; it is about significantly grabbing the disease, trying to tackle it seriously and putting a long-term strategy in place that industry and all stakeholders can sign up to. The Minister said that she wants the strategy not just to be a strategy but to look further at how we will implement and fund it and who will lead in the various elements. So, it will be an all-embracing strategy.

The Chairperson: So we are only looking at a strategy now, we are only really taking this disease seriously now, and we are only grappling with this disease now. Why do we need another government/industry strategic partnership when we already have the animal health and welfare stakeholder forum and the TB stakeholder working group?

Mrs Davey: Those are working groups, and they are stakeholder groups. This will be at a different level. It is not just about taking the disease seriously now; we have taken it seriously right up to now. A phased approach was taken by our previous Minister, and she said that she would review that in late 2013. This is the ideal time. So we are tackling the disease. There are steps all the time in science and development, and we are looking at those. It is about trying to take account of all the developments and moving to a different level. It is not about just a stakeholder working group; the group will be tasked with something different, and it will work at a different level from our normal stakeholder groups. It will not undermine our normal day-to-day involvement with stakeholders.

Mrs Dobson: I will wait with bated breath, Kate, to see how well you get on with tackling the disease. As you know, I have asked a number of questions for written answer about the permission being granted by farmers in the survey. I think that you said that Banbridge had risen by 1% to 77% and that Castlewellan is still at 66%. What percentages are needed for the survey to be a success? You said in your briefing that you are considering adding another area to the survey. Is that because of the uptake? Will you outline the Department's target percentages in those areas? What is the cut-off date? Do you have a cut-off date? Does the Department have a plan B if additional permission is not forthcoming? You said that you plan to visit the farmers to maximise it, but 1% is not much of a rise. If they do not take it up, what is your plan B? Are you going to proceed regardless?

Mrs Davey: We have said from the outset that we needed 70% of the land, so we have actually achieved that in Banbridge. That is what we are working towards. We are 4% away from that in Castlewellan. We are confident that, with the visits, we will increase that to over 70%. We want to maximise it. We need only 70%, but it would be lovely if we could hit 80%, 90% or even 95%. We will never get to 100%. Although we have already achieved it in one area, we are going to maximise it as far as possible. We do not feel that there is a need for a plan B; we think that we will easily acquire the 4% in the Castlewellan area.

You asked about the third area. It is not because we do not have uptake; it is about looking at badger numbers. If those are lower than we anticipated, we may need to move to a third area so that we have a statistically robust outcome to the research. We would like it to be considered and accepted by its peers as a statistically robust piece of research. That is why we are considering the third area. No decision has been made on that, but we will be very happy to come back to the Committee to advise it on where we are with the third area. We very much feel that that can be accommodated directly after Christmas if we need to get into that area. We are doing preliminary work so that we are prepared.

You also asked about a cut-off date. We will go back out to survey once vegetation dies back. We will have until mid May before the vegetation starts its regrowth. That is where we surveyed to this year. We have a lot of time, but we really want to get the work done early, hence we are going out now.

Mrs Dobson: The County Down biosecurity study is mentioned in your brief. I certainly welcome that, because it appeared that that had fallen into a black hole; there was no sign of it. When will it eventually be published? If I am right, it ended in 2011. I have been told that staffing problems in AFBI held it up. That information would obviously be a massive benefit to you and your staff as you progress.

Mrs Davey: We are advised by AFBI that the report will be finalised. We are now at the stage at which we are talking about only a few editorial tweaks so that there are no typos. The report is more or less finished. We expect to have that report by the end of this month. We will certainly provide it to the Committee as soon as possible thereafter. We will seek the Minister's agreement. We have provided to you a very comprehensive summary of what is in the report. Although we do not have the final, polished document, we have all the information. As I said, we are starting to look at that now with a view to using it to help to inform our thinking and biosecurity.

Mr Irwin: I welcome the fact that there is a slight increase in those who are taking up the TVR programme in the Banbridge area. The Ulster Farmers' Union has sent out letters to encourage farmers to participate, so, hopefully, we will reach a level that is beneficial and gives a good guide in that area.

I presume that the alternative control herds are herds of beef cattle that are housed and never let out and that the farmers are just beef finishers. That being the case, I would welcome that move. You said that there will be less testing, and I understand that, because those cattle would be going directly to slaughter and that would cut down on testing. Do you hope to have that up and running soon?

Mrs Davey: Yes. We are finalising the arrangements, and veterinary service is working steadily on those arrangements. We hope to have it announced in a matter of weeks. I do not know whether Roly or anyone wants to add to that. The plan is that it will be up and running in advance of the severe weather that we may anticipate this winter. Is there anything that you wish to add?

Mr Roly Harwood (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): In four to six weeks, we hope to be ready to process the applications and to go out and inspect the premises. I must emphasise that they are alternative controls, so, instead of the testing, the payoff is biosecurity. The key thing is that the people who apply can meet those biosecurity requirements. I do not know how long it will take people to achieve that standard. We hope to get more information out to them earlier so that they can see what is necessary and start thinking about it. We are well on the way with that.

Mr Irwin: One would have thought that, with strictly housed cattle, there would be little or no risk to other animals anyway; therefore, it will cut the risk down.

Mr Harwood: It does. The risk would be an incursion of wildlife — badgers or deer — and the risk from indirect contact with people. Therefore, we have to be absolutely certain about that. We will have a protocol for people to follow.

Mr Irwin: I read here that keepers of some of those closed herds may be able to buy in cattle from other closed herds.

Mrs Davey: That is right.

Mr Irwin: That would be very good. As you are aware, farmers had a shortage of feed last winter, and they were not able to sell animals. If that were the case, it would be a big help.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the delegation and the update. I am more concerned about the answers to our recommendations, in that a more confusing picture is emerging. I want to ask a simple question: what is the current estimated badger population in Northern Ireland based on current modelling?

Mr Ian McKee (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): When Queen's University conducted a population survey in 2008, there were about 33,000 badgers. A survey was done a few years before that, and the figures were slightly different but within the same realm. Therefore, there are about 33,000 badgers. The sett density was 0.56 for each square kilometre for the average across Northern Ireland. However, in County Down, it was assumed to be higher, at about 1 main sett for every kilometre squared. From the badger set survey work that has been done by AFBI, the figure for one area is 0.91 and the other area is 0.89, so it is slightly less than the Queen's estimate. It varies from year to year. You understand that DEFRA has revised downward its badger estimates. You can do population surveys and extrapolate, but when you go out on the ground it may be different, and it varies from year to year depending on the severity of the winter. I hope that that answers the question.

Mr Byrne: We have different surveys and projects: TVR, the alternative control herds, the AFBI evaluation of the gamma interferon database, we are waiting on the AFBI biosecurity report, and we have the QUB badger faeces research. That begs a question that was raised with me externally. Does DARD possess senior vets of sufficient scientific skills and experience to plan those exercises?

Mrs Davey: I will start, being a non-vet, and say yes, without doubt, actually. What the Deputy Chair outlined is a range of work that we are taking forward. There is no one answer to TB. A lot of this work will feed in and inform future science for us. You talked about the alternative control herds. We are dealing with that now to help farmers on the ground. Although that is linked to TB, it is not about eradicating the disease but controlling the disease and trying to relieve pressure on farmers.

I can assure you that there are sufficient senior vets in the Department to more than adequately implement any programme in respect of TB. I will pass you over to the deputy chief veterinary officer, who may want to add to that.

Mr Colin Hart (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): Of course, we have the expertise in AFBI, and we depend on AFBI to provide a lot of our primary research. Uniquely in veterinary service, I have a team of specially qualified veterinary epidemiologists. Over the past two to three years, we have expanded that to a team of five, so we are unique in the whole of these islands in our internal epidemiology skills and advising government on the application of epidemiology as it is used from day to day.

At one end, my team of epidemiologists apply themselves to individual cases. Mr Chairman, you asked a couple of times what more we can do with chronic herds. That is one area where my specialists can get involved in individual cases and assist local vets, adding a whole new dimension to the investigation of disease. At the other extreme, I have skills in-house that lifted the FERA report and developed the mandate for the TVR project. That case control study is a sophisticated piece of work, which involves fairly complex statistical calculations to make sure that we have the right power and a reasonable chance of success in getting a statistically significant outcome. As a senior vet, I am keen to see that those skills are developed. Only a fortnight ago, I released a vet to go to London for a fortnight to hone their epidemiology training skills.

I think you will find that in other parts of the UK there may be one epidemiologist within government. I have a team of five, and that is not over-staffing. Every one of those epidemiologists is gainfully employed. TB, as the Committee knows, is a complex subject. It is so diverse that there is work for everybody. I reassure the Committee that we have those skills, and I depend on them because I am not an epidemiologist.

Mr Byrne: Your response to recommendation 3 states:

"Over the last year, more Departmental staff have been trained to supervise TB testing veterinarians within DARD and in the private veterinary sector and an increased number of supervisions is taking place. This approach is aimed at improving the rigour of the testing process."

Why did it need such a remedial approach?

Mr Harwood: With all these things, you want to be able to assure, raise standards and create awareness and that is what —

Mr Byrne: So, the system was failing prior to that, is that right?

Mr Harwood: I would not say it was failing. We have had a very good delivery of TB testing in Northern Ireland over many years. We depend on the private vets and on our own vets to do the testing. So, it is well delivered, but, as is the case in all countries, there is a level of quality assurance and you are always seeking to improve. That is what we are doing.

Mr Byrne: Has the Department settled yet on which test is the most foolproof — the blood test or the gamma interferon test?

Mr Harwood: We have to use the skin test. At the moment, it is the most reliable in a screening programme such as ours, but the gamma has a role in improving the results that we get from it.

Miss M McIlveen: Have the farmers who have not given permission for the TVR project to be conducted on their land given any reason why they do not wish to participate?

Mrs Davey: I think that the answer is no, but Ian —

Mr McKee: We have not asked specifically for the reason why, but we have gained some insight from telephone calls. Some people do not want any interference, as they see it, with badgers on their land. There are also a number of people who have elderly relatives on the land, and they are uncomfortable with people whom they see as strangers or people whom they do not generally know. However, as a percentage, the number of noes is relatively small. The larger percentage that we need to deal with comprises the people who, for whatever reason, did not bother to respond. We appreciate that people have other things to do, and we appreciate that there was the heavy fall of snow in the Castlewellan area during the time when we were trying to recruit for the badger sett survey. So, we will be calling

with those people who have not yet responded to try to encourage them into it. I think that that should see a significant increase.

Miss M McIlveen: It would also be interesting to see whether there are any barriers that the Department could perhaps overcome to increase participation.

Mr McKee: When we went out first, there was a concern that the people who were coming on were DARD inspectors and that they were going to look for cross-compliance. We picked that up in the area from representatives of the Ulster Farmers' Union and the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association (NIAPA). We wrote again to assure people that this was not an inspection and to give them more detail. We told them that all that would happen would be that people would come on to their farm, walk the field boundaries, record the badger setts on a GPS and classify them according to whether they were main setts, annexes, subsidiaries or outliers, and leave them. That would happen during the one day, they would leave them and that would be it. When we got information that there was a problem, we tried to respond to it. However, I appreciate your point that, yes, there even can be an attitude. From looking at the map, we can see that there is good coverage overall, but there are a number of roads on which not many people have signed up. Sometimes that can just be an attitude. Somebody might say, "I don't want anybody", and the neighbours say the same. I think that, if we call and show that there is a friendly face, we might get a response.

Miss M McIlveen: The Department's reputation has preceded you.

Mr McKee: I hope not.

Mrs Davey: We would certainly like to emphasise the fact and put out the message that it is not Department staff who do this work. The staff doing it are from AFBI and are independent from us. The other reassurance that we have been trying to give is that we are not out doing anything other than looking at badger setts.

Miss M McIlveen: What is the level of TB in the Irish Republic compared with that in Northern Ireland?

Mr McKee: The statistics are gathered slightly differently, but I think that you can take it as slightly less than 4% of herd incidence.

Miss M McIlveen: Is there a reason why it is so low?

Mrs Davey: I think that that is more difficult to answer.

Mr Harwood: It is. The most recent figure that they reported was 3.55%, and their levels have been going down. The figure remained very steady over the past few years and has started to go down. They attribute that, in part anyway, to what they do with badgers. They remove badgers from around breakdown herds, and they have done so consistently for maybe five or six years. So, they credit that as being among the reasons. The programme there is fairly similar to ours. There are some small differences, but there is not much between the two.

Miss M McIlveen: What discussions have you had with DEFRA about the current badger cull?

Mrs Davey: We have meetings where all TB issues are discussed. I am not aware that we have had a direct meeting, but we have certainly had knowledge of what is going on and how it is being dealt with. Ian, have you spoken directly to your counterpart?

Mr McKee: I sit in on a monthly teleconference with DEFRA, the Scottish and the Welsh Governments. We discuss TB on a monthly basis and get an update on how they are proceeding with and making progress on their badger cull. So, we are aware.

Miss M McIlveen: Under what circumstances would the Department consider replicating the cull?

Mrs Davey: That decision would be for the Minister, and she has always said that, for a badger cull to be considered, there would have to be evidence to support it. At this point, we do not have evidence to support it. So, it is the Minister's decision, based on evidence.

Mr Lunn: Ladies and gentlemen, you will have to bear with me, because this is my first time at the Committee and I do not know much about badgers. What is the compensation regime for farmers who suffer losses because of the disease?

Mr McKee: They get 100% compensation at market value as though the animal were not diseased. They get full market price for the animal that is taken.

Mr Lunn: Has that changed over the years? Do you remember a time when it was less than 100%?

Mr McKee: It was increased from 75% about 15 years ago in recognition of the fact that, because the badger is a protected species, the farmer cannot take all steps to eradicate all risk. Therefore, the compensation was raised from 75% to 100%.

Mr Lunn: Were a farmer in an area with a high incidence of TB not to cooperate with the various measures that you suggest, might there come a point when he would not be compensated?

Mr Harwood: There is a legal process. I am not 100% clear on it, but it basically depends on what sort of non-compliance it is. If it is somebody failing to test, they may be taken to court, but that would not necessarily affect their compensation. Were they to be prosecuted for other things that may affect biosecurity, they could have part of their compensation removed.

Mr McKee: There are occasions when compensation is withheld if a prosecution is in process and until a judgement is given. So, it can be withheld, pending a prosecution, following which a decision is taken on the percentage of compensation that should be payable in such cases.

Mrs Davey: I emphasise that this is a legal requirement and that we have powers to prosecute people if they do not comply with testing. The Department is not afraid to exercise those powers if necessary.

Mr Lunn: I have one more question. Forgive me; I know that everybody here except me knows the answer to this. If you can vaccinate badgers, why can you not vaccinate cattle?

Mrs Davey: The EU does not allow it. It is in breach of EU law. No doubt, my vets will keep me right on this, but vaccinated cattle cannot be distinguished from positive cattle. So, work is ongoing to try to introduce a vaccine that will differentiate between a positive and a vaccinated animal. DEFRA has been in touch with the Commission on numerous occasions to progress that, but we see cattle vaccination being at least 10 years down the road, and a change in EU law is needed before it can happen.

Mr Lunn: Are cattle vaccinated anywhere in the world apart from the EU?

Mr Harwood: Yes, they are vaccinated outside the EU. I am struggling to remember — Brazil springs to mind, but I cannot be sure of any other countries that do it.

Mr Buchanan: Thank you for coming again today. I have some problems or concerns, similar to the Deputy Chair's, about the number of reports that have been done and that are ongoing. The reality is that TB is on the increase. Rather than reducing, it is increasing. You said that there is no one answer to TB, and you may be right; I do not know. However, I beg to differ, because if the badgers were culled, that would make a difference. In any other sphere of life, if there is a difficulty or a problem, the only way to get rid of it is to cut it out completely, if at all possible. I have no doubt that this is a way forward. So, in these affected areas where you are trying different models, why not try culling and see what difference it makes? I cannot understand how the Department has gone on for so long and has never tried culling as a method.

Another issue that was raised, again by the Deputy Chair, was about training more staff to supervise the vets who are doing the testing. I have to ask why we are doing this. Is it because the Department does not trust its own people who are doing the testing? Is it that there is a suspected element of fraud in it? Or is it simply just jobs for the boys? I cannot understand why we are continuing to train more people to oversee the so-called professionals who are doing their job. Is it simply jobs for the boys?

Mrs Davey: I will start on that and then bring others in. You started by saying that TB is increasing. TB is not increasing; it has significantly fallen from its peak in October 2012. It is coming down and has reduced, even since July. As I said, its incidence now has fallen to 6.59%.

Mr Buchanan: OK, I accept that.

Mrs Davey: So, there is a reduction. That is the first point that I wanted to clarify.

You asked why we are not culling badgers. First, badgers are a protected species, so for us to make any intervention with them, we must have a licence from the Department of the Environment (DOE) and the Minister of the Environment.

Mr Buchanan: Have you applied for that?

Mrs Davey: We are applying for the work that we are taking forward on TVR. We have not applied for a licence to cull, because, as I explained, the Minister has not made a decision to cull. As we said, work on selective culling is ongoing in the South, and a selective cull is taking place in England. Vaccination work is taking place in Wales, and we are taking forward the TVR. So, we are building a pool of independent knowledge that we can all draw on through taking different approaches. No one out there has found the solution to TB. Although we would like to say that we have, there is not, as yet, a defined solution. We have different approaches in the UK that we can each learn from, and we interact with our colleagues on a regular basis to draw on that. So, there is little point in our starting a cull when a cull is going on in England. We can draw from the knowledge in England. If that produces the evidence, we can consider that evidence. So, that is why we are not going forward with a cull at this point in time.

You mentioned the numerous projects that are going on. We have a very active research programme going on, and that informs our knowledge in different areas, whether on biosecurity, gamma or chronic herds. So, it is about trying to make the best use of resources to inform not just us but others. Others can draw on our research, as we can draw on theirs. It is, therefore, about trying to build up a pool of knowledge to allow us to have more tools in our toolkit to tackle this disease.

Mr Buchanan: I am sorry, I have to go to ask a question in the Chamber, but I will read the Hansard report to get the rest of the answer.

Mrs Davey: I will ask veterinary colleagues to answer the last issue that the member raised. It was about why we are bringing in more staff to supervise our own staff. We are not doing that. The vast majority of TB testing is done by private veterinary practitioners. It is about getting a balance and ensuring that we are assured that that work is being undertaken correctly. I do not know whether Colin or Roly want to add to that.

Mr Hart: I will build on that, Kate. The reason why we are doing this is linked to a recommendation from a 2009 Public Accounts Committee (PAC) report. We are trying to make sure that testing is delivered to the required quality. The TB test requires great precision. In particular, when the injection is introduced to the skin, it is important that the needle does not, for example, pass through the skin. It is truly an intradermal injection.

Our response to the PAC report has been to increase the level of supervisions, and we have done that in partnership with the veterinary associations. We have not taken a heavy-handed approach and started to inspect more often; rather, we have actually worked up protocols with the veterinary associations. It is all done in a way that means that people can reasonably expect to be supervised. That element of supervision keeps people on their toes. They are contractors, which means that we can get an assurance that we are spending public money in a way that gets the best return from that public money.

However, we have not stopped there. We have also introduced measures to ensure that, for example, new vets are trained to a higher standard initially, so that, when they first go out, they are actually skilled in the full range of activities that are associated with the TB test. Again, we have done that by working with the practice principals, who are, if you like, the head vets in the private practices, because they are ones who train up their assistants to the required standards.

That has been our response to the Public Accounts Committee's finding that there was an odds ratio difference between the number of non-negative animals discovered by a DARD vet and a private vet.

We have worked with the private vets to improve the overall standard of testing. Roly Harwood heads that up, and there have been some encouraging signs now that testing is being delivered, by and large, to a very high standard. Roly, I am not sure whether you want to add to that.

Mr Harwood: No, I cannot. I will just mention that the vets do a very professional job and that that has been borne out in the supervisions that we are doing.

Mrs Davey: I would just add that it is crucial that the right result is achieved every time there is testing out there. The consequences of a wrong result, whether it is that a farmer is closed down incorrectly or is not closed down when he should have been, are dire, first, for the farmer, if he is closed down incorrectly, and, secondly, for his neighbours if he should have been but was not, closed down. So, we have to get it right on every occasion. Supervision is a key element of that, by ensuring that testing is carried out to the proper standards.

Mr McMullan: How are you doing? I have a couple of questions. You are happy with the way that things are going. Obviously, how this is carried out is not all down to you. What help are you getting from the likes of the farmers' unions and animal markets in dealing with nose-to-nose contact and the movement of cattle? I am thinking especially the movement of, say, young calves, because they could change hands four or five times before settling down where they will stay. The number of times that they are moved about is one of the things that amazes me all the time. So, what help are you getting from those people to start with?

Mrs Davey: Again, I will start on that. We have a very good working relationship with both farmers' unions through our stakeholder meetings. A very good example of that is the recent work that we have done on the alternative control herds. We have a very good and close working relationship, and we have had agreement, help and support from them. So, there is a healthy working relationship at that level. When you talk about farmers and the movement of cattle, you move to a different level. One of the issues that was obvious in the biosecurity report is that herds that frequently buy in animals have a greater risk of becoming breakdown herds. So, an education process needs to be undertaken with farmers, and, when we get the final report, we will need to send some clear messages out. We cannot put restrictions on farmers' trading practices, but they have to realise that some of those practices may lead to their introducing disease to their herds. My veterinary colleagues may want to add to that.

Mr Hart: I will comment on the cattle movements. There are undoubtedly instances when calves move four and five times, although our statistics suggest that, each year, there are roughly the same number of movements of animals as the number that are born every year. On average, that translates into one movement in a bovine animal's lifetime. Overall, things are probably better now with the number of animals that are bought and sold than they were once upon a time. There may be reasons for that. For example, the pre-movement testing rules that we have for brucellosis at the moment help to put a brake, if you like, on the number of moves. That is an issue for us as well. Cattle movements undoubtedly spread disease, and, if at all possible, the farmer should operate a closed herd. However, the majority of farmers, unfortunately, are not in a position to operate a closed herd and are required to buy in replacement animals. So, yes, animals move. If quarantine arrangements are followed when the animals are brought into the herd, that can help to form a brake between the bought-in animals and the rest of the herd, because they can be tested in the quarantine arrangement and in isolation.

Mr McMullan: Is the quarantine element compulsory at the moment?

Mr Hart: No, it is not. If the animal is free to be traded, it is free to be included in the body of the purchasing herd. Good practice would say that, no matter the species of the animal, you should not bring it in until you are confident that it has gone through a period when you can see that it is free of disease. That applies to any disease or any animal.

Mr McMullan: I am conscious that, when you go on holiday, it is compulsory for cats and dogs to be quarantined, but here is something that is costing us hundreds of millions and is not compulsory. We should maybe look at that.

Are we happy and ready for the middle of next year? Are we on track?

Mrs Davey: Yes. At this point, we are on track, and, as I said in my statement, we are finalising the business case. That needs to be assessed in-house, and it will then go to DFP for its approval. Funding needs to be secured to allow that to happen. So, we still need to do work and to take steps, but, at this point, we are moving towards mid-2014.

Mr McMullan: Will we definitely need DFP to be on-board for the funding?

Mrs Davey: Yes, we need it approved in our own Department first. It will then go to DFP, and we need to try to secure funding for it.

Mr Irwin: Would keeping purchased animals for 21 days make any difference? After 21 days, farmers will not be any wiser than they were on the first day they bought the animals. I have bought animals on many occasions, but keeping them isolated for 21 days will not tell me anything.

Mr Hart: TB is such a slow and insidious disease that it will not tell you much, unless perhaps you go to the bother of having them tested for TB during those 21 days.

Mr Irwin: That is the only thing that you could do.

Mr Hart: That would be a post-movement test. These are things that we can —

Mr Irwin: I declare an interest as a farmer. In fairness, if a farmer buys animals, they are bought from a herd that is, or should be, free of TB. If not, he is not allowed to purchase those animals. Pre-movement testing is probably one way of ensuring that that will not happen. Herds are tested very regularly now, so it is quite difficult to do that.

Mr Hart: One of the interesting points that is coming out of the TB biosecurity study is that it emphasises once again that farms that buy in animals are in that category of farms that are more likely to experience a TB breakdown. There could be a number of other factors. We still have to explore the detail. I am sorry; I meant the chronic herd study — I am getting my reports mixed up. There is an indication that a herd that buys in is in the category that is more likely to experience a TB breakdown. Of course, we know that some beef finishing herds tend to suffer regularly from bought-in infection.

Mrs Davey: To add to what Colin said, there was, obviously, discussion in that TB biosecurity study with farmers on whether there should be additional measures. It is in the summary that we provided to members. Although I accept that a very small number of people participated, half the participants in the study supported the pre-movement testing of animals. However, only 17% were prepared to pay for it.

Mr Irwin: That would not be a surprise.

Mrs Davey: No, I do not think that it was.

Mr Irwin: Farmers had to pay for pre-movement testing for brucellosis for many years. It is not easy.

Mrs Davey: Obviously, these are issues that we will look at as additional measures when the strategic partnership is up. It is about trying to balance that with actually putting additional costs on the industry.

The Chairperson: A couple of questions came out of that question-and-answer session that I think we should explore. I know that Tom has left the room, and I know that he looked disappointed and jaded that he had got it wrong about TB incidence. However, I assure you that he was overjoyed that we have a reduction. The question that I am sure that Tom would have asked if he had stayed in the room is whether the Department can explain why there has been a reduction.

Mrs Davey: That is an exceptionally difficult question to answer. We cannot explain it. I will let my veterinary colleagues come in on this. Just as we could not explain why there was a rise, equally we cannot explain why there is a reduction. Certainly, we continue to implement the programme as rigidly as we can. We have moved to the stage where incidence is reducing. However, no one reason is jumping out to say why it is happening.

The Chairperson: That brings me to my point about the eradication plan and the Department's testing and testing again. All that we can really derive from that is the measurement and scale of the disease. Simply testing will not lead to eradication. That having been said, studies are being conducted until they are coming out of our ears — there have been umpteen studies. Yet, we still cannot come to any conclusive evidence of why TB incidence rises or falls. That is the fundamental issue here.

Mrs Davey: Yes. I accept that it is. Our testing programme is an EU requirement. As I said at the outset, it is actually set out as a year-by-year programme. The Minister, as I said, will set up a strategic partnership to look at what more we can do and to put steps in place for eradication in a long-term programme. So, it is about building on what we already have and tackling the disease.

Mr Irwin: On that, you tell us that TB incidence is now 6.59%. Can you tell us what the level is for our neighbours in the Irish Republic?

Mr McKee: It is under 4%.

Mr Irwin: So, have they reduced their incidence quite significantly in recent years?

Mr McKee: Yes. Their incidence has come down. What Kate alluded to is that we had a rise here in Northern Ireland that was not replicated elsewhere, either in the South or across the water. So, whatever happened here for around 14 or 15 months was unique. We do not know why. We have looked at many factors and possible reasons. However, we have not come to a settled conviction that x, y or z caused it. So, the fact is that we had this sharp increase for the best part of 15 months followed by an equally sharp decrease. It is like a pyramid. If you look at the graph, you see that it went up steeply and is coming down just as steeply. We do not know what caused the rise. The factors may well have been resolved some time ago, but the testing regime has been taking out the diseased animals. We hope that we are getting ahead of the disease and taking the diseased animals out and, therefore, suppressing the infectivity.

The Chairperson: You talked about the TVR "commencing". That is a great word, and I must say that we do not hear a lot from this section of DARD that something is commencing and that some action is taking place. You will note my frustration, and I am really frustrated about this issue. Kate, you stated that the commencement of the TVR proper will be in mid-2014.

Mrs Davey: Yes, we have said that. I accept your frustration about TVR. There is preparatory work that is really part of TVR, and different terminology has been used that is not. The badger sett survey work has to be done to give us the baseline here. The preparation stages of TVR are already well under way. As for the intervention stage, subject to the caveats that I explained to the member about clearance with DFP and funding, which the Minister has already explained, we are aiming to get this under way in mid-2014.

The Chairperson: What are the chances of slippage, and what would the reasons be for that?

Mrs Davey: Obviously, if we were to have a lot of delay in getting our business case cleared, both in-house and through DFP, it could cause slippage. I can tell you that we are working to resolve those issues. If the date of mid-2014 were to change, the Committee would be advised, and you would have the opportunity to have us explain why it had changed. That is where we are working towards at this time.

The Chairperson: When the Minister was here previously, she said:

"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."

What does success look like?

Mrs Davey: Success will look like implementing what we agree is the mandate for TVR, and that will be intervention on the ground, removing the diseased animals and vaccinating the non-diseased animals, and looking at how that impacts on both the badger and the cattle population. It is not a simple fix. It will take a number of years before we start to see any results. We have talked about the fact that this is a research project, and it is about monitoring those outcomes. That, in a very crude way, is what success will look like.

The Chairperson: I will now bring you on to the Committee's report. You have responded to that, noted it and accepted most of it. There are a small number of exceptions, one being where we say that the Programme for Government has no specific target for the eradication of TB, which you have not accepted. The fact that there is not a target in the Programme for Government, even for a reduction, leads me to believe that the Department is either trying to kick that issue into touch, buy time or evade it from the consciousness. In all your statements in response to our recommendations, you say that you are doing a study here and a study there and that you have commenced a study and done this. When will we see some results? What is the problem, and why have we had no real substance by way of a response from our review?

Mrs Davey: I will start and then pass over to Ian to mention some of the specifics. I have tried to explain why we are doing various pieces of research and various reports. It is to build our knowledge. I assume that you are alluding to a target in the Programme for Government. We are certainly, as I said, setting our strategic partnership in place with a view that we will have a long-term strategy. I cannot pre-empt what will come out of that strategy, but my assumption is that there will be some sort of target in that on eradication that we will be working to. There is still work to be done, and that work will take place over the next year. You may want Ian to go through where we are on the specific recommendations —

The Chairperson: I will give you a couple, because I know that there is a wide range. What work has been done on the gamma test? Where are we on the different strains of TB, apart from just mapping them? Colin mentioned the chronic herds. Do we even know what a chronic herd is yet? If we do, what work has been done to investigate chronic herds?

Mr McKee: So there are three: gamma, strain-typing and chronic herds.

The Chairperson: That is only three.

Mr McKee: OK. We have a research project with AFBI to capture all the information that we have on gamma, because Northern Ireland has done proportionately more gamma testing than anywhere else in these islands. We have reams of information, but it has never been pulled together to tell us the story.

The Chairperson: Why not?

Mr McKee: We have commissioned that, but it is a large project. That is being done now. That is one aspect of gamma. Another aspect of gamma, which we are also commissioning work on, is that it has to be done in the field and the bloods have to be delivered to the lab within about six hours, so it has to be the same day. If you have a large herd in the west of the Province, gamma testing is going to be very difficult to do, so we need to adjust the gamma test. There are lots of cut-offs — it is a scientific process — to ensure that the gamma test meets Northern Ireland's needs right across, so we are working on that as well. Those are large projects that have to be dealt with.

We have information that is provided to the local vets on strain-typing, but that technology is improving. They are moving on from strain-typing to whole-genome sequencing. So, even though we have all that information, the scene is changing so quickly that we have to keep moving with the times. There is work being done on that, and we are waiting for a report from AFBI on strain-typing.

The Chairperson: When is that due?

Mr McKee: It should have been with me; I admit that. It has been delayed because of staff vacancies. I do not want a scientific paper. I need to know what we can do practically. We need to know how we can use that tool better. We need to see a practical outcome from it, rather than a theoretical one. We need to get it from the scientific onto the ground, and my veterinary colleagues will deal with that.

We have gathered information on chronic herds from about 2005 to 2012. It is like anything that is chronic. How do you measure chronic heart disease and what cut-offs do you use? How do you deal with chronic asthma? It is the same thing. Our epidemiologists have gone through it and have identified 5% of herds that give 25% of the reactors. Now we need AFBI to do further work to take that forward. My veterinary colleagues might want to come in on that.

The Chairperson: I do not want to be facetious, but is DARD blaming AFBI?

Mrs Davey: No, it is not about blaming anyone. That work takes time, and sometimes all available resources are not there to do the work. It is not a blame game. It is about working with our partners and actually bringing the work forward as quickly as we can, taking account of changing science as we go, as Ian said. I do not know whether anyone wants to add anything on chronic herds.

Mr Hart: On that worst 5% of chronic herds, it is interesting that — to some extent, our intuition might have told us some of this to start with, but the statistics bear it out — the picture generated on that 5%, or that chronic herd set, if you like, shows that the incidents involved larger herds. Those herds were present in higher bovine TB incidence areas. They were purchasing larger numbers of cattle per unit of time. Those herds were also more likely to have an historical link to a previous bovine TB breakdown; so, there is a hint in there that there might be a carry-over of infection from a breakdown in the previous seven years. At every point in those seven years, there was a link. Those herds were also more likely to disclose with a larger number of skin reactors and the total number of reactors during that restricted period. Those are all things that we suspected at the back of our mind. That data set will be explored in a great deal more detail, but the earlier results indicate all those things. The herds in that 5% data set are also more likely to have a lesion at routine slaughter. So, all those things are interlinked.

We have defined "chronic herds" in a way that took the 821 worst chronic incidents. Some of those incidents came from the same herds; only 758 herds were involved. The data set was produced by my team of epidemiologists. It has been provisionally analysed, and what is known as a descriptive paper has been produced. That is a whole series of statements of fact, which now needs to be processed in much greater detail.

Therefore, Chairman, I can say that we have not been idle. We are moving those things forward. I have some expertise in-house, and I am using that where possible, but I am also dependent on some of the skill sets that exist in AFBI to add value to it. We are working reciprocally with AFBI to investigate the chronic herds issue, which the Committee rightly questioned.

The Chairperson: So, again, we have this data set, which is a lot of information that we suspected, or assumed, anyway. You have produced a technical paper. Was that the term used?

Mr Hart: A descriptive paper.

The Chairperson: It has gone from a data set to a descriptive paper. Where does it get to the ground?

Mr Harwood: Further analysis has to be done. The epidemiologists are going to extract the variables that they feel are important from the data set and start investigating them further. It applies on the ground in this way: as you gather your knowledge with a degree of certainty, you can provide the advice about where farmers should buy from that Mr Irwin talked about. It is one thing to say that if a herd is trading, it is free from disease. However, there are some herds trading that are at higher risk of having disease in them than others. It is about being able to advise people with a degree of certainty. If you want to give advice and people want to apply it, it will cost someone money. You have to be sure of your facts, and you have to do so in a proportionate way.

Another way that this is moving forward is that we will possibly see changes to the programme. The data set will be sent to England. Over there, they have a TB model that they have already worked on for England and have published papers on. They have agreed to take our data and put it into their model, to allow us to explore what changes to the programme need to be made and how they would affect things moving forward. This type of work sounds slow, but you have to work through a process with it, and we are starting to see outcomes from it.

The Chairperson: It sounds very slow, and that is the frustrating bit.

Mr Byrne: Just to follow on the same theme, I want to revisit the figures. Some £317 million has been spent on this scheme for 15 years up to March 2011. The last day that we had a presentation on this, I asked Mr Bert Houston whether there was an incidence level of bovine TB that was acceptable or tolerable for the Department. Given the fact that reactor cattle legitimately go into the food chain, who benefits from this? When reactor cattle go to the processors, do the processors get market value, given that the farmer has been compensated at market value, or do they get the cattle at a discount? That is a grey area that has never been explained to anybody.

Mrs Davey: I will start. I was present when you asked that question. I think that I answered it at that meeting. The question was about whether there is an acceptable level of TB in Northern Ireland. The answer then and today is exactly the same: there is not an acceptable level. Our plan has always been to move to the eradication of TB. That is what we still aim to do. There is definitely not a tolerable level.

As regards cattle moving into the food chain, I will let some of my veterinary colleagues talk about what happens on the ground with TB reactors. However, I reassure you that we are not accepting a tolerance of TB.

Mr Hart: Mr Byrne, although the farmer receives 100% compensation, there is not a driver in there. Ultimately, the Department decides whether an animal is a reactor. As a government body has the decision on whether something passes as a reactor, nobody can exploit that situation and try to make profit in that way.

Mr Byrne: Let us say that I have 10 700 kg beef cattle with a market value of £1,500 each, and they go down in the test. There is a £15,000 quantum market value compensation to the farmer. How much does the processor pay for those cattle when they arrive in his yard?

Mr Hart: It is probably quite a complex answer. We have a contract —

Mr Byrne: It is fairly simple mathematics.

Mr Hart: We have a contract. The Department receives a salvage value for those cattle from the —

Mr Byrne: What would the salvage value discount be?

Mr Hart: The salvage value would not encourage the Department to put reactors down to get the salvage value back, if you follow me. Clearly, the salvage value would be less than the open market value of the meat.

Mr Byrne: Let us take the example of the 10 cattle at £1,500 each, which is £15,000. What is the salvage value of them?

Mrs Davey: We do not have that direct answer. Please stop me if I am wrong in what I am saying. The Department put in place an open tender for a processor to tender for the work. There was a proper procurement process. When the Department put those animals out to a processor, it sought the best value that it could get for its money. That is the tender process in place. I fully accept that the tender process will not give us the equivalent; if we pay £1,500 for the animal, we will not get that through the tender process. We managed, through the competitive tendering process, to secure the best price available to us.

Mr Byrne: I would like the facts and figures in a written answer to the Committee. There is a fog of uncertainty and questioning out there. Somebody is benefiting somewhere.

Mrs Davey: The Department will look at what it can provide. We may not be able to provide some of the information because it is commercially confidential, but —

Mr Byrne: There is also a lot of public money at stake.

Mrs Davey: I fully accept that. However, irrespective of whether the processor gets the animals at a lower rate, he has no means of influencing that. Although he might get the cattle, he cannot influence the number of cattle he gets or anything like that. There are very clear procedures in place for the Department to determine what is a reactor, and the basis of that reactor is already set in contract to that independent slaughter plant. The slaughter plant has no way of influencing that. There is a clear, legitimate, auditable process in place that will stand up to any external scrutiny.

Mr Byrne: I await the answer.

Mr Lunn: I am interested in Ian's figures from a wee while ago: the 4%-odd figure in the Republic as against 6-59% here. I wonder why, on a small island with a pretty porous border, there is such a

difference and, in particular, why we had a significant spike when, apparently, the Republic did not. So, I will ask you these questions. Is the testing regime in the South similar to ours? Could it have anything to do with the movement of animals between the two jurisdictions, whether legal or illegal? Is the compensation regime in the South the same as it is here?

Mr McKee: The testing regime is similar. The vets will answer on this if there is anything else to say. It is an annual testing regime. The farmer pays for one test a year. The farmer pays a private veterinary practitioner (PVP) to do the test. The Department pays when it is a risk test for a breakdown herd.

On the two levels, about two years ago, we got down to 4.99% herd incidence. At that time, herd incidence in the South was slightly less. However, we were running in parallel. The graph was going down. The South was slightly below us, but we were trending in the same direction. A long-term trends analysis showed that. However, we then had that completely inexplicable increase that they did not.

Mr Lunn: Do you have any theory on that?

Mr McKee: No.

On compensation, we have unlimited 100% compensation to market value. In the South, there is a cap on compensation at €2,300. The farmer pays into the compensation fund through a non-statutory levy. The farmer pays somewhere in the region of 45% or 50%; it varies year on year. The farmer pays from his levy almost 50% of the compensation that he receives, but that is capped. So, there are differences between the North and the South.

Mr Lunn: Up here, in the olden days, you used to be able to insure the difference between the 75% and the 100%. Do you know whether that approach still exists in the South? I am maybe being unfair by asking you that.

Mr McKee: I cannot speak about compensation or insurance arrangements down South. The NFU Mutual may give compensation for certain aspects, but I am not au fait with the detail.

Mr McMullan: We could talk about this all day, as I said before. However, the real point is what we are doing in respect of testing for next year. If we are looking at cost figures, we must do so in context. The £317 million that we have talked about is over a period of 15 years, but it also includes compensation that is paid. Are we now advocating that we cut compensation rates to reduce the money that is paid from public funds? We need to keep this in focus. We have an industry that is worth over £1,000 million, so, over 15 years, we are talking £20 million or so.

The work is ongoing. The work on the disease is quite a slow process. As everybody who has presented to the Committee has said, there is quite a lot about the disease that is still unknown and is still to be found out. We should not nitpick through what we know as the facts of what we are paying out in compensation. We, at this Committee, discussed compensation and did not throw it out. We cannot now go down the road of saying that it is costing millions of pounds, because we know that it is costing millions of pounds. In fact, Europe is looking to see how we can reduce the compensation bill. Europe has said that too much compensation is paid.

We need to be very careful that we do not start something in the farming industry until we get TB sorted out. We need to concentrate on eradicating the disease. If we can get disease levels down, everything will fall in behind that. I think that we are doing well at the minute.

The Chairperson: OK, Oliver. Thank you for your question. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Davey: When the Minister was here on 17 September, she clarified that, in setting up the strategic partnership, she wanted the partnership to look at an all embracing strategy that would also look at the issue of compensation to see whether there is any need to change it. So, that will be part of the work of the strategic partnership. I will not pre-empt the outcome, but it will be under consideration next year.

The Chairperson: This is my final question, I promise. On the alternative control of herds — I know that William Irwin is supportive of that measure, as, I am sure, we all are — will there be a differential for pedigree herds in any way, shape or form, or will the system work the same way?

Mr Harwood: The system would work the same way, as long as they can meet the requirements. We will not be prescriptive about the type of herd, although it will not work for dairy herds.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you very much for your time; that was a marathon session for you. I really appreciate your presentation and your answers. Believe it or not, you are some of my favourite people from the Department. *[Laughter.]* As this is such an important issue, I request that you give us an update on all the recommendations that you accepted from our report. I will seek a follow-up oral briefing early in the new year.

Mrs Davey: That is fine. I take it that the request for the update will come from the Committee Clerk following this meeting.

The Chairperson: Yes. Thank you.