



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Suspected Illegal Slaughter of Cattle:
DARD/Food Standards Agency

11 March 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

Suspected Illegal Slaughter of Cattle: DARD/Food Standards Agency

11 March 2014

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 Oliver McMullan
Mr Ian Milne
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Mr Michael Hatch	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Michael Jackson	Food Standards Agency

The Chairperson: I welcome Michael Hatch, who is from DARD, and Michael Jackson, who is from the Food Standards Agency (FSA). You are very welcome to this Committee for this important and topical issue. We will allow you time for your briefing and then go straight to questions, if that is in order. Who is starting?

Mr Michael Hatch (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): Yes, I will start. I submitted a paper, and I will run through that first to give an outline. We are obviously referring to the operation of last Monday, 3 March, when the PSNI led a multi-agency inspection of two premises in Forkhill and one in Bessbrook as part of ongoing efforts to tackle agricultural crime. The police were accompanied by Newry and Mourne District Council officers as well as Department of Agriculture and Rural Development officers.

Evidence of recently slaughtered animals was found at the agricultural buildings in Forkhill. There is no evidence at this stage that meat from the premises in Forkhill has been placed on the market. Investigations are ongoing to determine the supply chain of meat from those unapproved establishments.

This investigation covers public health, for which Newry and Mourne District Council and the Food Standards Agency, ie Michael, have responsibility, but there are also animal health and animal by-product issues, which are the responsibility of my Department. The police lead on all wider criminal activity associated with the investigation.

In Northern Ireland, district councils are the enforcement authorities for food safety. In this case, responsibility for the investigation into the suspected illegal slaughtering premises and beef distribution, and any associated enforcement action, lies with Newry and Mourne District Council.

The Food Standards Agency is the central competent authority in matters of food safety and is instrumental in ensuring that appropriate measures are taken to protect public health. This includes assessing any risk to public health with respect to food safety implications and to manage that risk appropriately and proportionately in partnership with all relevant authorities, including liaising with the Food Safety Authority of Ireland in the South. The FSA also has responsibility for enforcement of hygiene regulations in approved meat establishments. In Northern Ireland, those inspections are conducted by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development on behalf of the FSA.

The FSA is closely monitoring any possible risk to public health as a result of the operation and is working closely with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Newry and Mourne District Council, the police and the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, which was alerted in case any product was distributed across the border.

It was DARD's central enforcement team (CET) that participated fully in the operation, providing assistance to the other agencies and undertaking animal health and welfare inspection and enforcement tasks under our own legislation. The CET conducted cattle identification inspections at the two premises in Forkhill. Three cattle were seized by DARD under cattle identification regulations and are being held pending further enquiries about their identity.

Ear tags were also seized and, at one of the premises in Forkhill, the CET seized carcass meat. Alleged breaches under identification, registration and movement, transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSE) and animal by-product and welfare regulations are being investigated by my Department.

I will clarify the role of the central enforcement team in DARD. The CET is deployed full-time in enforcing animal health and welfare regulations, and its role consists of conducting inspections, investigations and prosecutions. It works closely with other enforcement agencies, sharing intelligence, training and best practice, and conducting joint inspections and investigations like this one. That is particularly so with the current cooperation with the PSNI in tackling rural crime, but it also includes work with local councils, the Food Standards Agency, HMRC and the southern Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, particularly its special investigations unit.

The CET is distinct from the Department's central investigation service (CIS), which is a unit in the finance division. The CIS provides the Department and its agencies with a range of counter fraud services that include investigating cases of suspected fraud that are perpetrated against financial programmes and schemes. The CIS was not involved in the current DARD investigation.

The Chairperson: OK. Michael, is there anything that you want to add?

Mr Michael Jackson (Food Standards Agency): No. We put together a joint submission for the Committee, which has hopefully explained the roles of the various agencies in the incident.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you very much for your presentation. I want to put it out to members.

Mr Irwin: Thank you very much for your presentation. The illegal slaughterhouse was unearthed in a part of my constituency of Newry and Armagh. You said that there is no evidence at this stage of the investigation that meat from the two premises at Forkhill has been placed on the market. If animals have been slaughtered, they are doing something with the meat. I am sure that they are not giving it away; I am sure that it is going somewhere. As yet, is there no evidence to suggest where it is going?

Mr Jackson: At this point, the investigation is still very much ongoing and live. We are in regular contact with our colleagues in Newry and Mourne District Council. As you will appreciate, it is one thing to detect the activity at the location and find out what is going on at a site but another to establish where meat may have gone. That is a much more complex issue that involves the council working with colleagues in DARD and a lot of examination of paperwork. That is still very much live, but, at this stage, there is no evidence that the meat has been placed on the market.

Mr Irwin: Am I right in saying that the premises of a retail butcher were raided on the same day?

Mr Jackson: A further site was visited regarding this particular investigation, yes.

Mr Irwin: OK. Thank you.

Mrs Dobson: Michael, given that this was a multi-agency operation, how effective would you say that its response was? In your brief, you state that the central enforcement team provided assistance and undertook inspection and enforcement tasks. Will you outline exactly what it did?

Mr Hatch: There were live animals in the premises that we investigated. We had a two-pronged role. I must say that we cannot go into very specific details about the investigation as we do not want to jeopardise it. Our role initially was one of support for the agencies that had prime responsibility, which were the Food Standards Agency and Newry and Mourne District Council. Over the past 18 months, we have been working very closely with the police in the southern region — E and F districts — on agricultural crime in general, and a number of investigations are ongoing into general agricultural crime. That was the background.

I cannot go into the specifics of how we got drawn into this investigation, but we did and, hence, we gave full cooperation to the lead agencies. However, we also have an interest in cattle investigations with our responsibility for animal health and welfare. During the inspections, we gathered evidence and are currently investigating a number of breaches under animal health and welfare law.

Mrs Dobson: Do you feel that the multi-agency approach worked well?

Mr Hatch: Yes, overall, it was excellent. In very general terms, criminals do not limit their criminality to one aspect. Therefore, as we have different agencies responsible for different legislation, we need to cooperate and join up. This is a good example, and we are getting stronger in our relationships with the police and other regulatory authorities in building trust. The operation last week clearly discovered alleged offending, and it will only bolster confidence in other agencies because, quite clearly, in the planning for those operations, we have to share intelligence and pool resources.

Mrs Dobson: Does —

The Chairperson: I will come back to you, Jo-Anne.

Mrs Dobson: I have a supplementary question that relates to this.

The Chairperson: Sorry, you have had a question and a supplementary question. I will bring you in later.

Mr Buchanan: No doubt a multi-agency approach is the only way forward on this. When will you be in a position to know where this meat went? As my colleague said, this was not just slaughter for the sake of it. There is a market or an outlet somewhere. When will you be in a position to know where the meat went?

Mr Jackson: It is difficult to be precise about that. The reason is that one can work only with the intelligence and information that is gathered at the time of the event or that had already been provided. That will give us areas to look at. I am quite satisfied that Newry and Mourne District Council is actively pursuing those areas and has been doing so since the events of last Monday. Investigations into the distribution of food, particularly where it is being done below the radar, are extremely complex in nature and time-consuming. It is a question of being thorough and following all the leads, including examining a lot of paperwork and conducting traceability. So, unfortunately, I cannot be precise about how long it will take before the local authority can be definitive about where the meat has gone.

Mr Buchanan: I have no doubt that this is of grave concern to the Department. Take a look at the two sites in question. How many people have been arrested?

Mr Jackson: That is a matter for the police. I do not believe that individuals were arrested.

Mr Hatch: There were no arrests to my knowledge.

Mr Buchanan: No arrests. Does that not cause you some concern? Here is an illegal operation that has been ongoing and is putting meat somewhere. We do not know whether it has gone into the food chain or where it has gone. Individuals have been involved in this but no arrests have been made. That is not a very good multi-agency approach.

Mr Hatch: The police led the operation and it was executed on the day under police warrant. The evidence has to be gathered and put to the suspects, if it is sufficient. Until that point, neither the police nor my investigation team is in a position to pose those questions. You must gather the evidence, build your case and then put it to the defendants or suspects in good time.

Mr Swann: Michael, you mentioned that ear tags were seized. Were they traced to stolen cattle?

Mr Hatch: I do not know the details and, if I did, I could not share that sort of information. That would form part of the investigation.

Mr Swann: In gathering further evidence, will you be using forensic accounting on either of the sites or for any of the individuals?

Mr Hatch: Do you mean a financial investigation?

Mr Swann: Of course.

Mr Hatch: Again, I cannot go into the detail of the Department's investigation, but, generally, for animal health and welfare investigations, we do not use forensic accountants. At times, and generally speaking, we use forensic analysis of ear tags, for example, to see whether they have been interfered with or reused. That is one of our options. If you suspect, for example, that an ear tag has been transferred from one animal to another, you can use that sort of forensic analysis. However, I cannot really go into the detail of the evidence gathering for this case because I simply do not want to jeopardise any prospects of securing a successful outcome.

Mr Swann: You went out of your way to say that the CIS has not been involved at this stage. Why did you feel that was necessary?

Mr Hatch: During some of the media interviews last week, there appeared to be confusion on the part of the interviewer about who the investigators were. It was simply to distinguish that for the benefit of the Committee.

Mr Jackson: When forensic accounting comes into play in a food-related investigation, what tends to happen is that you have got sufficiently far in an investigation before you consider that it would be fruitful to go down that route. So, in general terms, forensic accounting is not the starting point in a food-related investigation. It is something that will be considered when the picture has been established.

Mr Swann: Would the FSA do that?

Mr Jackson: In the case of this activity, it could be a number of bodies. It could be the local authority. It would not be the FSA. However, we do have a way to assist local authorities with such operations, because they can be expensive. We operate a fighting fund to which local authorities can apply, and we will provide financial assistance to undertake whatever work is deemed necessary.

Mr Byrne: Obviously, as a scrutiny Committee, we have to try to reflect the concerns of the public. Which of those organisations initiated the situation regarding visiting the farms and premises? Which organisation would have been first alerted?

Mr Jackson: Again, without wishing to go into any detail that could potentially compromise the investigation, the way that those operations come together is that they start with fragments of intelligence. They may come from one source or from different sources. Then, the challenge is to piece together the various bits of information that lead us to determine that an operation is the right way forward. Information can come to more than one of the organisations through different routes. The key thing is that we work effectively together. We work together with anyone who has an interest in food fraud or animal-related activities to put those parts of the jigsaw together, and we then mount an operation such as was launched last Monday.

Mr Byrne: Which agency or organisation will now have the greatest authority and responsibility to progress it to an ultimate conclusion?

Mr Hatch: We will share our roles. Essentially, the evidence from the animal health and welfare investigation will be gathered by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Any evidence on the food safety aspect will be conducted by Newry and Mourne District Council with FSA oversight. We cannot prejudge a case.

Mr Byrne: So, there is a collection of agencies but nobody is really taking the lead role, is that right?

Mr Jackson: It is important to understand that each of the agencies has a different role to play. As long as we are all aware of what our roles are and we are joining up effectively, we should get the right outcome. It is just a reflection of how there are different organisations involved with different responsibilities. As Michael said, the live animals are very clearly a DARD responsibility. Under the system in Northern Ireland, the activities around food and the handling of food are the responsibility of district councils.

Mr Byrne: I will make one final comment. There is a general perception among the community that all those agencies want it to go away in time and that it will be forgotten about.

Mr Hatch: We would certainly love the criminality to go away. Part of the logic for of the operation is to hopefully act as a deterrent to others who would consider establishing anything that is going to threaten food safety.

As we said earlier, over the past 18 months, there has been a determined effort from the Minister and her staff to tackle rural crime and to assist the police regarding rural crime. We have put resources and effort into that. We have had a number of successes in the broader agricultural crime fight, and last week may also turn out to have been a successful operation.

Mr Jackson: I will just add to that. Over the past 18 months to two years, a significant number of issues have been brought forward from intelligence that have led to detailed investigations, not all of which will immediately hit the public domain. However, I would like to provide the assurance that, if anyone is suspected of being guilty of wrongdoing in food safety matters, the Food Standards Agency will treat it with the utmost importance. We will work with the various authorities to make sure that the matter is thoroughly investigated and brought to the appropriate conclusion.

Mr Byrne: Is the Department satisfied that it is only cattle that were involved and not sheep or horses?

Mr Jackson: I think it would be better not to go in to that particular area given that this is a live, ongoing investigation.

The Chairperson: It is hard to leave it there. You could assuage the fears and concerns of the population if you were able to say now that there were no other animals involved.

Mr Jackson: My understanding is that the focus of the investigation has been around cattle.

Mr Milne: You have stuck to the script pretty well. I will try to come at it from another angle. Over the past six months, how many cattle have disappeared in the North? How many have farmers reported as being stolen or whatever? Those statistics must tell you the possible amount of meat that has gone into the food chain. If you cannot answer the question today, maybe DARD could supply the Committee with the figures of incidents where cattle have been stolen. We need to have some joined-up thinking. We are going to have a debate shortly on waste, but that problem might be much more extensive than the single item that we are going to debate. It is the same with this issue. If we find out that 1,000 cattle are disappearing a month, we know that they are going somewhere.

Mr Hatch: I can certainly get the data for the past six months, but I think it has already been disclosed that, over a period of years, 9,000 cattle have been reported as missing or stolen. Exactly where those cattle have gone, we do not know.

Mr Milne: I understand that —

Mr Hatch: There are other places apart from the food chain. There is the possibility, for example, that cattle can be buried and money saved from not having them properly disposed of. I obviously do not have evidence of that, but there are alternatives to where cattle may be when they are reported as

missing. There is a sanction if you fail to dispose of your livestock properly. You are not allowed to bury your livestock. So, that is one option. I am not hiding from the fact that some of this is serious criminality.

Mr Milne: Yes, it is organised crime.

Mr Hatch: In the general area, there is a lot of work ongoing with the police on livestock theft. The Minister has met the Chief Constable on a couple of occasions. She has met David Ford from the Department of Justice, and I understand that she is meeting him again next week. At the lower operational level, there are a couple of groups. The police now have a rural crime unit, and there is a steering group that is trying to direct the police and us in how best to tackle the issue. There is also a multi-agency livestock theft group that is being led by Chief Inspector Humphries. That includes the guards, our police, Revenue and Customs and the Department in the South. They are looking at whatever way is possible for us to tackle this scourge.

There have been modest successes. For example, on a couple of occasions, stolen sheep have been identified through DNA and returned to their proper owner. Stolen cattle have been intercepted at a meat plant and re-identified. Again, that is forming part of an ongoing investigation. So, there have been some successes on the ground. There have also been a number of measures to try to assist the agriculture community to do their bit. There is a scheme now where texts get sent round farmers if there is suspicious activity. I am on that myself, so I get a feel for what is happening on the ground, and I have to say that there are quite a few texts. People are being encouraged to freeze-brand, to improve lighting and to install CCTV. Attempts are being made, but we do not hide from the fact that there is terrible criminality going on. One of the threats of that is that cattle are being re-identified and being submitted into the food chain. There is an obvious risk from that, and we are doing our utmost to try to challenge that.

Mr Milne: Is there a regular multi-agency sit-down to discuss the whole thing of farm crime?

Mr Hatch: Absolutely. The livestock theft group meets every month, and it moves about on both sides of the border. There is, allegedly, a border trade in this as well. So, we are trying to do as much as we can. The Ministers are meeting as well to see, at their level, what controls can be put in place to try to make it more difficult for those people to operate.

I am not here to speak for the police, but the police have devoted resources. The assistance that we are getting from the police now is absolutely first-class. In respect of our relationship, we have been training policemen and policewomen how to identify cattle when they do roadside checks to establish what the correct paperwork is so that they do not get bluffed. They have a 24/7 phone line to the Department if they want to know who the owner of livestock is. There is intelligence sharing. Obviously I cannot go into detail, but there have been improvements there in respect of sharing information. So, there are lots of little bits going on, and we are starting to close in on some of the gangsters.

Mr Milne: Congratulations on the efforts that you have put in. I am very happy with the stuff that you have said regarding your conscientious approach to the whole thing.

Mr McMullan: Were the cattle that were found on the scene tagged?

Mr Hatch: I really do not want to go into the detail, but that is clearly what we are investigating. It is an offence to not have your animals properly identified, so we will investigate any offending of that nature.

Mr McMullan: You mentioned that it could be the case that some of the cattle that go missing every year could be buried.

Mr Hatch: Yes. When people report cattle as having been stolen or missing, neither we nor the police are convinced that every single one of those animals was indeed stolen.

Mr McMullan: Do you agree that this is turning out to be a bigger thing than people thought it was, going back a little bit? We are really getting into it now, and it is starting to evolve into a very well-organised criminal operation.

Mr Hatch: Yes, there is certainly a degree of organisation.

Mr McMullan: Would you not say that there is a high degree of organisation? To move cattle about, get them killed and get them away and all that is not done overnight with half a dozen cattle. You have to be well organised for that.

Mr Hatch: There is certainly a level of organisation. We accept that there is a worrying level of criminality, but we must also keep it in proportion. There are 1.5 million cattle in Northern Ireland, and we are talking about 9,000 over three years. I do not know what that is per month; I cannot divide that in my head. However, we are talking about hundreds out of 1.5 million, and there are tens of thousands of movements of livestock as part of normal business. We have to have systems and regulations in place that take account of normal business. Our regulations are made to try to keep overall control, but you cannot have a system in place that completely prevents movements and normal agricultural business.

Mr McMullan: That is the purpose of tags.

Mr Hatch: Yes, the whole identification, registration and movement system is to ensure traceability of livestock so that we know where animals are at any one time. To be honest, Northern Ireland has a very good knowledge of where livestock are. So, if we get hit by epizootic disease and have to trace animals, the vast majority of them will be where they are meant to be. Undoubtedly, however, there will be some animals that are not and some that have had identification switched.

The Chairperson: I will go round again if need be, Oliver. It is obvious that there is a lot of information that you cannot or are unwilling to divulge because investigations are live, but can we bring some clarity to the situation? What alleged breaches or offences have been committed here, and what is the maximum penalty for those?

Mr Jackson: From the perspective of food safety and those matters that Newry and Mourne District Council is responsible for investigating, clearly it is illegal to slaughter animals for human consumption and place them on the market other than through an approved establishment that has the appropriate controls in place. That will be a key issue that Newry and Mourne will investigate.

Mr Hatch: From our side, we are investigating the animal identification regulations and animal by-products. The proper disposal of animals and parts of animals is, again, a legal obligation. In very general terms, we are investigating allegations along those lines.

The Chairperson: Again, for both of you: what are the maximum penalties?

Mr Hatch: In general terms, and not talking about this case, because —

The Chairperson: No, we cannot, but, in a general sense, what are the maximum penalties?

Mr Hatch: There is imprisonment for breaches of animal health and welfare legislation. You can be imprisoned for three months and more. I might be better waiting and giving you a written reply on the actual penalties. I do not want to be guessing.

The Chairperson: We do not want to give out false information. So, if you are not sure, yes, we will wait for a written submission. We ask that that be submitted as soon as possible.

Mr Hatch: Right, and just to clarify, it will just be in general, because it varies from one piece of legislation to another.

The Chairperson: Yes. I will talk about this specific case, and I understand that you will not be able to tell us some aspects of it. You said that carcasses were found on site.

Mr Hatch: Yes.

The Chairperson: Where they in a shed, or where were they?

Mr Jackson: The important fact is that carcasses were found that were not in an approved establishment for slaughter and cutting. The fact that they were in any kind of building that is not an approved establishment is a matter that needs to be fully investigated.

Mr Irwin: This concerns my constituency, and I welcome the fact that you have found this illegal slaughterhouse. It certainly has health implications, so it is good that at least that has stopped. There are a number of issues around the whole situation. I have been a farmer myself, so I am fairly aware of it. I am sure that you will agree that no one would send their cattle to an illegal slaughterhouse if they were prime animals. There would be no benefit to that; it would be negative from the farmer's point of view. Someone had to move those cattle illegally to that slaughterhouse, so there should be some evidence somewhere that you have found to show where those cattle came from and what has happened. It seems that, in the past, it has been difficult to get evidence on people who do things like this, and I hope that, this time, you can get some evidence and put a stop to this sort of behaviour. Farmers and herds in Northern Ireland are strictly monitored as to where their cattle go. If they are moved from herd to herd, that is OK, but, you cannot just move them to an illegal slaughterhouse and cover it up. Let us hope that every effort is made to make the people who are guilty amenable. This illegal slaughterhouse is not just acting on its own. There has to be a bigger picture here.

Mr Jackson: I can perhaps give you some confidence around where we are going in this general area. You will probably be aware that there have been several reviews of the horse meat incident last year. The Food Standards Agency commissioned its own review by Professor Pat Troop at a very early stage to see what we can do to improve the regime. One of the recommendations that we are currently implementing is to develop an intelligence hub, and this will be a management system that will bring lots of different factors in. We will look at horizon scanning and things that could be happening out in the environment that would encourage people to be thinking about breaking the law in relation to food, then pulling in the snippets of information that I referred to earlier that come from various sources, including whistle-blowers and people who are prepared to share information around wrongdoing.

We are building the model up on this at the moment, and this will result in a series of what we call agents being in place. There will be an agent for Northern Ireland, and that person will have a responsibility to build these networks and get closer to the ground and make sure that we pull all of the information together in a timely way and get to the point where we are better able to anticipate what people might do, rather than being in a situation where you are trying to deal with it once someone has done something wrong. An awful lot of work is still ongoing, and, indeed, when Professor Elliott's report is published in late spring or early summer, further work will be agreed to build this whole system and make life more difficult for those who are intent on breaking the law.

Mrs Dobson: I know that you said that you cannot go into specific details on the breaches while they are being investigated, but when do you feel that we will know the outcomes of the investigation? Do you have any idea of how close we are to that?

Mr Jackson: Again, it would be impossible to put any concrete measure around that.

Mrs Dobson: Is it at a fairly advanced stage?

Mr Jackson: I think that it is fair to say that, because of the complexity of food-related crime, these can be quite long and drawn-out processes. I can speak from experience, and I know that, from the time that you unearth the initial facts to get the level of detail, for example going down the route of forensic accounting and everything that is involved with that, it can be a long process before one is even ready to have a file for consideration, either by the local authority or by DARD.

Mrs Dobson: Are you talking months?

Mr Jackson: Most definitely. It is a process that you cannot rush. You have to take the time to establish the facts and put all of the evidence together.

The Chairperson: OK. I think that everything has been covered that can be covered today. I think that all members have asked their questions in the different spheres that they can in order to interrogate and scrutinise this. I feel that we will need to have a follow-up presentation from you. Again, I know that you cannot put timescales on it, and we do not know what progress will be made — that is in your hands as the investigating agencies along with the PSNI — but the PSNI are up to talk

to us about rural crime in May, and I feel that that might well be a good opportunity to have you back up again alongside them in order to talk about this. I think that, if you are up at that time also, then we can maybe get into specifics, hopefully more so on this case and then on other developments that will hopefully have come out of this case. There may also be further developments in last year's horse meat scandal, and maybe we can get an update on that as well, because, to my knowledge, there have not been any arrests around that scandal.

Mr Jackson: Just to emphasise the point that I made earlier around how long these investigations can take, there are still police-led investigations into matters associated with the horse meat incident that are ongoing. Those are progressing, and it is just a reflection of how long it takes to be able to get matters of this nature to the point where you are ready to make a case. However, I can assure you that that is definitely ongoing.

The Chairperson: Was anyone brought in for questioning by the PSNI, or if you have the jurisdiction or authority to do that, did you bring anyone in for questioning about this incident?

Mr Jackson: I cannot answer for the police, but what tends to happen in investigations of this nature is that you gather the initial evidence at a particular location on a day, you make an assessment, you make inquiries and you try to establish what you think is going on. It would be quite normal then for any individual who you think may be associated with that to be formally interviewed some time down the line. That tends not to happen there and then on the day; you gather the evidence, and then that is when you would normally conduct formal PACE interviews.

Mr Swann: Gentlemen, you talked about all the different agencies that you are working with. Is there an international aspect to this that you are working on? I do not mean just the Republic of Ireland, I mean European as well. Not specifically, just in general to the work you do in regards to illegal meat or horse meat or whatever.

Mr Hatch: There is some work done Europe-wide in intelligence and following up of investigations. Certainly, my own staff have had to, on occasions, seek witness statements from other countries across Europe, but it would probably be exaggerating to say that this is an international investigation.

Mr Jackson: On the wider front and in the wake of the horse meat scandal, the European Commission set up a specific food fraud unit that will be tasked with addressing this issue on a community-wide basis. The world has definitely changed following the horse meat issue, which spanned across Europe, and this new food fraud unit will allow a much more structured approach to be taken forward across the various countries.

The Chairperson: Can I seek agreement from the Committee that we be provided with written updates on the situation as it develops before May? Are members agreed?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Byrne: Can I just ask one further question? In relation to the previous issue of horse meat in that part of the world last time, we were told that a number of crates of imported meat — essentially horse meat that had been mislabelled — were in cold storage in Newry. I remember asking some months afterwards whether they had been disposed of, and we were told that, as of then, they still had not. Have they ever been disposed of?

Mr Jackson: The key point here is that any meat that was not correctly labelled was prevented from entering the food chain and being distributed, but, as I said, this is still very much a live investigation. Depending on the offences that may have been committed, it is necessary to preserve the evidence. However, the key thing and the assurance is that, once this material has been found, it is taken under the appropriate control of the authorities and cannot enter the food chain. It will be disposed of at a point in time. As with any other evidence, it will be dealt with when the matter has been brought to a conclusion.

The Chairperson: OK. Can we seek agreement to forward the papers and the Hansard report of today's meeting to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, gentlemen, for your time, your presentation and your answers to our questions.