



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Bovine TB Eradication: DARD Briefing

8 April 2014

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 Judith Cochrane
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr William Irwin
Mr Declan McAleer
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Ian Milne
Mr Robin Swann

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 Andrew Kell	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Ian McKee	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

The Chairperson: Kate, is there anything that you want to say about the news that the test, vaccinate or remove (TVR) exercise has not been cleared by the Executive?

Mrs Kate Davey (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): No, Chair, there is not. Unfortunately, it limits what we can discuss with you today on TVR. We will be very happy, once we get Executive clearance, to come back and update the Committee at your request.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

From the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, (DARD), I officially welcome Kate Davey, a principal officer; Colin Hart, the deputy chief veterinary officer; Roly Harwood, the senior principal veterinary officer; Andrew Kell, the head of the TB research branch; and Ian McKee, the head of the TB policy branch.

I ask you to take no more than 10 minutes to address the Committee on any additional points that are not in your briefing papers. Some papers on the TVR exercise that were to be cleared by the Executive yesterday were not considered, and you are, therefore, restricted in what you can say. We will leave it there, if you like. No doubt, there will still be questions that you may find difficult to answer. We will just have to try our best.

Mrs Davey: That is fine. We are happy to work with you.

The Chairperson: Kate, are you going to lead off for us?

Mrs Davey: Yes. Thank you for the opportunity to provide the Committee with an update on bovine TB. We will be very limited in what we can say on test, vaccinate or remove.

I am pleased to report that there has been an improvement in the TB position in 2013 compared with 2012. TB herd incidence has fallen from 7.32% for the year ending 31 December 2012 to 6.44% for the year ending 31 December 2013. The TB herd incidence at the end of February this year was down again to 6.34%.

Although there has been a 12.7% reduction in the number of new herd breakdowns during 2013 when compared with 2012, there has been an even greater reduction — 24.1% — in the number of animals removed as reactors in the same period. During 2013, there were 1,479 new herd breakdowns, and 8,271 animals were removed as reactors, compared with 1,695 new herd breakdowns and 10,897 reactors in 2012. So on that front, we are moving in the right direction. We welcome that reduction in TB but feel that there is no room for complacency. We need to reduce TB levels in our herds further, with the ultimate aim being eradication.

I will move on to the strategic partnership. You will recall that the Minister announced last September that she intended to establish a TB strategic partnership group to develop a long-term strategy to eradicate TB from the cattle population here. The Minister indicated that the eradication strategy should be all-embracing and address all relevant issues and that the partnership should produce an action plan to implement that strategy. The action plan should outline the cost of implementing the various elements and detail how those elements will be funded and who will lead on their implementation, so there is very much a shared approach.

It is unfortunate that we have not yet been able to establish that partnership, but I can advise the Committee that work is progressing exceptionally well. To help the strategic partnership to be effective, we have to recruit a chair and members to that group. I am pleased to tell you that we are about to advertise those posts. It is anticipated that the chair will be appointed first and will then be part of a panel to recruit four or five individual members. The appointment of the chair is expected to take place in May. Once established, the partnership group will be tasked, as the Minister said, with developing a long-term strategy and implementation plan within 12 months.

I turn now to the recent TB research findings. You are aware that the TB biosecurity report was published last November, and the Committee received a copy. The report revealed the need for training to be provided for farmers on biosecurity in general and more specifically in relation to TB. More could be done, for example, to prevent incursions by wildlife into cattle housing and feed stores. We have already met stakeholders once to assess what can be done to raise biosecurity awareness. We are also considering what TB biosecurity training and capital funding could be made available for on-farm biosecurity improvement measures in the context of the next rural development programme.

The recently completed slurry literature review provides a comprehensive review of national and international scientific papers and conference proceedings on the role that slurry might have in the transmission of bovine TB to cattle and wildlife. The final report was published in February this year, and copies have been provided to you and to key industry stakeholders. It is also available on the DARD website.

The review confirmed that *Mycobacterium bovis* (*M. bovis*) is capable of surviving in the environment for extended periods and that environmental contamination may be important in the indirect transmission of TB between cattle and wildlife. The survival of *M. bovis* in artificially infected slurry indicates that the organism may survive for up to six months in stored slurry. That is why it is recommended that slurry be stored for a minimum of six months before being spread on the land. The report also recommends ways of spreading slurry to minimise aerosol spray, which should be adopted.

Officials are considering the report in more detail. Given the association between disease risk and the use of farm contractors highlighted in the TB biosecurity report, what other advice can be provided to minimise even further the risk of transmission from that source? That is under consideration.

Ongoing TB research projects are continuing in connection with the gamma interferon testing, and we anticipate receipt from the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) of the badger cattle proximity study in the very near future. The report will be shared with the Committee once it is available. In the

coming weeks, we plan to hold a stakeholder event to see how the messages from the research projects, the reports of which have been published, such as the biosecurity report and the slurry literature review, can be effectively disseminated to farmers. We want to discuss that with the industry to see how best to take that message forward and ensure that, as much as possible, it ends up being implemented.

I will highlight where we are with TVR. Substantial work has been undertaken to progress the TVR research project. At the outset, the Minister made it clear that it was vital that Northern Ireland embarked on an intervention research project that could provide a unique contribution or insight to TB and TB in wildlife here and that we must avoid simply replicating expensive interventions or research being taken forward elsewhere.

You can appreciate that the design was complex, and several key steps had to be carried out to inform that design. One such step was the badger sett survey over 200 square kilometres of County Down to establish the location and number of badger setts. That work has been completed. The level of landowner agreement to allow the survey to take place was excellent and led to over 80% of each of the areas being surveyed, which far exceeded our 70% target.

In addition, external modelling work, as we said previously, was undertaken by the Food and Environment Research Agency (FERA), which has changed its name to the National Wildlife Management Centre. We used that to help us to identify the most appropriate area for the study, the optimum size for the study and the frequency and duration of the intervention.

Mapping outputs have helped our veterinary epidemiologist to design a TB mandate that is best able to provide an evidence base, taking account of our budgetary constraints. I am sure that the Committee is aware that the TVR project is cross-cutting: you have acknowledged that. It is cross-cutting with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) from a finance point of view, and it is cross-cutting with the Department of the Environment (DOE) from the point of view of its responsibility for the protection of wildlife. It is also cross-cutting with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), which has responsibility for licensing under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act. Therefore, in compliance with the ministerial code, Executive agreement is required to allow TVR to go ahead. The Minister has put a proposal on TVR to the Executive, and, following the Executive's decision, officials will be happy to update the Committee again at your request. I hope that that has been helpful. We are very happy to take questions.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, Kate, for your presentation. I will start off with questions. With all due respect, we have listened to a presentation that lasted 10 minutes and took a lot of time to prepare, but all I heard was phrases such as "ongoing work", "very near future", "engaging with other Ministers", "going to the Executive" and "nothing back yet". I have not heard anything concrete, of significant substance, targeted or strategic. We are told that we are still researching. We have seen no action on the ground. A strategic partnership group was to be set up. The last time that you were here, we questioned the need for such a group. We have now been told that it has been delayed. It was to have been in place by the end of 2013, with the strategy produced within 12 months of its establishment. There has been slippage because of competing TVR priorities. There has been a lack of progress in most, if not all, the research that was to have been commissioned because of vacancies and gaps in AFBI and elsewhere. What are the competing TVR priorities? Should the issue not be a massive priority for the Department? Why is it not? From my point of view, it is as if nothing has changed since the last time you were all here before us. It is feeling a bit like Groundhog Day, and we have seen nothing move forward. In fact, we have just been given excuses as to why things have not moved forward.

Mrs Davey: Mr Chairman, I am disappointed that that is the conclusion that you came to. I can assure you that substantial work has been undertaken on TB, TVR and on the research projects. The Department sees TB as a very high priority. We have a substantial team working on it, and we are delivering our ongoing TB programme daily. That is very comprehensive work that continues to be delivered, and the results that I indicated to you show that it is working. We are testing, and there are results on the ground. We are delivering on TVR. It takes time to design the project. There are so many steps. I appreciate that you find it frustrating, but we are at a crucial stage at which we are waiting to get something through the Executive — I cannot pre-empt the Executive's decision — and we hope that that comes very soon. We have done a lot of preparation, and it is unfortunate that we cannot tell you about that today, but the groundwork has been done on TVR, and we are now waiting on the decision. That is where we are sitting.

There has been a lot of work and good output with our research projects. As I said, we have brought to fruition the biosecurity report, the slurry review, and we are about to get the proximity report. We have had numerous meetings with our stakeholders, and we want to meet them again to look at how we are disseminating that biosecurity message. We want to put it out there effectively. We have liaised with other colleagues across the Department to ensure that the rural development programme has measures that will help our farmers to address TB, whether that be training or capital measures. We are hoping to get capital measures in there so that we can allow and can support farmers to implement the recommendations in the biosecurity report. These are measures such as badger proofing farmyards and fencing off setts, and farmers need money to carry out those types of actions. We are hoping to get that built in.

There is a push on TB, and I certainly do not want the Committee to think that it is not a priority for the Department. It is a major priority for the Department.

The Chairperson: The Committee's recommendations 4 and 5 relate to awareness of the potential impact of liver fluke and Johne's disease and the sensitivity of the testing for bovine TB. We are told that that study was commissioned on 23 April 2013 but that it is yet to start because there are vacancies in key posts.

Recommendation 6 is that DARD reports back to the Committee on the methods available to improve the performance and reduce the cost of the gamma interferon test. We are told that that was scheduled to be completed by December 2013, but that slippage is due to vacancies in key posts.

Recommendation 7 is that DARD brings to the Committee as soon as possible proposals that explore how the comprehensive and detailed information currently available on strains can be better interrogated and used in the programme to eradicate bovine TB. We are told that progress has been delayed because of staff vacancies but that it is anticipated that initial proposals will be considered by DARD in the near future.

On your most recent visit to the Committee, you told us that this was a highly complicated disease with all sorts of strains in all sorts of places, and we had to understand the disease before we could have any action on the ground. We are being told, however, that everything has been delayed because of vacancies. Maybe it is the same position that is vacant, or maybe there are different vacancies. Somewhere along the line, things will have to start maturing and coming before the Minister so that you can assess them. Until we do that and until we understand the disease, how can we do anything on the ground and know that it will be a success?

Mrs Davey: I fully accept that we have to understand the disease. We are working with AFBI to support it in filling the vacancies, and, when possible, our veterinary service is trying to do some elements of the work. Things may look bleaker than they are. I assure you that we continue to work to try to get those key posts filled in order to progress work on the disease. We are also looking to other areas in which research is being taken forward so that we can build our knowledge. It may not be direct knowledge on the situation in Northern Ireland, but it is wider. Work is ongoing on that. I do not know whether anyone wants to come in to support that, but it is a priority for us. In a smaller organisation, it is, unfortunately, sometimes difficult to get key people and to keep them in post. However, it is not something that we are not working to try to address.

The Chairperson: If you are telling us, and trying to assure us, that work is ongoing, we are going at a rate of knots, and it is unfortunate that people are not in place, why do we need a strategic partnership? The update report states that the partnership will:

"address all issues; including how the Strategy will be funded; who will lead on the implementation of the various elements of the strategy; improve disease detection; improve biosecurity; improving communications with farmers and vets; and developing our ability to address the wildlife factor."

Is that not what is going on? If it is, why do we need another partnership when we have partnerships that have got you to this point, and they have agreed to the TVR.

Mrs Davey: We have a lot of groups working to bring things together, but, as the Minister explained when she came here in September, we see this as a closer working relationship with industry and more ownership. We have our annual eradication plan, but we want a long-term strategy. The Department does not want to say to the industry that this is the strategy, and this is what we are going to do. It is about giving the industry a clear seat at the table and asking it to sit down and develop a

long-term strategy. We will not eradicate the disease in five years' time. The strategy that has just been published in England talks about eradication in 2038, so this is a long-term strategy. It is about jointly owning that strategy, because this will take money. We all have to work together: the Department, the industry and the players will all have to do their share to move forward. Farmers will also have to play a part. It is about reinvigorating the work that we are doing and driving us towards that ultimate long-term strategy goal.

The Chairperson: How will the partnership be able to come to an accommodation on how the strategy will be funded? How will that work?

Mrs Davey: We want key people from the industry round the table — people who have the respect of the industry, from the processing industry right through to farmers. It is about us working together, looking at the key elements of the strategy and considering who is best placed to deliver that and who can fund it. Although TB is a priority for the Department, we do not have an unlimited budget. If we put the total cost of TB into context, it costs us about £30 million a year. We will have to look at how that money is currently spent. Does our industry partnership feel that that money is best spent the way it is spent? We will have to address everything, including compensation. It is about going forward jointly on a united front. Is it better that our money be put into 100% compensation or 80% compensation? These are figures off the top of my head. Should we use the rest of the money for other actions? It is about looking at the money currently available and looking for new money, which does not have to be government money, to try to tackle the disease once and for all and have a long-term plan to do it.

Mrs Dobson: Kate, thank you for your briefing. I certainly welcome the reduction in herd incidence and the resultant compensation reduction. However, as you said, there is no room for complacency. This is no guarantee of future performance.

Recommendation 13 suggests that DARD should reinvigorate biosecurity training and advice. Your response states that TB biosecurity leaflets are available on the DARD website. Is a leaflet your definition of "reinvigorate"? I am sure that it is not what Committee members had in mind. Given the huge implications for the industry and the taxpayer, would DARD not consider a more robust approach than putting leaflets on a website? The Committee recommendation states that advice and training should be delivered:

"at a pace and in a setting that best suits the farmer and herd keeper."

I share the concerns of the Chair. You have had many months to plan and reinvigorate your approach. What more could you have done other than publishing a leaflet on a website?

Mrs Davey: It is not just a leaflet on a website. We have delivered training. Messages have been given out. There was specific bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) training for farmers, for example, which delivered a biosecurity message and tailored it around TB. That message has been delivered. It is also about promotion. We have had numerous promotion events, such as the winter fair.

As I said, the plan was to continue to do that, to put clear training in place and to secure money through the next rural development programme to allow that training to be tailored to the farmers' needs and to be delivered. Work is ongoing and will continue. When we go to the Balmoral show, for example, which the vast majority of farmers attend, we will have TB information on the DARD stand. We will try to deliver that message very clearly. A message is also delivered directly to individual farmers every time there is a breakdown, so assistance is given. I will allow some of our veterinary colleagues to come in.

Mr Colin Hart (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): I will start off with the leaflet. It is more than a leaflet, but it was developed with all the farming organisations. We were all round the table, and we identified the key issues that would protect the herds. It was done with the involvement of the industry. A theme that we need to keep coming back to is how to engage farmers and make them realise that there is so much that they can do to protect their herds and keep disease out. Farmers are absolutely central to the whole message of biosecurity. We fully accept the point that we need to get that message across. Over 3,000 farmers attended the BVD training. Interestingly, there is a commonality between animal diseases: what will keep one animal disease out will keep a number of animal diseases out. The BVD training is vital, and as the BVD programme is encouraged and rolled out, protecting herds against reinfection from BVD will help to protect them against TB.

My staff in the veterinary service give specialist biosecurity advice to farmers who have had breakdowns, but, over and above that, we try to promote the message that is on our website and has been for some years. The principles have not changed; they are all there. Nevertheless, the TB biosecurity study highlighted that farmers are quite often aware of what is required from biosecurity but do not always see the need to implement those measures. We have to encourage that. We somehow have to find a mechanism to get farmers to engage in biosecurity, not necessarily to understand it better but to practise it better.

I will finish by saying that we increasingly recognise that biosecurity needs to reflect the role of the badger. When I say that, people regularly say to me that there is nothing they can do. In fact, we strongly believe that there are things that can be done, including the fencing off of badger setts on pasture and the securing of housing to prevent badgers entering those houses to steal cattle foodstuffs. Those are increasingly recognised as key measures in the prevention of TB. There is still quite a long way to go, but we are actively involving private vets and are trying to promote our message with farmers in all the available public forums. We consider biosecurity to be an absolutely fundamental part of TB eradication.

Mrs Davey: We are trying to educate our future farmers. It is part of the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise's (CAFRE) programme to put out the message about the importance of biosecurity very strongly to students. The next generation will also hear that message.

Mrs Dobson: I should declare that my husband is one of those farmers with whom you need to engage. I am heartened by your reassurance about what is happening with biosecurity. It was concerning and quite shocking to read in the update report that a leaflet was available on the website.

The Chairperson touched on the subject of my supplementary question, which is about recommendation 4: research on liver fluke and Johne's disease. I was concerned to read that there has been a delay at AFBI because of vacancies; I know that Kate touched on that and explained the rationale behind the vacancies. As the Chair said, we have been here before. The biosecurity report was held back for the very same reason: vacancies. Why is the Department not concerned about these delays? What are you doing about the delays? In this case, if I am right, there was a one-year delay. What is your best guess as to when the 30-month study will finally begin? Has the cost of the study been agreed with AFBI, and will you revisit that as a result of the delay?

Mr Ian McKee (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): AFBI has been seeking to fill key vacancies. It is fair to say that they lost a number of key staff. BVD and Johne's disease have been very important in the past couple of years, and the people who would have been dealing with strain typing, liver fluke and other diseases have gone to BVD and Johne's disease. That is crucial and will have a benefit, but it has created vacancies that have to be filled. There is a small pool of people. Adverts have been put out, but AFBI does not yet have people in post. There has been duplication. Perhaps someone is stepping in to hold the fort until someone else can come in to help them. Also, epidemiologists have been diverted to the TVR project, which has been a major piece of work over the past 12 months and more.

Mrs Dobson: When do you think it will be —

Mrs Davey: Sorry, I do not have a date at this stage, but we will certainly come back to the Committee. We will discuss the issue again with AFBI and come back with a date by which it anticipates filling the posts.

Mrs Dobson: Because the vacancies have not been filled, you have no costings.

Mrs Davey: There will be costings. We can also provide those, but we do not have them to hand today. Those will all have already been agreed with AFBI.

Mrs Dobson: You will provide those.

Mrs Davey: Yes.

Mrs Dobson: Thank you.

The Chairperson: Jo-Anne makes a very good point. Ian has talked about people moving to other Departments because of priorities, but if the priority was liver fluke and Johne's disease, that is part of the network of research that needs to be done in respect of how they affect bovine TB. Surely, if someone was moving sideways in AFBI or anywhere else, they could have conducted a piece of work or a survey on liver fluke and Johne's disease — they were doing that anyway — and how it interacts with and affects bovine TB.

Mr McKee: They moved out of AFBI.

Mrs Davey: They moved to the private sector. I am sorry; we should have clarified that. They did not move within AFBI. They moved to the private sector to take forward work on BVD and Johne's disease. Unfortunately, therefore, what the industry is doing has had a knock-on effect on us.

The Chairperson: OK. Another point that Jo-Anne raised is the biosecurity research, which was delayed. It was finally presented to us in November 2013. What has been done with research since then? It was five months ago. How has that been uploaded into the system?

Mr McKee: We, as officials in DARD — administrative staff, policy people, scientists and vets — have had quite a number of meetings to review our existing biosecurity advice, to sharpen that and to see ways in which we can promote it. We have touched on some of those issues already. Also, having got the slurry literature review, because there is a commonality in some aspects, we want to take the main points of both the TB biosecurity study and the literature review — as well as a number of other developments, not necessarily within Northern Ireland but elsewhere in these islands — and bring those to the industry. We are planning a stakeholder workshop to look at that, because we can do so much, but we need the advice of the industry on how best to get the message across.

Some of the things that have been identified in the biosecurity study might be causal, but there might just be an association. For instance, it seemed that people who had experienced a breakdown had more reliance on agricultural contractors than people who did not have a breakdown. We are not saying, and we should not say it in this meeting, that agricultural contractors cause TB. That is not the case. There might just be an association, but is there something that we need to do? Is there some advice that we need to give specifically to the contractors or to farmers who employ contractors about things that need to be done? It is about going into that in more detail so that we have advice that is tailored to need and that is endorsed by the Ulster Farmers' Union, the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association (NIAPA), the National Beef Association etc, as well as by private vets. I hope that answers your question.

The Chairperson: So, since November, you have had the report, you have had meetings and you have thought about it. What has actually been done?

Mr McKee: As I explained, we have sharpened our advice. We are taking that forward with the industry, but we have also been engaging in the development of the new rural development programme because we can see avenues that would be positive for the industry. Training is seen as possible. Also, as Kate has mentioned, there may be barrier methods to keep badgers in particular from entering feed stores. The badger/cattle proximity study will be with us very shortly. It has been indicating that, where badgers enter farmyards, it is generally not into cattle housing. However, they know where the feed stores are, and spilt grain is an issue either at the feed store or outside the feed store. They are opportunistic feeders. If you have solid doors and the feed is locked away, that removes the incentive for a badger to come anywhere near the cattle housing. That might be an opportunity for some capital funding. It might not be very expensive to do, but it might be very worthwhile. We are working through that as well.

Mr Byrne: Chairman, like yourself, I am a bit disappointed that the strategic partnership group has not yet been set up. The facts are that we spent £317 million up to 2011 and, Kate, you reckoned that, in the current round, we are talking about £30 million per annum. How much of that £30 million goes, first, on the private vets sector, secondly, on DARD vets and administration, and, thirdly, the compensation total for the 2013 figure of 8,271 cattle?

Mr Roly Harwood (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): Sorry, Mr Byrne, which —

Mr Byrne: A breakdown of the £30 million between the private vets sector, DARD vets and administration and the compensation total for the 8,271 reactors.

Mr Harwood: I have the 2012-13 figures. Compensation totalled £16,157,933. Private veterinary practitioner (PVP) costs were £7,379,000. Our overall staff cost, which is more than DARD vets — it is all the staff involved in the programme — was £6,480,431.

Mr Byrne: Thank you. So, there are three groups that are earning a living out of this. In relation to the compensation, am I right in saying that meat plants can still buy the reactor cattle at a discount of £220 per annum?

Mr Harwood: We have put that out to tender. That is subject to a tendering process.

Mr Byrne: Yes, but I am just dealing with the facts. Am I right in saying that the average price per reactor cattle paid by a slaughtering house was £223 per annum?

Mr Harwood: I am not sure of the actual figure, but it is probably around that.

Mrs Davey: The Department has to tender for those processes. We have to take the best offer for them. There is only so much that we can do to achieve a value for those animals. There is not the same demand for those animals as there would be for other cattle. It is not comparing like with like.

Mr Byrne: That begs a question. The animal that is a TB reactor is sold to the meat plant and goes into the food chain, but there is no discount on the sale price of the finished product that comes out of the meat plant. Is that right?

Mr Hart: All the reactor animals that the Department purchases go to the meat plant. At that point, they are subject to a detailed meat inspection. Those that pass enter the food chain. Any that do not pass because they have a tuberculosis-like lesion — a number of animals have been treated with an antibiotic or another substance — have to be slaughtered to remove the TB risk from the farm. They are not eligible to enter the food chain. At that point, the Department not only has to accept that there will be no salvage value from those animals, but has to pay the meat plant for disposal of the animal by-product. That takes us to the issue of the price that the Department eventually gets per head for salvage. There is commercial sensitivity because it is part of an open tendering process that occurs every three years. However, that return is the balance between the animals that enter the food chain, which we get salvage value for, and the cost to the Department of all the others that have to be rendered as animal by-product and for which we incur a cost. It is quite a complex matter, but we try to get the best price for salvage. Ultimately, though, the main direction of the Department is to remove disease from farms, and we have to accept that salvage is the less important side of this. We have to get rid of the disease. We are not allowed to export tuberculous cattle — those that have failed the test. We cannot export them to the South or even to Great Britain, so they must be slaughtered in Northern Ireland and it is a buyer's market; we have to take what he can get. However, we put that out to open tender and try to get the best possible price.

Mrs Davey: I would add that not all abattoirs compete for those animals. Because of the contracts that they have, some abattoirs in Northern Ireland are restricted from tendering for that type of animal. Therefore, the market that we have is limited. It is not a matter of saying, "Because this animal can go into the food chain, it should be worth exactly the same as a prime beef animal." You cannot compare them, even though there is nothing wrong with the animal going into the food chain.

Mr Byrne: I appreciate that, but I am trying to elucidate the facts, which include that, in 2012, the average salvage price paid at meat plants was £223. It took a bit of work to get that figure, but it is in the public interest that we should know. What percentage of the 8,271 reactor cattle that failed the test went into the food chain?

Mr Hart: We have that figure, but not with us. We can get that to you.

Mr Byrne: I would appreciate that because these are important facts. So much fog surrounds this issue and so many people are getting a good living out of this that I am beginning to question the sincerity of the efforts to tackle this problem. In fact, to use a phrase that I have used before, I question whether we are only tinkering at the problem to create the illusion of dealing with it.

Mr Swann: Kate, your statistics were that reactors were down last year from 10,896 to 8,271; and herd instances were down from 1,695 to 1,479.

Mrs Davey: Yes.

Mr Swann: Yet the Department has not really done anything new or additional.

Mrs Davey: I will let Roly explain the changes in the programme's implementation.

Mr Harwood: We have been working hard on the implementation of the programme. When we come across circumstances where there is a rise in disease or a cluster of infection, we increase our testing, use gamma interferon testing and increase the sensitivity level of the testing, or interpret the test more severely, thereby increasing the probability of removing infected animals. It is very important that we apply the programme properly, and that makes a difference to the level of disease. There is nothing specifically new that you would do about it, but it makes a difference. Sometimes, the incidence of disease will rise and fall. You have no control over that because so many different factors affect it. However, we work on delivering the programme as best we can.

Mr Swann: There no additional steps to the programme and, unfortunately, if I understand you correctly, you are just following the programme more vigorously.

Mr Harwood: Yes but it is a good programme. That is what our staff are trained to do; our veterinary staff are trained to assess a situation, the risk in the area, the risk to animals from a breakdown having spread infection to other herds, and to follow up on all of that. That is a very complicated process.

Mr Swann: Were we not doing that in the past?

Mr Harwood: We have been doing that, yes.

Mr Hart: It may helpful to give an example. For every herd breakdown, the veterinary officer will map all the surrounding farms. Those farms receive notification that they are on a tighter testing regime. So, every outbreak creates a lot of work to stamp out the disease in the area. There is nothing to say that the farmer who initially flags up the TB is on the originating farm; it might have come from a neighbour. Therefore, we have to trace the animals. We have to map the area, and forward trace the animals that have left that herd since the last clear test. We identify where they have gone and follow them up. We test them in their herd of destination. If they turn up positive in the herd of destination, we have to test that herd as well. So, when we see what we saw in 2012, that rapid increase in disease, it really means that all the veterinary machinery has to gear up to address the greatly increased pressure for tracings and testing. I think that that is what Roly is saying.

Our PVP contractors responded extremely well, because they can bring in assistance. They did that; they employed more staff to get out and carry out that increased volume of testing. That all happened without anyone really noticing, but that is why our costs went up in 2012: because of the rise in the amount of testing and the rise in the number of reactor cattle to be removed. All of that creates a burden on my staff. As Roly says, the programme is just working its way through, but it takes quite a lot of effort, and that is the key point that I want to make.

Mrs Davey: I would add that working through that programme in 2012 hopefully had an influence on events in 2013. We have seen that reduction in 2013.

Mr Swann: What was the increase from 2012 to 2013, again?

Mrs Davey: Do you mean the decrease from 2012 to 2013?

Mr Swann: No. Was there an increase, then, from 2011 to 2012?

Mrs Davey: There was an increase from 2011 to 2012. I am not sure whether you have that figure with you, Roly.

Mr Harwood: Off the top of my head, at one point in August 2011, we were at 4.99% and then it went up to 7.62%. And then, in October 2012 —

Mr Swann: It was at 7.62% and then it came down to 7.32% in 2013.

Mrs Davey: Yes, and, as of the end of February, we are at 6.34%.

Mr Swann: So, there is nothing additional; it is just that you are applying the programme more stringently. Is that the case?

Mr Hart: As you proceed, you tend to use more severe interpretations, so you take out, as reactors, cattle with lumps that are smaller. You are trying to remove the infection before it can continue. Therefore, the number of reactors tends to go up before it starts to come down, due to the increased severity of our actions.

Mr Swann: I have a final point on that. Rather than introducing TVR or any other programme, three or four years down the line, if the Department were just following its current protocols, stringently and to the letter, and doing the job that it is meant to be doing in eradicating TB, which Roly and Colin have just described to us, is there a chance that the Department is just waiting out TB, rather than taking any initiative against it?

Mrs Davey: No, I do not think that is the case. The programme is vigorously implemented not just in Northern Ireland but in other countries, and that has not got those countries to the point of eradication. We are looking at doing more to get to eradication. We have brought down the figures, and we want to bring them down a heck of a lot more, but we want to get to the point of eradication, so we believe that there is still more to be done, and it is not just implementing the programme.

Mr Swann: What was Scotland's programme for eradication?

Mr Harwood: It would have been the same as ours.

Mrs Davey: TB has been eradicated in Scotland for quite some years.

Mr Swann: Using the same programme?

Mr Harwood: Yes, it was the same type of programme. They are all based on identifying reactors.

Mr Swann: Scotland was able to eradicate TB using the programme that the Department is currently using?

Mr Harwood: Yes, but Scotland did not ever have the same level of the disease.

The Chairperson: On Robin's point, and applying that logic, I believe that the eradication programme in place at the minute is there just to measure disease, rather than stop it.

In the past 12 months, animal TB herd instance has come down in Northern Ireland generally but has increased dramatically in the Ballymena divisional veterinary office (DVO) area, both for animal and herd instance. How do you explain that? The herd instance has nearly doubled in the past 12 months, and the animal instance has increased from 0.2% to over 0.6%?

Mr Harwood: Ballymena actually had a very low incidence. Ballymena stayed very level during the rise that occurred over the past few years, which is excellent. Ballymena had not encountered that rise. If you get a cluster of TB in an area, it can be quite dramatic. They have experienced that, especially in the Broughshane area. Investigations show that the strain of that TB came from a different area of Northern Ireland. It looks like it was brought in and got a hold in that area. They now have — I do not know what you would call it — a high incidence area where they are applying more stringent measures to deal with the disease. They are optimistic that they will be successful with that. The disease tends to cluster. Once that happens, it takes time for it to be dealt with and go away. However, the programme should deal with it.

Mr Irwin: I declare an interest as a herd owner. I am fully aware of TB and the issues surrounding it. Do you accept that, in effect, the Department has made very little headway on TB since the mid to late 1990s? We have not moved that far between 1996, 1997 or 1998 and today. You will accept that, in recent times, farmers have worked with the Department on testing. There have been additional tests and tests due in the summer when farmers are under stress. Normally, farmers could have waited until the autumn to test their cattle, but they now work with the Department. Even with all that, we

have made very little headway. We are talking about a decrease of barely 1% over the last year. We could tinker with the figures and come up with 1% for next year.

If I had a breakdown in my herd, the first thing that the departmental official would ask me is whether I have any badgers. Badgers are a real issue. Do you accept that the badger issue should have been dealt with more robustly in the past?

Mrs Davey: It is not just the badger. This is an exceptionally difficult disease to manage. We are following a very detailed programme that is approved by the EU. Yes, dealing with the badger is one of the issues, and we are certainly looking at that. We are also looking to other areas of these isles that are dealing with badgers. We want to learn from everyone. Dealing with just the badger may not be the answer to eradicating TB but it is certainly one of the factors. We are looking to address all aspects.

Mr Irwin: You say that you are looking to other areas. Has the Department looked closely at badger culls in the Irish Republic or England, for instance?

Mr Harwood: We are in very regular contact with them. We know what they are doing. We know that they feel that that has been successful. We are fully aware of what they have been doing, including their research work.

Mr Irwin: You will accept that TVR has been slow. We have made very little headway on that. We are all hopeful that we can make some progress and get there in the end. However, I am a farmer and I talk to farmers every day who feel that the issue of badgers has not been dealt with robustly enough. I am not saying that badgers are the only issue, but they are a big problem.

Mrs Davey: There is no doubt about that. Although research on specific vaccinations for badgers, for example, is not ongoing here, a lot of work is being carried out in these isles on how to deal with badgers. We want to draw on all of that. We also have to look at the fact that, whatever intervention ultimately happens, it has to be socially acceptable. I fully appreciate the farmer's role in this and the implications that TB has for the farmer. However, at the end of the day, we have to look at what will be acceptable across Northern Ireland.

Mr Buchanan: Folks, I appreciate that a lot of work has gone into this and that a lot of work might be being done. However, we have to ask this question: are we only tinkering around the edges or are we really having an impact and making a difference? As my colleague said, when you speak to farmers out there, they question whether a difference is really being made. It is very difficult to see that a difference is being made at this time. However, let us hope that, if we keep at it, we will see that difference.

What about the Department's project to improve knowledge transfer on TB between the Department and private vets? How is that going? What progress is being made on that?

Mr Harwood: We have been working with the veterinary associations over a number of years. We are in the middle of working up a plan to get better two-way communication with them. We ran a quite successful pilot a year or so ago, but it was on a very small scale and would have been difficult to roll out across Northern Ireland. However, we learned a fair bit from it, so we are taking the material from that and looking to see how we could roll that out to all practices. We are continuing our work on that. In fact, we are meeting them tomorrow to discuss it further.

We provide a lot of information to practitioners. We send out a fact sheet to them three or four times a year. Our local offices talk to practitioners all the time. We send out other communications, and we have a stand at their annual conference and provide a lot of advice there. Overall, a lot of information goes to practitioners. I hope to build on that by getting to farmers the information from the biosecurity work that has been done recently.

Mr Hart: We used private vets as part of the knowledge transfer seminars on BVD. The private vets attracted the farmers to the groups. We used that opportunity to convey the biosecurity message. We recognise that the private vet plays a key role and has a position of trust and confidence among farmers. The Minister has said that she is keen to see that avenue for knowledge transfer explored and developed.

We also have the biosecurity leaflet that Jo-Anne mentioned. The private vets were part of the group that we used to develop that message. They contributed to the advice that we put out subsequently. Indeed, the two associations, the Association of Veterinary Surgeons Practising in Northern Ireland (AVSPNI) and the North of Ireland Veterinary Association (NIVA), collaborated with us on a joint seminar to which we were able to attract 120 or so vets from across the country. Using their offices and that platform, we were able to bring a group together to communicate the TB messages, the importance of the quality of TB testing and the biosecurity message. We were able to use their offices to bring the private sector vets together so that we could transfer our knowledge to them.

We accept that it is very important that both the private sector and the departmental vets give the same message. We are keen to make sure that the messages that get through to farmers are consistent and helpful. That is the way in which we try to use the private veterinary sector.

Mrs Davey: As I said, we are looking at the next rural development programme and trying to get funding in that to allow us to deliver that type of knowledge transfer so that there is money available to do that. I will also add, if the member will permit, you said that we have been tinkering at the edge and asked whether we have done an awful lot. This is actually a two-way issue. Although the Department can carry out all the testing, we need to have our farmers onside in respect of biosecurity. You make a very valid point about getting that knowledge out there. If we continue to test and remove positive animals and we do not get the cooperation that we need out there in respect of biosecurity, we will not get too much further with this disease. So, it is about building that partnership. That is one of the reasons why we are talking about the strategic partnership. It is to ensure that we get that engagement and get that message down on to the ground. Although our biosecurity report covered only a small area, it did not deliver a good message. So, we want to try to address that.

Mr Buchanan: It appears that all these programmes and projects are only in their infancy, and everyone that you have talked about today is looking for money, and you are looking to see if you can get money from somewhere to deliver those and get the knowledge on the ground. To me, that looks to be somewhere away in the future, yet, while we are waiting to put out these programmes, the TB rates are not coming down. We are doing nothing to reduce TB because we are waiting to get all this knowledge out and all these programmes delivered, and we are looking for money from here and there to get all this done. Yet, while we are doing that, there is nothing happening. The level of TB is not coming down. It might come down a few per cent this year, and it will go up next year again and back down again. It is going to fluctuate slightly, but the common denominator is staying the same, practically all the time. Is that really delivering to help the situation that we find ourselves in?

Mrs Davey: I would argue that we are delivering at the moment. We are enhancing that. Yes, we are looking to the likes of the new rural development programme to provide money to enhance what we are doing, but we are not sitting on our hands at this point. As we have already said, training has already been delivered on BVD. We had the colleges trying to educate the new farmers. So, the message is already out there. A stakeholder workshop is about to take place in the coming weeks to try to deliver that message. So, it is not just about the future; it is about planning for the future. Work is constantly being done, and we are also looking to enhance that.

Mr Buchanan: I have one other issue, Chairman. If I picked you up correctly, in response to the Chair earlier, you talked about proposals that you had put to the Executive, and you were waiting on a response. Can you share with us what proposals you put to the Executive?

Mrs Davey: No, unfortunately, we cannot. That is the difficulty. It is confidential to the Executive at this time. Following a decision, I would be happy, as I said earlier, to come back and talk about TVR, but, at this stage, I cannot do that.

Mr Buchanan: If the proposals are agreed, will that have a positive effect?

Mrs Davey: We are talking about proposals around TVR. I cannot go much further than that at this point in time.

The Chairperson: It is a matter of professional pride; I am going to ask anyway. With regard to what you gave to the Executive, you do not have to tell me the detail, but was it simply a proposal for funding, or was it the master plan that is TVR?

Mrs Davey: The TVR is cross-cutting, so the Minister needs the agreement of the Executive. So, it is the entire package.

The Chairperson: When did it first land on the Executive table?

Mrs Davey: It only very recently landed on the Executive table.

The Chairperson: This month.

Mrs Davey: Yes.

The Chairperson: When was it to be on the agenda for the Executive?

Mrs Davey: We would have liked to think that it might have been on yesterday's agenda, but it was not.

The Chairperson: So, the Department is bringing a massive piece of work, and it has put all its eggs in the basket of bovine TB, and it brings it to the Executive table in April, knowing all the issues and difficulties with the Executive, and we are to have TVR rolled out in May 2014. Why are we so late in bringing this to the Executive?

Mrs Davey: Before I answer that question, we have to step back. You said that we put all of our eggs in the basket of TVR. It is a research project, and we have to be clear that it is a research project. It has taken time to design it, and to work it through. Yes, it would have been ideal, had it been done earlier, but it has taken time; it has taken a lot of effort and input from a range of people and organisations to get us to where we are.

The Chairperson: With due respect, we were there; all the stakeholders were agreed a year and a half ago.

Mrs Davey: Sorry, I am not talking about stakeholders; I am talking about the design of the project. This is subject to Executive agreement. We are still working to have that implemented in mid-2014, but it is subject to Executive agreement.

The Chairperson: You talk about it being a research project, but this really is the doing bit in all of this. England is doing, albeit badly; Wales is doing; Scotland has not got any TB; and the Republic of Ireland does things. DARD has not even got to that stage.

Mrs Davey: No, and TVR is a research project. What we are planning on doing will add to that knowledge. We will have to work that through on the ground, assuming that we get approval, and, basically, we will be contributing to the knowledge. You say that each area is doing its own thing. Yes, that is true, but that knowledge is shared knowledge. So, by doing the work that we are doing, we will be adding to that pot of knowledge to look at what best suits us as a way to go forward.

The Chairperson: With due respect, TVR was painted as the be-all and end-all; it was the halfway house between a cull and vaccination. You had all of the stakeholders on board, and I take it that you still have them on board. You have the full support of the Committee to progress TVR, but you are only getting it to the Executive now. We could be in jeopardy of it being in the Executive for a period. You may fail to get it started this year, because of the closed badger season and the cycles that are in the wildlife population. This could be defaulted on for a further year.

Mrs Davey: I cannot anticipate what the Executive's decision will be. Assuming that there is a positive decision, and if we get an early decision, we will have the preparations ready to go once we get a decision. We are working on this to ensure that we get a decision as soon as possible. The badger closed season is still in effect. The closed season ends in the middle of May. We have been working very closely with our colleagues in the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and DHSSPS because numerous licences have to be put in place. Ultimately, it will be for the Environment Agency to decide the timing of a licence. There is no guarantee that you can get a licence directly in the middle of May, when the badger closed season ends. It might be slightly later. In any event, we have a large window of opportunity to take this through June, July, August, September and October. That is what we have been planning to do, assuming that there is Executive agreement.

The Chairperson: You have to go to the Executive on this, officially, but I assume that you have spoken to the individual Ministers involved in order to gauge their level of support.

Mrs Davey: Obviously, we do not speak directly to individual Ministers. We speak to officials, and we have been speaking to officials who have a cross-cutting issue with this. We have been engaging with those for some time.

The Chairperson: OK. So, there are no fault lines there, they are all supportive or at least likely to look at this in a —

Mrs Davey: We are not aware of any issues.

Mrs Dobson: This is just a quick point to get back to my initial question. Colin, you talked about getting the message out on biosecurity. My initial question was about the leaflet on the DARD website. Just for clarity on getting that all-important message out, does the letter go out after a breakdown? You spoke about the letter to farmers and the range of things that you do to increase awareness. Does that go out after a breakdown?

Mr Hart: Yes.

Mrs Dobson: Why not before?

Mr Hart: We do both, actually. We have a detailed biosecurity guidance note called 'TB in Your Herd' on our website. It is tailored for farmers and it is available for farmers who are not currently broken down. We also have a biosecurity code that was developed with the industry, but it has been there for a number of years, so it may not just jump out at people. It is a piece of work that is still —

Mrs Dobson: Sorry, this is all on the website?

Mr Hart: This is on the website. When somebody has a TB breakdown, our procedure is to provide them with a package of information that includes a variety of leaflets explained by the veterinary officer who covers the breakdown. That includes public health advice to the farmer and his family, because TB is a potentially zoonotic disease. It includes biosecurity advice and an explanation of the restriction notices, because no animals can move out of the herd at that stage. There will be an explanation of what the farmer can expect in the testing that we are likely to carry out and how long it might be before he could expect to be freed up again.

Mrs Dobson: But, all that information comes after a breakdown?

Mr Hart: That is all given out after, but —

Mrs Dobson: What is given out before a breakdown?

Mr Hart: Before, there are the leaflets or, rather, the booklets that I told you about; they are much more than leaflets. 'TB in Your Herd' —

Mrs Dobson: Are they sent out? Is a letter sent out to farmers?

Mr Harwood: A letter is sent out a period of time before a test is due, and that letter is —

Mrs Dobson: Does it have biosecurity information in it?

Mr Harwood: Yes, and, in addition, some of our staff on the ground have the leaflets, and whenever they are doing, say, brucellosis testing, they will also give the leaflets out and chat to farmers.

Mrs Dobson: Is the bulk of the information that Colin spoke of, with the detail, sent out essentially after a breakdown rather than before? Is the same quantity and detail sent out before a breakdown?

Mr Harwood: We would not send out the actual detail of the processes and procedures around a breakdown ahead of —

Mrs Dobson: I am just concerned about biosecurity details. You mentioned the website, but not every farmer, as we know, has access to broadband. If they do not have access to the website, what do they get? Do they get details before they have an inspection on biosecurity?

Mr Harwood: Yes, they do. If they have an inspection, or if a test is done during the year, the inspector may well give them a leaflet and chat to them about biosecurity —

Mrs Dobson: What I am trying to tease out is whether they get as much information before or whether all the detail comes after they have a breakdown — the cart after the horse, so to speak. Are they getting all the detail after they have had a breakdown? Is there as much before?

Mr Hart: Part of our response to that is the BVD training, in that we are able to get out to farmers before they have had any trouble with TB and impress on them what biosecurity is. The private vets delivered that training under the current rural development programme. If you can keep BVD out of your herd, there is a fair chance that you will keep TB out of your herd; certainly, the cattle-to-cattle element of TB. Yes, you might need to do a bit more with badgers to protect the feed stores and so on that Ian referred to. The CAFRE training, of course, for the CAFRE students, many of whom are going back to their family farms, is aimed at getting that message across as well.

Mrs Dobson: I am thinking about elderly farmers. You are assuring me that a letter with as much detail is sent before a breakdown as after?

Mr Harwood: About biosecurity.

Mrs Dobson: About biosecurity.

Mr Harwood: Yes.

Mrs Dobson: Is there? Because you know I will check. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Davey: This is also annual information that goes out on annual herd tests. As I said earlier, we target big events where farmers will be present, such as the Winter Fair and the Balmoral show, so that there is a better opportunity to talk directly to farmers rather than bombard them with information through the post.

Mrs Dobson: I understand, but I am thinking in particular of an elderly farmer such as my own father-in-law. There is nothing like reading a letter to go through the details. He would certainly never view a website, and he is not fit enough to go to the Balmoral show.

Mrs Davey: There is annual information going out.

Mrs Dobson: Are you confident that it has the same level of detail as that sent after a breakdown?

Mr Harwood: Yes. There is enough information to give the broad principles of biosecurity advice. To give somebody specific biosecurity advice, you need to be on the farm and to go into it in an awful lot of detail. That would probably happen more at the time of the breakdown or if a farmer were to ask for that.

Mrs Dobson: So, there is more information given after breakdown than before.

Mr Harwood: It would be more specific. There is enough information to allow somebody to take the measures that they need to take to protect their herd.

Mrs Dobson: But, in essence, the specific information is given after a breakdown.

Mr Harwood: The specific, tailored information would be, because you cannot give that unless you go onto the farm.

Mr Swann: Just to carry on from Jo-Anne's question, do you ever review your notification letters to make them less threatening and intimidating to some of those who receive them?

Mrs Davey: Policy is delegating this one to implementation. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Harwood: Right, do we have a review —

Mrs Dobson: Can I say in advance that we are not a tag team? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Harwood: We have not reviewed them recently, no.

Mr Swann: It has come back to some of us that when your letters come through with notification of reactors, some of the wording can be quite threatening, or can be perceived as threatening, rather than helpful or instructive.

Mr Harwood: They are not meant to be threatening, obviously. Some are legal notices and have to be written in a particular way. We have a series of letters that we send out to notify people about all sorts of things —

Mr Swann: Maybe they could contain the legal notice but with an explanation of what it means.

Mr Harwood: Yes.

Mr Swann: In simple English, I think the campaign model should be.

Mr Harwood: Yes, some of them now are quite specific around breakdowns that we are looking at to separate the two, so maybe that would help.

Mrs Davey: We take the member's point.

Mr Irwin: Most of us around this table probably have been vaccinated at some stage against TB, so it is going to be complex and hard to eradicate. Do you see vaccination as a possible long-term solution?

Mrs Davey: Vaccination of cattle?

Mr Irwin: Yes.

Mrs Davey: First of all, it is against EU law at the moment to vaccinate —

Mr Irwin: I understand that, yes.

Mrs Davey: With regard to the EU timetable for vaccination, we are probably talking nine or 10 years. Substantial work is being undertaken in England on vaccination. They have been working closely with the Commission to progress that and do field trials. That work is developing, but the EU has set out the timeline for that, and it really does not see that happening before 2023.

Mr Irwin: That is some nine years away. That is a long time, but at least there may be an opportunity at some time in the future.

Mrs Davey: There is, and a lot of work is being done to progress this.

Mr McKee: Vaccination is not an assured, foolproof method. If it was permissible, it would help in the majority of cases but not every animal vaccinated would be protected, so there could still be TB as a result. The other thing we need to be careful about is the acceptability of vaccination in relation to exports. Not every country would accept such a product, so we need to be careful there. That is why a long-term testing and approvals route has to be taken. There would have to be worldwide acceptability that this is safe and appropriate. There are quite a number of issues that are difficult for us to see the end result of from where we stand at the moment. We see the road ahead and the approvals that have to be gone through, but the reason for those approvals are important, and we should not just assume that vaccination would be the silver bullet that will solve TB. Sorry, but that is the reality.

Mr Irwin: Yes. That is OK. Thank you.

The Chairperson: No other member has indicated. Perhaps, I could ask one question — or a further question, if that is the best way to put it. The Minister made a statement to the House in November about alternative control herds. How is that going?

Mrs Davey: I will pass that across in a second. The work has been done to put those in place. We have worked with the industry. Certainly, applications for alternative control herds have been open now for quite some months. I think that we have had one.

Mr Harwood: We have not approved any. There has been some interest. However, nobody has taken it through the whole approval process. We have been in discussion with the stakeholders about that.

The Chairperson: What reasons were given for why it has not progressed in the way in which the Minister had hoped?

Mr Harwood: The whole thing was taken forward with the industry and stakeholders. So, the purpose was, obviously, either to allow movement from breakdown herds into them in certain circumstances, or, because of the nature of them, to reduce testing, which gives people more of an incentive to take them up. Overall, it did not suit the way in which the people whom we have talked to do their business at the moment.

The Chairperson: Is there any way in which the Department could modify its system to suit business and industry better?

Mr Harwood: We have to be very careful because biosecurity is the key point. What we cannot do is relax it and allow the potential spread of disease in an area. We have to be very careful. We have been in discussion, but I suppose that we are just playing it by ear at present. In the early part of the year, we were told that people were very busy with other things. I do not know: perhaps, if they get their heads round it, they will want to take it up. It is not something that will just sit. We will have to work with people to see what we can do. We also have to be very aware that there will probably be a Food and Veterinary Office mission to Northern Ireland in the coming months. We have to be very aware of that as well.

Mrs Davey: I would just reiterate that the scheme was worked up very much hand in hand with the industry. It was not about the Department imposing it. Obviously, it was about us protecting our export markets, but we did work it up closely with the industry. Certainly, if there becomes a demand, we can look at it. There is just not the demand out there at the moment.

Mr Harwood: Over the winter, we maintained arrangements to help farmers if they ran into problems with welfare or finances. So, there was something in place to accommodate that.

The Chairperson: No other members have indicated that they want to ask further questions. So, again, thank you very much for your time. I recognise that you have been here for quite a long time. Thank you for your time, your presence here, your presentation and your answers. It is a very serious subject. We all take it very seriously. Again, I appreciate your time.

Mrs Davey: Thank you.

The Chairperson: You are still my favourite people in the Department. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Davey: We are glad to hear that.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much.