



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Agricultural and Rural Crime:
Police Service of Northern Ireland

27 May 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Frew (Chairperson)
Mr Joe Byrne (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Mr William Irwin
Mr Declan McAleer
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Assistant Chief Constable George Hamilton	Police Service of Northern Ireland
Superintendent Brian Kee	Police Service of Northern Ireland
Sergeant Gary McMullan	Police Service of Northern Ireland
Mr Jeff McNamara	Police Service of Northern Ireland

The Chairperson: I welcome to the Committee ACC George Hamilton; Superintendent Brian Kee; Sergeant Gary McMullan; and Jeff McNamara, the operations manager. Gentlemen, you are all very welcome to the Committee. It is good to have you here to discuss the very serious issue of agricultural and rural crime. Brian, it is very good to see you again; I know you from your time in Ballymena.

I ask members to keep their questions concise and to the point. Following the briefing, we will go straight into questions. George, I know you are leading off. I ask you to keep to 10 minutes, if you can. Please assume that we have read the material you have given to us, and we will take it from there. Thank you very much.

Assistant Chief Constable George Hamilton (Police Service of Northern Ireland): Thank you, Chair and members. Good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee and report on agricultural and rural crime. As you are perhaps aware, I am Assistant Chief Constable George Hamilton. Superintendent Brian Kee, Gary McMullan and Jeff McNamara are accompanying me here today. Brian is actually the service lead for rural and wildlife crime.

As a Police Service, we are very aware of the significant contribution that the rural community makes to a successful Northern Ireland. We recognise, as, I am sure, you are only too well aware, that the agrifood sector is one of the biggest and most successful sectors of the local economy, with over 49,000 farms in Northern Ireland supporting in the region of 24,000 jobs. So we, as a Police Service, take this seriously, and I know that you, as a Committee, do as well. That is why we are here today. The sector contributes some £4.4 billion to the Northern Ireland economy, and the aspiration is that that will grow to £7 billion by 2020.

I am pleased to report that crime against the farming community is relatively rare. That is not to say that it does not have a big impact on victims of the crime. Burglary, robbery and theft against farms and farmers accounts for 2.3% of all such offences and 0.8% of all crime across Northern Ireland. That is just trying to put it into perspective and a strategic context. In the financial year just ended — 2013-14 — there were 870 agricultural crimes. You will probably have picked that up from the documentation we supplied. That is a slight increase of five offences on the previous financial year, but it follows two years of decreases: we had a 5.76% decrease in 2011-12 and a 2% decrease in 2012-13.

Of course, statistics are only a small part of the story. We recognise that, and we take it seriously. We do not hide behind those relatively small statistics. We understand the impact that crime against the farming community has on farmers, their families, farm workers, businesses and the wider rural community. It is for that reason that we take it seriously. I chair a gold group internally in the Police Service of Northern Ireland — Brian has been appointed as the service lead — to give this momentum so that our attention and focus remains on rural crime. Every rural community in Northern Ireland has a dedicated neighbourhood policing team, with an inspector, a sergeant and a number of constables allocated to that function.

In a joint initiative between the Department of Justice community safety unit, the National Farmers' Union, NFU Mutual insurance and us, a data analyst has been dedicated to rural crime since September last year. Her role is to analyse rural crimes and identify emerging crime patterns and series. In fact, some of the documentation that you got in preparation for this meeting has been prepared by that analyst. That information is then supplied to local police commanders, because this is a local problem, to put in place the appropriate operational tactics and plans to prevent and detect rural crime. The data analyst has been very helpful in producing problem profiles on agricultural crime, livestock theft and farm machinery theft, and subject profiles on who the suspects may or may not be. That work is all to support the front end of detecting and preventing crime at district level.

Without boring you with the detail, we have a control strategy that is based on the principles of prevention, information-gathering, enforcement and reassurance. Rather than me telling you the good work that Brian does day in, day out, I will get him to explain briefly those four pillars in the six minutes that we have left.

Superintendent Brian Kee (Police Service of Northern Ireland): OK, sir. Thank you, Chair, and ladies and gentlemen.

A significant amount of work is undertaken under each of those four key pillars. I will give you a flavour of some of our work under the heading of prevention. Our crime prevention officers (CPOs) and neighbourhood policing team (NPT) officers regularly engage with the rural community at rural events, as evidenced recently at the Balmoral show and at other recent events in Shane's Castle, Antrim, and in the Carnlough, Ballycarry, and Islandmagee areas of Larne. Further rural crime prevention events will be held throughout the summer, such as the rural safety event, organised by Downpatrick NPT and Downpatrick police and community safety partnership, to be held at Down racecourse this Friday. We will also have a presence at Ballymena show on Saturday, at Gosford Park in Armagh on 14 June and at Omagh show on 4 and 5 July. Those events provide an opportunity for police not only to engage with the rural community but to discuss farm security and how it can be improved through products such as CCTV, Tracker, construction equipment security and registration scheme (CESAR) data-tagging and, indeed, closed shackle locks.

Under the heading of information, through those organised rural crime prevention events and informal day-to-day contact with farmers whilst on patrol, police officers are continually encouraging farmers and the rural community to report suspicious vehicles and behaviour. Farmers know the rural community better than anyone and know what is normal and what is unusual or suspicious. Live-time reporting of unusual or suspicious activity significantly enhances our opportunity to prevent and detect rural criminality.

Under the heading of enforcement, the analysis of rural crime enables us to identify hotspots and target our high-visibility patrolling into those areas. All officers have a 24/7 contact number for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm the bona fide of any livestock being moved at night. Agricrime-related searches have been conducted; for example, in the Armagh area in January, a mini excavator, a slurry tanker, stolen number plates and cash were recovered, and two people were arrested. An additional 23 of our road-and-armed support vehicles have been fitted with the latest tracking technology from Tracker. That has proved successful already, with a quad that was fitted with Tracker, which was stolen in the Crumlin area, being recovered in Glenarm.

Under the heading of reassurance, in addition to the engagement events outlined above, police officers and our CPOs engage with farmers at UFU offices, at livestock marts, on their farms and through the Farm Watch rural text alert schemes. Farmers are encouraged to sign up to their local Farm Watch scheme to have property security marked, to receive signage for display at the roadside or on their laneways and to be part of the local text alert scheme. Rural NPT teams use their PSNI Facebook sites to post information and appeals about rural crime in the area and to inform followers of recoveries and arrests.

In relation to organised crime, I anticipate that the Committee will be interested in any involvement in agricultural crime by organised criminal gangs. Assistant Chief Constable Harris has previously briefed the Policing Board that the crime operations department, in association with colleagues in an Garda Síochána and the National Crime Agency, is investigating organised criminal gangs involved in plant theft. Those are complex investigations and are ongoing. Colleagues in district policing, including response officers, NPT officers and detectives, are also progressing investigations into rural crime. In respect of the border districts, that involves regular contact and liaison between officers on both sides of the border.

The Committee asked us to address some specific issues. The first was rural crime statistics. I understand that the latest quarterly update to the end of March 2014, which covers the financial year 2013-14, has been supplied to members. The second was radio reception in the glens of Antrim. I am accompanied by a colleague from our information and communication services branch, who will address any concerns the Committee may have on that issue. The third was the Tracker and CESAR initiative. A total of 119 devices were fitted during the initiative — 106 Tracker units and 13 CESAR units — protecting over £1.7 million of machinery. When comparing January to March 2014 with October to December 2013, the number of machinery thefts in E district is reduced from 24 to 23 while the number of machinery thefts in F district was reduced from 17 to three. The rural crime partnership is in discussion about extending the initiative to the other four rural districts: C, D, G and H.

The fourth issue was in relation to the alleged illegal slaughter of animals. You have just had a comprehensive briefing from colleagues in Food Standards Agency and DARD on that issue. The fifth was the implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. The Act was commenced on 2 April 2012 and placed responsibility for enforcement of the welfare of domestic animals, such as dogs, cats, horses etc, with the local council animal welfare officers (AWOs). Responsibility for the enforcement of the welfare of farmed animals continues to rest with DARD, while PSNI retains responsibility for the investigation of organised crime involving animal fighting, such as dogfighting and badger-baiting, and the enforcement of any wildlife crime involving illegal poaching or protected birds and plants. The PSNI has a good working relationship with the AWOs in local councils and officials in DARD. The 2011 Act, while still in its infancy, is working well. A memorandum of understanding is being developed between PSNI, DARD and local councils to reflect the enforcement responsibilities of the Act.

Finally, the sixth was in relation to Redcaps Security Solutions Ltd. My letter of response to the Committee was issued on Friday 11 April 2014. I can further advise the Committee that Mr Brown of Redcaps Security Solutions Ltd provided a further presentation to the rural crime partnership meeting this morning.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, Brian and George, for that comprehensive presentation and for the information you have given to us to date. I will go straight into questions. I and other members pushed for some time for a more organised rural crime unit or task force. I am sure that those are the words that would have been used at that time. Whilst we have the establishment of a rural crime unit, which came into effect on 12 August 2013, is it not true that all we got — all you appointed — was a data analyst, which basically only records the crimes and the statistics but does not delve down into the prevention or apprehension of what would be, in most cases, very well-organised criminals?

Assistant Chief Constable G Hamilton: I will answer that first, and Brian can sweep up any detail that I miss. The important thing from my point of view is to get the functionality right. This is a highly localised problem that springs up all over the place. I did not want — my predecessor was not of a mind, either — to create a tactical support group-type group of 30 cops that would parachute into wherever we thought the next rural crime issue would spring up. Over 50% of Northern Ireland is rural. We wanted local commanders to understand the impact of rural crime on farmers, farm workers and the rural community. That centralised piece could more intelligently grab the information sitting in various parts of the organisation and put it into the sorts of packages that you have been supplied with today. This is basically an overview document; it does not do full justice to the work of the analyst. There are subject profiles, which are profiles on suspects that give the full intelligence picture around

them and what they have been involved in previously, trying to be predictive about what they might do in the future. I do not want you to think that the analyst is simply there to make sure that records are kept right; their job is much more forward-looking and predictive.

When I go out as the Assistant Chief Constable for the rural region to hold accountability meetings with district commanders once every four or five months, toes are held to the fire at those meetings with regard to what people are doing about rural crime because although, relatively speaking, the number of crimes is small, they are high impact. As they are high impact on the rural community, they are high impact on the rural community's confidence in policing. So, this is important to us. What I do not want to do is give district commanders locally some sort of get-out or the ability, even in good faith, to abdicate their personal local responsibility because there is some unit at headquarters taking responsibility for it. The headquarters unit is there to supply information and provide them with packages, and then I hold them to account for what they have done with those packages.

One thing that the analyst also does is actually a results analysis. So, there is a little bit of internal competition between each of the rural districts, which is healthy. If F district has managed to reduce plant machinery thefts from 17 down to three in a two-month period, how come E district has reduced it by one? What is F district doing that E district needs to learn? It is that sort of thing. So, there is a balance, Chair, between that and having some sort of centralised unit. We could dismiss it as being just one analyst. There is actually a constable in there as well. As much as possible, I want to be able to empower people out there in the rural districts to go and do the business, and then hold them to account for doing it. The centralised bit is more about information management, rather than going and touching the collars of thieves, as such. We want that to stay local. I think that is a healthy thing.

The Chairperson: Yes. Thank you. I commend — I think you said that it was F district — that reduced the incidence of machinery theft from 17 down to three. Having spent time on DPPs, and not being completely endeared to them or their functionality, I know — and I would never ever want to suggest that anyone could blame the police for crime stats or levels, because that is a societal issue and what you are there to do is investigate that crime — that although the information and data that is being analysed, collated and collected could well go some way to showing local commanders on the ground the context, prevalence and everything else, there must be a massive part of that which is organised crime and which will work with no borders, through jurisdictions and indeed across districts in this jurisdiction. Surely it cannot be left to a local commander to police that if it occurs across multiple districts and jurisdictions? Surely something must be organised at the top so that we are more organised than the organised crime gangs?

Assistant Chief Constable G Hamilton: Organised criminality is really about two things. It is not about rural crime, cocaine, firearms or even human trafficking. At its core, organised crime is about power and money. All of those other things are the commodities that they trade in, in order to gain their power and money. Actually, agricultural crime is no different. We have around 130 detectives in organised crime branch centrally that my colleague ACC Harris has responsibility for. There is absolute cross cutting. Even in the past week, partly in preparation for the Committee, there has been ongoing dialogue between the chief superintendent in organised crime branch, my office and probably Brian on a more routine basis.

So, our organised crime branch is interested in and involved in some of what we have seen in the case that some of our colleagues were talking about in the previous session. We are trying to develop intelligence around it to see how organised it is — not just that case, but things like that. It is the same with milk smuggling: where there is the ability to gain about £35,000 on one load of smuggled milk because of the quota system, that will always be attractive to organised crime gangs because of their insatiable desire for money and power. I would like to reassure the Committee that the organised crime branch has been entirely supportive and cooperative with the districts. It is actually represented on that gold group that I talked about, which I chair a couple of times a year, to make sure that we are all facing in the same direction. In a big organisation of 10,000 people, it is easy for people to run off and do their own thing. The idea of the gold group is strategically to pull together all the activity to make sure that information is being shared and that people are going in the same direction.

The Chairperson: I want to give you an opportunity to counter allegations in my constituency of North Antrim, where farmers have been putting massive pressure on the police over the last number of years in sporadic periods, especially when the crime levels have gone up and down. There may be some individuals, who may not even be that well organised, who have been allowed to get away with certain rural thefts and crimes because they may be giving information to the police on other cases. How would you counter that?

Assistant Chief Constable G Hamilton: Well, nobody is above the law. I will say that that does not happen. It is a concern that I have heard not just in the realms of rural crime and agricultural crime but right across the piece. Are people protected because they are giving information to the police? The relationship that the police develop with people who give information to us is very tightly regulated. The Office of Surveillance Commissioners comes in once a year and does a very in-depth assessment and provides a report to the Chief Constable and the Policing Board about the integrity and compliance with the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000. Someone's involvement in crime, under that legislation, has to be on the periphery of crime. It is not as if people will be engaged in widespread crime and all the rest of it. That is simply not permissible. It is outside the law. Police officers that I know who deal with those issues, apart from their own integrity, are not going to sacrifice their pensions by operating outside of that, quite frankly.

So, from the reports that I have seen from the Office of Surveillance Commissioners, which oversees all that world of information getting to the police and all the rest of that covert world, I am satisfied that there is a degree of integrity and compliance that is reassuring. It is hard sometimes to give the detail of that into the public domain, but the job of the police is to give enough information that provides people the reassurance that is there. If people on a specific case suspect that, we encourage them to go to the Police Ombudsman, because the ombudsman also has the power, on a case-specific issue, to come in and look at a person's status, look at what they have been involved in, look at the quality of investigation, and if they were not pursued, why were they not pursued? That is probably the most reassuring thing that someone can do if they have that suspicion: to instigate that level of scrutiny through the Police Ombudsman's office.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you very much.

Mr Buchanan: There have been 870 crimes committed in the agriculture sector. How many people have been brought to book for those 870 crimes?

Assistant Chief Constable G Hamilton: There were 144 arrests in the same period. As the financial year has just ended, bringing them to book could mean more than arrest. It could be getting them through court, convicted and all the rest of it. So, a number of those will be in train, as it were. Those are the sorts of questions that it is my job to ask people locally to make sure that we exploit every opportunity we can, first of all to prevent the crime and then, when it happens, to bring those who have done it to justice if we can. Brian, I know that you have more detail around that.

Superintendent Kee: Just to reinforce what has been said, the crime statistics for Northern Ireland for the PSNI, published a couple of weeks ago, highlight the outcome rates around each rural district. Looking across the six rural districts of C district to H district, the average outcome rate was 29.4%. So, effectively, three in every 10 crimes that occurred throughout the rural districts had an outcome.

Mr Buchanan: Out of the 144 arrests that were made, obviously cases go through to the PPS. Do you find that many of the cases that go to the PPS are thrown out and not taken to court?

Assistant Chief Constable G Hamilton: The PPS applies two criteria to the decision on whether to prosecute. One is whether the quality of evidence is there to meet the evidential threshold. The challenge for the police in that is whether we have done everything possible to make sure that we have as good an evidential package as we can have. However, even with our best efforts, we sometimes cannot get up to that threshold. The other criterion is public interest. The PPS may declare that it is sometimes not in the public interest to prosecute. That is its responsibility and role, rather than that of the police. Police would be frustrated here and there in individual cases around that, but we have to respect the system and the office of the Public Prosecution Service.

Mr Buchanan: I am glad to see that, over time, you have reduced from 17 to three in F district. What has been done to cause that reduction? F district was plagued with farmers losing tractors and all types of machinery. I am glad to see that there is a reduction in that, so what has been done to cause that reduction?

Superintendent Kee: You will obviously be aware that a lot of work is ongoing across F district. We have some good people there, particularly in neighbourhood policing teams, with a huge commitment to dealing with rural crime. Prevention and detection initiatives are ongoing on a regular basis, and I mentioned the Omagh show, which takes place on 4 July and 5 July.

The rural crime initiative announced by the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Agriculture last December also contributed to the drop. Through the good work of the rural crime data analyst, it was identified that the majority of crime occurs in the E and F districts. Therefore, some money was found to subsidise the fitting of security equipment for farmers across those two districts. As I mentioned in my introduction, 119 devices, mainly Trackers, were fitted across those two districts. There was a degree of publicity around that. The work that the local officers, the PCSPs and the farming community are doing, backed up by initiatives from the rural crime partnership, are helping to make the difference.

There have been calls to extend that initiative across the other rural districts. It was discussed this morning at the rural crime partnership meeting, and it is intended to do that. I welcome that and hope that it will lead to further reductions in rural crime.

Mr Buchanan: It is a success story that I welcome.

Assistant Chief Constable G Hamilton: On that point, you are probably well aware that there is a huge amount — I do not want to blame the victims of crime here — around crime prevention, plant and site security and so on that farmers in the rural community could do for themselves. So, when our neighbourhood officers in rural areas find a tractor or a piece of plant machinery sitting with the keys in it, making it easily moveable, we encourage them to go and find the farmer and discuss that, but not in a lecturing way. This is about the owners, the farmers, the police and everybody else taking responsibility. There is no point in making it easy for criminals, because there may be an organised element to it, as we have discussed, but there is also a large amount of opportunistic thieves out there.

Mr Irwin: My own farm was robbed a few years back, and a Land Rover and trailer stolen, so I know what it is like to be at the other end. In E district, there were 249 offences. Our local paper ran the headline, "Rural Crime Capital of Northern Ireland". There is a perception among rural people that, if you are insured, police are not that interested. That perception is out there. I know one guy outside Markethill who lost 100 sheep about four weeks ago. He is very disappointed by the police response. I can only say "very disappointed" because he was. I think that it was 24 hours before the police came to him. There was a camera a mile from the scene where a vehicle was spotted. He requested that the camera be checked, and I am not sure to this day whether it has been checked against the time and date.

If a bank were robbed overnight of £10,000, it would be headline news and the police would be very proactive. When £10,000 worth of sheep are stolen, there seems to be a different attitude. It may be a perception, but that is how farmers and the rural community feel. What do you say to that?

Assistant Chief Constable G Hamilton: Brian may be able to deal with that specific incident; it does not sound like a good-news story. As police officers, our job is to keep people safe and lock up bad people. Whether or not somebody is insured is of secondary importance to those two key principles. We have a job of work to do to convince people that the reason why we joined the police in the first place was to bring people who commit offences to justice, keep people safe and protect the vulnerable. I am disappointed to hear about your friend's experience of the police. Obviously, I am happy to drill into that; in fact, I will be drilling into it to find out what the story is. Brian, you may be aware of some of the detail.

Superintendent Kee: Yes, the incident was reported on 1 May. It was reported to us at 10.05 pm. I understand that it was agreed with the injured party that the police would call the next day and record a statement of evidence. Investigations are ongoing into that incident, Mr Irwin. Through our inquiries, in liaison with an Garda Síochána, a number of those sheep were recovered in County Mayo. The injured party has attended and identified those sheep. Obviously, it would have been preferable if our work had led to the recovery of all the sheep, but a proportion of them have been recovered and inquiries are ongoing between the PSNI and an Garda Síochána into who was involved in not only stealing those sheep but transporting them.

Mr Irwin: I am aware that a small number of sheep have been found. I am not sure whether he has recovered them yet, but they have been held down south. Someone noticed something suspicious at the livestock mart and reported it to the guards. There seems to be a difficulty with accessing cameras. Police in the area have told me they have to request traffic camera footage and, sometimes, that is slow in coming. It seems strange that, when there is a robbery of that magnitude, it takes so long to tie things down, view the camera footage, and all the rest of it.

Assistant Chief Constable G Hamilton: We can look into that. There should not be a delay with that; it is not that complicated these days. We have the people with the expertise and capacity to do it. There seems to have been some sort of glitch in this case, Mr Irwin, and I am happy to have it looked into.

Mr Irwin: That is OK.

Assistant Chief Constable G Hamilton: There are different elements. There are CCTV cameras in the conventional sense. Sometimes, if cameras are privately owned, there is a difficulty in accessing them because you are reliant on the owner of the premises. There are also automatic number plate recognition (ANPR) cameras that monitor traffic movements on the road. We have full control of those. That type of data can be accessed with the click of a mouse or the press of a computer button. I am not saying that all 6,500 officers are fully au fait with how to go about doing that, but we can look at that issue. If there is a problem, we can certainly rectify it. It should not be a problem.

Mr Irwin: I was speaking to two officers on Saturday. I was to come back to them today on that issue. We are getting conflicting messages from officers. In my area, a large number of tractors have been stolen over the past six or eight months, some of which have been recovered. In one particular instance, the farmer himself traced his tractors. There is a perception that, if a farmer can find a tractor, why can the police not do so? You can understand that perception.

Assistant Chief Constable G Hamilton: Absolutely. People's perceptions are based on their experience. The difference between perception and reality is wafer thin sometimes. There will be no defensiveness from us on that. We want to learn from these cases and make sure that we can improve the quality of the service in the future.

Mr O McMullan: Thanks for your presentation. On the theft of animals and, in some cases, the non-theft of animals reported stolen, what happens when you find out that animals reported stolen have not actually been stolen? There have been some cases of that, and a lot of time has been wasted on it. To my knowledge, no one has ever been brought to book for that.

How are you working with the meat plants? I know that, although you can steal a number of cattle, for instance, you can steal quadruple the number of sheep; lorry-loads of them. They are taken away and disposed of very quickly. Has our method of checking the meat plants etc improved? If not, how do we do that?

Superintendent Kee: On your second question, Mr McMullan, as outlined in the papers, the number of livestock thefts represents a small proportion of the overall cattle and sheep numbers in Northern Ireland, but it still has a very significant impact on farms and farmers.

Unfortunately, on occasion, it can be some days, in respect of cattle, or some weeks, in respect of sheep, before a theft is actually reported to the police. Obviously, that causes difficulties and challenges for the investigation.

When livestock are reported stolen to the police, we use our reporting system to notify the abattoirs and meat plants via our colleagues in DARD, who then communicate that information to the Department in the South. The inspection of meat plants is not undertaken by the Police Service. We have a system in place whereby we notify abattoirs and meat plants of the theft of sheep or cattle, even if it is some days or weeks after they have gone missing. Through that, we endeavour to try to stop the outlet for some of the stolen livestock getting into the abattoirs.

Mr O McMullan: Has anybody ever been prosecuted through that system of contact that you have with meat plants, the Garda Síochána and all those other contacts, no matter where they are staying? Has anybody ever been prosecuted through that system?

Superintendent Kee: I am aware of information coming back to the Police Service about the suspicious movement of sheep and cattle into the system. However, I am not aware of any specific prosecution arising from that. I am aware of individuals having been prosecuted for the theft of livestock, but I do not know whether that originated from the process that I just outlined.

Mr O McMullan: So, we do not know. Right. Have there been any cases of stolen animals — again, I go back to the example of sheep — ending up in Scotland?

Superintendent Kee: We are interested in where sheep and cattle go to after being stolen, what happens to them and what the outlet is.

There is a lot of focus on the North/South and South/North movement of stolen livestock, but it is not unreasonable for us to assume that stolen cattle or sheep could also go across the water to GB. I do not have any specific information or intelligence that that is the case, but we keep an open mind on the destination of stolen cattle and sheep and we are aware of that as a destination.

Mr O McMullan: OK. You have a system for recording information on computer. Is there a name for that?

Assistant Chief Constable G Hamilton: Niche.

Mr O McMullan: Niche?

Superintendent Kee: Or our command and control system?

Mr O McMullan: Can each of your police stations feed into that information or is it done centrally?

Assistant Chief Constable G Hamilton: I need to make sure that we are talking about the same thing. There is a records management system. Reports of crimes, information about someone being taken into custody or pieces of information that members of the public give to the police all go into that system. The man at the end of the table would probably be better placed to talk about it than me. That can be accessed from a BlackBerry, which every operational police officer has, never mind individual police stations. Individuals can feed in and retrieve information from that.

Mr O McMullan: One of the things that police personnel have said is that feeding information into that central computer is a barrier.

Assistant Chief Constable G Hamilton: I do not know —

Mr O McMullan: We had a meeting with police from H district and that was one of the things that came up at that meeting.

Assistant Chief Constable G Hamilton: You are not that long out of H district.

Superintendent Kee: No, I am not.

Mr O McMullan: You were not there that day.

Superintendent Kee: Was I not at the meeting, Mr McMullan?

Assistant Chief Constable G Hamilton: I am not sure what the issue is.

Superintendent Kee: As Mr Hamilton said, there is a single information system across the organisation called Niche. All our information on stolen property, stolen animals or incidents that are reported to the police go into that as a central repository. That means that officers in Larne can see what has been reported in Enniskillen. There is no sense of a separate information system by district.

Mr O McMullan: Is that separated by agricultural crime?

Superintendent Kee: Yes, for all crime.

Mr O McMullan: So I could walk into a police station anywhere and ask them for the up-to-date statistics on agricultural crime and I will get that answer.

Superintendent Kee: That would be available from area commanders.

Mr O McMullan: Hold on, now. From area commanders? Can I walk into a police station and, as an MLA, ask for that information? Can that be given to me?

Superintendent Kee: That information is collated quarterly by our central statistics unit at headquarters. It produces a quarterly update document. An example of that work is the document that we have circulated to the Committee for the crime figures up to the end of March 2014, which covers the entire financial year 2013-14. The Committee has that document and it is available to it quarterly.

Mr O McMullan: So, basically what you are saying is that I cannot get that information if I walk into a police station. That is what I am talking about. Agricultural crime has still not been separated from rural crime. That is central to fighting crime.

Superintendent Kee: That has been done, Mr McMullan. Agricrime is obviously a subset of rural crime and the document that I referred to breaks crime down into urban crime, rural crime, and further into agricrime. Our central statistics unit, which looks after all crime statistics for all crime types across the PSNI, produce that document for us. Essentially, it uses the definition from a Northern Ireland Assembly briefing paper that was published in late 2011. Those figures are certainly available.

Mr O McMullan: I certainly look forward to going into a police station and asking for those figures. I will be greatly surprised if they are available. Your personnel, especially in H district, do not have access to them. They have told us that on several occasions.

Superintendent Kee: I mentioned area commanders because I supply the information directly to district commanders, superintendents and chief inspectors. The document is then loaded onto our internal PoliceNet site, so all officers have access to it.

Mr O McMullan: I push a button and it is not there. No matter how many quarterly reports you give, it is not there if you walk into the station, and that is one of the things that could speed up the detection of crime.

I have a last question. There were a couple of cases of the disposal of dead animals in Carrickfergus —

Assistant Chief Constable G Hamilton: Sorry, Chair, before we leave that, I take it that you have the document that we produced.

The Chairperson: It is in members' packs.

Assistant Chief Constable G Hamilton: It may sound like self-praise, but I think that that document and what it pulls together is of high quality. That is the one for the end of the financial year, but it is produced quarterly. There is no reason why an MLA with an interest in rural affairs or who is a member of this Committee could not have that. You are very welcome to it, and it helps us in what we are doing.

The Chairperson: It is on page 61 of our meeting pack.

Assistant Chief Constable G Hamilton: Are you with me?

Mr O McMullan: Are you with me? What do you think I am reading off here? I have it here, and to say that if I had "an interest" in rural crime — I take that as a disparaging remark. I have been in your stations on quite a number of occasions in H district. I have talked to Mr Kee and his predecessors as well on the same point: your computer information system. Your own staff have told me that they cannot do it; it takes too long to get the information out. That is all that I am saying to you. I have not made any disparaging remark about your report. As a matter of fact, had you waited, I was going to congratulate you on your report, but your own staff are having problems getting information out of your computer system quickly. You said that it was brought to your staff through your area commanders. I have no reason to dispute that, but it should be there quicker. We can get other crime stats in your computer system quickly. You cannot do that with agriculture crime because it is mixed in, as you said, with rural crime. It is a matter of getting a separate programme into your computer system. That is all I am saying.

The Chairperson: For clarification, is this for individual police officers on the ground or for a punter — a member of the public just walking up?

Mr O McMullan: If you or I walked in and asked for crime figures like that, the person in the station — if they did not have those reports — would have trouble getting them up on the computer because of the system.

Superintendent Kee: If it helps, Chair, I think the point is that the stats may differentiate between rural crime and agrcrime, but we do not produce that document daily or weekly. It is produced quarterly. Therefore, we have the stats up to the end of March 2014, and they will be updated at the end of June. Come the first or second week in July, I will have the first-quarter figures. We update the agrcrime stats quarterly. Perhaps the point is that we do not update them daily.

Mr O McMullan: My last question is about the incident at Carrickfergus. On two occasions, at the same spot — the reservoir — dead animals were dumped.

Assistant Chief Constable G Hamilton: I do not have specific knowledge of that. Do you, Brian?

Superintendent Kee: No, sorry. I am not aware of that.

Mr O McMullan: Will you look into that?

Assistant Chief Constable G Hamilton: I will. I will be up to see you next week, anyway.

Mr O McMullan: You will see me next week, yes.

Assistant Chief Constable G Hamilton: We will have an update for you for then.

Mr O McMullan: I hope that it will be different from what we have seen. If you could do that —

Assistant Chief Constable G Hamilton: I just do not have that information to hand.

Mr O McMullan: It has caused a bit of concern around there. People are concerned that the residue from dead animals could get into the water table.

Assistant Chief Constable G Hamilton: Of course.

Mr O McMullan: It has happened a couple of times in the same place.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the presentation. My apologies for not being here at the start. I want to record my thanks to the outgoing F district commander, Pauline Shields, who recently left. I welcome that the number of offences in F district has gone down by 20. Is there a particular reason why rural crime in F district is running at the high level of 47%?

Secondly, on convictions, how many people have gone to jail? What level of fines have been handed to those who have stolen tractors worth £40,000-plus? Lastly, George, you talked about how good neighbourhood policing is. I agree. However, what is the relationship between neighbourhood policing and the crime branch? If we do not have crime officers going out there, seriously intent on gathering the evidence, putting together a professional file and presenting it to the PPS, we are all fooling ourselves.

Assistant Chief Constable G Hamilton: On that last point, the neighbourhood officers will, hopefully, have access to the detectives locally or through the organised crime branch if we suspect that something was more organised than simply opportunistic. That is the way it should work. If there are specific instances in which there has been a breakdown, I am happy to look at them.

Mr Byrne: Can I ask you a supplementary question? If a farmer witnessed the theft of a tractor, reported it to the police and the neighbourhood police come out, but nobody from crime branch arrives for a week, is that acceptable?

Assistant Chief Constable G Hamilton: That does not sound acceptable to me, no. If there are specific instances like that, we are happy to look at them to put them right or ensure that there is no recurrence. Brian, do you want to talk about the other piece?

Superintendent Kee: Yes. As we alluded to during the presentation and discussion, there is no doubt that the majority of agricide occurs across E and F districts. Somewhere in the region of 50% of agricide occurs in those two districts. That said, it is somewhat relative and proportionate to the number of farms in those areas. The vast majority — around 56% — of farms are across E and F districts, but, setting that aside, those are undoubtedly the two districts with the highest number of agricides. That is why we do a lot of work through our crime prevention officers, neighbourhood officers, response officers and detectives in those two districts and why the rural crime partnership security marking initiative was targeted specifically at E and F districts. We have plans to roll that out across the other districts.

Some of our operational successes are outlined in the papers. As Mr Hamilton referred to earlier, we have made 144 arrests over the past four years in relation to agricide. Our crime statistics published on, I think, 12 May identified that, across the six rural districts, there was an average outcome rate of 29.4%. We are making inroads into agricultural crime and wider crime that occurs in rural areas, but much of that is led by the information we get from the rural community. I regularly appeal to the rural community; as I said in my opening remarks, nobody like the farming community knows what is unusual and suspicious in their area. We encourage them to report incidents to us as they occur because live-time reporting of that suspicious behaviour and activity significantly increases our chances of making a successful arrest.

The Chairperson: There are no further questions, gentlemen. Again, thank you very much for your time here and your evidence. It has been very worthwhile and productive, so thank you very much for your time. I know that you are all very busy.