



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

2013 Fodder Transport Scheme:
DARD Briefing

21 May 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Frew (Chairperson)
Mr Joe Byrne (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr William Irwin
Mr Declan McAleer
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Ian Milne

Witnesses:

Mr Joseph Kerr	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Ian McCluggage	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr David Small	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

The Chairperson: I welcome David Small, deputy secretary; Joseph Kerr, grade 7; and Ian McCluggage — I think I have got that right; sorry if I have not — grade 7. David, are you leading?

Mr David Small (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): Yes.

The Chairperson: I saw you nodding your head there.

Mr Small: I will try to address the issue of both schemes being delivered here.

The Chairperson: If you could address that in your presentation, that would be great. Thank you.

Mr Small: Thank you very much for the opportunity to update the Committee on recent developments in what has been a very fast-moving situation.

The Committee will be aware of concerns within the industry recently about the continuing poor weather and the impact that that has had on grass growth, ground conditions and the availability of fodder. The Department has continued to assess the situation carefully. We were approached last week by the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU), and as a result of that approach, we met stakeholders last Wednesday to hear directly from them their assessment of the situation and the difficulties being faced by farmers. That helped to confirm that there clearly were some very difficult situations in localised areas, but it also confirmed that the fodder shortage was becoming more widespread. We briefed the Minister on the outcome of that discussion.

We met the UFU again on Thursday to discuss possible interventions, and on the Thursday, the Minister raised the issue with Executive colleagues and secured up to £1 million for a fodder transport scheme to support farmers.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development officials worked on Friday and through the weekend with the UFU to develop the fodder transport scheme, to agree how the scheme would operate and to agree a delivery model. The scheme is very much modelled on a similar scheme operating in the South.

The scheme became operational at midnight on Saturday 18 May and will run until midnight on Friday 31 May. It is being delivered by the UFU and Countryside Services on the Department's behalf. Full details of the scheme are available on the Countryside Services website. At this stage, 1,000 tons of fodder have been delivered under the scheme, providing a very significant and much-needed supply of fodder into Northern Ireland. The rate of support available has been set at £90 per ton. That was a flat-rate subsidy for all types of fodder, based on indications that the majority of fodder brought in under the scheme would be straw and hay. On that basis, it is comparable to the scheme and rates applicable in the South.

We have been reviewing the impact of the intervention. The scheme literature, which is available on the Countryside Services website, provides a facility for the Department to adjust the subsidy rate if necessary. At this stage, we are seeing higher levels of silage and haylage coming in under the scheme than anticipated. We are reviewing the current subsidy rate to ensure that it remains appropriate. Our analysis shows a significant volume of silage and haylage. As such, we believe that the £90 flat rate represents a disproportionate contribution to the cost of silage. We still believe that it is appropriate for hay and straw, but, in the case of silage, there is a risk that the current subsidy rate could distort the market. We have reviewed the rate in consultation with the UFU. We will be adjusting the rate for silage and haylage; we hope to confirm a new rate later today. We will give reasonable notice of any new rate being introduced for anyone operating under the scheme.

The Department fully recognises the difficult situation that the industry and farmers are facing. The current problems follow a long, hard winter, which, as we all know, has been very difficult. The Department has taken a number of actions to assist the industry. The less-favoured area compensatory allowance (LFACA) payments were commenced three weeks earlier this year than last year. This means that, under LFACA, 98% of eligible claims have been paid, worth £23 million of support going into the sector. The Northern Ireland countryside management scheme payments were started this year in April, which is about five months earlier than last year. The hardship payment scheme, which you have just heard about, will provide much-needed support to the industry. The transport fodder scheme will offer further assistance to farmers. That is all that I wanted to say in describing the scheme.

If you like, I will try to address the issue of the hardship scheme and the fodder scheme operating under the de minimis rules. You are right in that both schemes are being delivered under de minimis state aid arrangements. Individual farmers will be limited to a maximum de minimis level set by the EU for all aid they receive under this scheme, the hardship scheme or any other support scheme that the Department introduces. For a small number of farmers at or near the maximum €7,500 limit for de minimis state aid, there is the possibility that utilising the fodder scheme could take them over that limit. I am pleased to say that the UFU has confirmed to the Department's officials that, if that is the case, the union will manage a co-ordinated industry fund that will meet the balance to avoid farmers being denied the opportunity to benefit under the fodder scheme. That is very helpful, and it has been warmly received by the Department. It is a positive step forward from the industry.

That is the outline of the scheme. We were working pretty frantically over Friday, Saturday and Sunday to try to get it up and running, recognising the nature and urgency of the issue as it developed. We are happy to take any questions from the Committee.

The Chairperson: Does the UFU scheme have a name?

Mr Small: I do not have a name for the UFU contribution. It has been described as a co-ordinated industry fund. We are waiting for confirmation in writing from the UFU on just how that will work and what it will be called. The scheme that we are operating is the 2013 fodder transport scheme.

The Chairperson: Thank you. This was all about haste, as the Deputy Chairperson alluded to earlier in the other presentation. I know, having watched Assembly Questions, that other MLAs were receiving complaints, as was I, as well as fears and concerns about the fodder shortage. The real fears and concerns about shortages of fodder were always forecast around the snow crisis, but the real concern was about three weeks ago.

We know that the Republic of Ireland acted very quickly. How do you respond to the claim that we have again reacted too slowly on this issue? Granted, when you decided to move, we were first informed of it on Thursday night and you did a lot of work on Friday with the stakeholders to put a scheme in place for Saturday night at midnight. When we decided to move, we were able to move very quickly, but there was a period when I am sure the Minister was getting letters from individual MLAs and questions were going to the Assembly as we did not seem to be able to break into the psyche of the Department. That happened over three weeks. Why did it take so long?

Mr Small: I am not sure that we were receiving a lot of correspondence. We were not receiving a lot of correspondence through the Minister's office or at departmental level, either. We checked our telephone helpline to assess the level of concern, and I think that over a one-week period, there were four or five calls dealing with fodder concerns.

I suppose that we came out of the spring blizzard having delivered fodder. You rightly mention the fact that fodder was going to be an issue following the snowstorm, but we acted to try to provide fodder to the affected areas during the snowstorm. The Department's assessment has been that there were some isolated incidents in which people were facing difficulty, but our general feeling over the past few weeks has been that there is fodder available. It is beginning to trade at a slightly higher price. We were not aware of a widespread problem being evident; indeed, in the past week, discussions with the UFU were not indicating that this was a crisis.

It was really during the week, when we had further discussions with the UFU and met the National Beef Association and National Sheep Association, that we began to get a sense that this was becoming more widespread and more of an issue, and that we needed to think about what we needed to do. As you said, we acted very quickly to do that. Perhaps in hindsight, this might have been more timely two weeks' ago, but that was not what the evidence suggested to us.

The Chairperson: I accept your answers on that and I thank you for your directness and your honesty. What were the differences between the situation in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland?

Mr Small: My understanding is that the situation in the South became very difficult, in the Cork region, several weeks back. They were seeing real difficulties earlier than we began to face the same level of difficulty. That is my understanding; I do not know whether Ian wants to add to that.

Mr Ian McCluggage (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): There were very difficult conditions in Munster. They also have a different farming system. They carry very little reserve of silage over from one season to the next. They are predominantly spring-calving; in a normal season, they would calve the cows down and go to grass immediately, whereas in Northern Ireland, there is a different system. There would normally be fodder reserves and, until recently, fodder was available, but I do not think any farmer anticipated to still be feeding last year's silage to stock in May. Reserves have been significantly reduced and are not available on many farms. The scheme was about improving the accessibility of farmers to fodder. Cattle are ruminants so they cannot go onto an all-concentrate diet; they need a certain level of roughage in their diet and on a number of farms, that simply was not there.

The Chairperson: Obviously, the weather led to this, but is the situation making the Department reflect on farm practices, how support could be meted down to the farming industry and how the industry itself might have to evolve?

Mr Small: The College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise has been running workshops and has been working with the industry on grass management and, as you say, on farming systems. We will also, hopefully, begin a process this week in which an industry and departmental task force will come together. We recognise the urgency of what we are dealing with now with the current crisis and the fact that, as we go into next winter and autumn, we are likely to face further difficulties. We are conscious that there will be issues ahead and we are pooling the industry together to try to get a

sense of what those issues are likely to be and what kind of interventions, either departmental or industry-led, might be needed. We are aware of the issue.

The Chairperson: Every farmer who has talked to me about this crisis has told me about the second crisis, which is the cycle of the year. It is very important that the Department takes note of that.

I have one further question on the logistics before I open the meeting to other members. We need legislation for the hardship fund. Do we also need legislation for the fodder transport scheme, albeit that it is in an emergency?

Mr Small: No. My advice is that we do not need separate legislation for this. This has been done under ministerial direction, but is being paid under the Budget Act, which gives us the vires to make the payments.

Mrs Dobson: The scheme is welcome, if a little late. David, I was taken aback by your comment that you were not aware of the widespread crisis. I do not know what farmers you have been talking to, but the farmers who have been ringing me from first thing in the morning, and everyone else whom I have spoken to, have told me that this crisis has been looming for a very long time since the snow crisis.

Earlier, you gave a timeline: you said that you met the stakeholders last Wednesday, the UFU on Thursday and that the Minister raised the scheme with Executive colleagues on Thursday afternoon. As you know, the Committee met the Minister last Thursday night. Why do you feel that she did not take the opportunity to inform us directly, considering that the wheels were already in motion?

Mr Small: I really do not know. My understanding is that the Minister secured support from the Executive —

Mrs Dobson: On Thursday afternoon.

Mr Small: — at last Thursday's Executive meeting. I am not sure what time that was.

Mrs Dobson: OK. What level of discussions has the Department entered into with hauliers? Have you discussed preferential rates, for example? How much of the £1 million will be spent directly on fodder? Do you have a breakdown of that?

Mr Small: The discussions with hauliers have been conducted by the UFU and Countryside Services. When we met with the UFU last week, we tried to establish a model for delivering the scheme and the UFU volunteered to manage, co-ordinate and deliver it through Countryside Services. So, most of the contact with hauliers has either been directly through the UFU or Countryside Services.

The Minister has secured up to £1 million for the scheme, and that will be spent covering the additional transport costs of transporting fodder into the North. We are not paying for the fodder, but for the additional costs of transporting it. Transport costs are increasing slightly as people are having to go further to source the fodder.

Mrs Dobson: How much will the scheme cost to administer through Countryside Services? Will you outline when the decision was made to use Countryside Services as a provider? Why did it not go out to tender? Were any other potential providers approached, or just that one?

Mr Small: As you said, we were dealing with an urgent crisis. Our desire was to get a scheme up and running as quickly as we could. The UFU offered to co-ordinate the scheme for us and we welcomed that offer.

No payment is being exchanged; the Department is not paying for this service. It is being delivered by the UFU for the good of the industry. It is using its commercial wing, Countryside Services, but no payment is being exchanged and there are no administrative costs attached to that. So, up to £1 million will be spent on fodder transport costs, not on administration.

Mr Irwin: As a farmer, I declare an interest. I am on one of those farms that had to buy in feed.

I welcome the fodder scheme, although I think that it should have happened sooner. Down South, a scheme has been ongoing for six or seven weeks, but we are where we are, and it is welcome that some help is available.

I am a wee bit concerned that it opened on 18 May and is closing on 31 May. That is only a 12- or 13-day period, which is very short. Is that sufficient time to deal with the situation, especially on hill farms, where there are difficulties because there has been very slow growth and the ground is very wet yet? Lowland farmers may be able to manage OK, but I would have thought that it is quite a tight time frame for them to get over their difficulties.

You mentioned £90 a ton. Did you mean that you were paying £90 a ton towards transport costs?

Mr Small: Initially, yes. There was a flat rate, which we applied across all fodder types to cover transport costs.

Mr Irwin: Is the payment made to farmer or the haulier?

Mr Small: The payment is made to the haulier. The benefit we foresee being with the farmer, because the transport cost is no longer a factor.

Mr Irwin: If the haulier is greedy, there might not be that much benefit to the farmer.

Mr Small: Perhaps. We are hopeful that that will not be the case. As I said, we are carefully reviewing the impact of the intervention. We are seeing some evidence that more silage is being brought in than we anticipated, and we do not think that the £90 flat rate, which we initially applied across all fodder types, is appropriate for the amount of silage coming in. We will be adjusting that rate to make it more realistic so that it does not provide an opportunity for hauliers to take advantage.

Mr Irwin: It is the farmer who needs this. That is the fear that I have. It is difficult to have a scheme up and running quickly.

Mr Small: This was the most straightforward and quickest way to get a scheme up and running, managed and co-ordinated.

Mr Irwin: I fully understand that. It would not be sensible to go out to tender and wait for weeks: it had to be done immediately.

Mr Small: Trying to devise a scheme in which the payment went to the farmer would have been incredibly complicated, complex and bureaucratic.

Mr Irwin: We hope there will be some benefits from the scheme.

Mr McAleer: On a scrutiny Committee, sometimes people feel they have to be critical. In fairness, it was only really last Tuesday that the Committee heard about the crisis. The previous week, there had not been any action points about it.

I commend the Department for acting quickly, particularly given the number of calls you had to the help line. A freedom of information (FOI) request will probably show how much correspondence the Minister had from MLAs highlighting a crisis before the scheme was introduced, which will be interesting to see.

Are hay and silage the specific types of fodder that we are looking at here? You say that the £90 was causing a market distortion towards silage. Explain that more fully. Why did that not equally apply to the hay?

Mr Small: Ian can help me on this if needs be, because it gets technical. The difference is in the dry matter content. Hay and straw are dryer than fodder. So, when you load that on to a transport vehicle, there is less tonnage. When you are loading silage, the same space is being taken up, but you are achieving more tonnage. We apply a rate per ton, and the £90 is no longer an appropriate rate for silage because of that distinction. It is still broadly appropriate for straw and hay, but for silage, we have reviewed the analysis of the impact that the intervention is having. We plan to change the rate for silage to make it more appropriate.

The Chairperson: Are you saying that there is too much silage coming in?

Mr Small: There is more silage coming in than we anticipated. We anticipated the bulk of fodder coming through to be straw and hay. The flat rate of £90 a ton that we pitched was appropriate for that and was comparable to the rate in the South. In practice, we are seeing more silage coming through because the £90 per ton may be a bit higher than we would like it to be. Our initial judgement was for a flat rate to cover fodder. We have been reviewing that, and our analysis now suggests that we need to intervene to reduce the rate. We hope to do that today.

Mr Clarke: The member who spoke before me said that it would be interesting to see the FOI request and to see how many people wrote to the Minister — and all the other things that he was told to ask. Some of us who are on the ground and who live in farming communities actually know the problems that farmers have been having and are surprised that the Department was not aware that you need an FOI request to find out how many people wrote to it. Most of us who live in farming and rural communities know exactly what the problems are and what the farmers have said to us directly. I am surprised that the Department did not know about it and had to be told.

On the £90 a ton rate, I wonder whether it was the same economist who worked on that as worked on the price for the calves. You may get more on the lorry, but did your economist take into account the fact that it would take more diesel to draw the lorry?

Mr Small: We have; yes.

Mr Clarke: They are using flat-bed trailers to bring in straw and are stacking it higher, and they are bringing in the silage in long dumper-style trailers, which do not carry as much anyway. We are talking about two different types of machine for haulage with regard to the weight of the straw versus the weight of the silage. Has that all been factored in?

Mr Small: We have conducted detailed analysis of the form of transport being used, the type of product being carried, and issues like the cost of diesel and the difficulty of loading and offloading. Our analysis suggests that the original flat rate is no longer appropriate right across the board for all fodder types, and we are going to intervene to change that.

Mr McCluggage: Some fodder had been coming into Northern Ireland, predominately in the form of hay and straw. Apologies for being technical, but straw and hay consists of around 80% dry matter with 20% moisture content; silage would be the reverse: somewhere around 25% to 30% dry matter with 70% to 75% moisture content.

What you have said is correct. There is a maximum load that a lorry can carry. One of the larger square bales of hay or straw weighs around half a ton. You are getting between 36 and 42 of those bales, depending on how they are stacked. There is a huge range in bale sizes and, to try to simplify the scheme — again, for the sake of speed of operation — it was decided to run it on that basis. Livestock eat dry matter; they do not eat the water. Therefore, there is much more benefit to be gained from a bale of hay and significantly more livestock can survive for longer. There are significant problems on a number of farms with fodder. Ruminants cannot move to a diet solely of concentrate meal; they need long fibre to remain healthy, and a good source of long fibre is hay, which is easily transported. Hay is coming from the south of England and even northern France as we speak. Therefore, transportation and speed of movement is required as well.

We are dealing with two different materials. If you say that hay is about two and a half to three times dryer than silage, then, on a per ton basis, some distortion can arise in the haulage rate.

Mr Clarke: They are using two different types of trailer to transport it.

Mr McCluggage: Some of the loads of silage were between 14 and 18 tons, compared with 20 to 22 tons of hay.

Mr Clarke: So, at £90 a ton for 22 tons, the haulier is getting more for hay and less for silage, unless that is the wrong way round.

Mr McCluggage: There is more benefit to the animal at the end of the day.

Mr Clarke: So you are actually dictating what the farmers feed their cattle.

Mr McCluggage: Not at all. It is essential that fodder is available on farms. This is under review, in conjunction with the farming unions.

Mr Clarke: Have you thought of the cost of purchasing silage, hay and straw? One of the things I heard when constituents were talking to me was that one farmer spent £26,000 for silage in a month. He did not talk about hay or straw. This is only going towards transport. Have you looked at the comparable cost, while farmers keep their cattle in sheds, in their choice about what to feed them, and whether that cost is more or less?

Mr Small: I know that the analysis we conducted was very detailed. I do not know every detail in it.

Mr Clarke: It depends on what outcome you want.

Mr Small: As I said, Trevor, we were working around the clock during the weekend to get a scheme up and running. We carried out the level of analysis that we could in the time available, conscious that we did not want this to run on forever. We could have taken longer, but our initial judgement was that we should keep the simple flat rate. We expected primarily hay and straw, and the flat rate was appropriate for that. We are now seeing a slight shift with respect to the quantities coming through and we believe that we need to adjust the rate again to balance that.

Mr Byrne: I am glad that something started, belatedly, last Thursday morning when the Minister made an announcement at the Balmoral show. That was because there was such a public outcry at that stage. From local papers such as 'Farm Week', it was pretty obvious that a lot of people had no fodder.

Two weeks ago, I got involved in the situation when I got panicked phone calls from people who had no fodder. As of last Monday, a local dealer in Dromore was able to sell silage brought in from the south of England at £60 a ton. The alternative to a delivery charge was to go and pick it up from the yard. I am amazed as to where the figure of £90 for haulage is coming from. The dealer was able to distribute 450 tons in three days — Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday — at £60 a ton.

Mr Small: The figure of £90 a ton for straw and hay equates to the same level of subsidy in the scheme run by the South. We felt that it was comparable. The discussions we had with the UFU confirmed that that was believed to be an appropriate rate. It has had the impact of getting large quantities of fodder into Northern Ireland, which is what we were trying to achieve. However, having done that, we now need to satisfy ourselves that the rate remains appropriate. That is what we are doing. As I said, we hope to adjust the rate as a consequence of that analysis.

Mr Byrne: I appreciate that. The real issue now is to ensure that farmers who need fodder get it. That is the only issue I have.

Mr Small: We saw the benefit of getting large volumes of fodder into Northern Ireland as providing an immediate boost to fodder availability. That should translate into farmers being able to source fodder. We are into only the second or third day of this scheme. It will run until 31 May. Our belief is that that will allow sufficient quantities of fodder into the Province so that it can then make its way to the farmers who need it.

Mr Byrne: David, are you saying that this was a much bigger problem than had been expected or anticipated? Was it operating under the radar and did it only belatedly become clear?

Mr Small: As I said, we were carrying out our own analysis. We were not being lobbied at all on this issue by the industry. Until it became a more significant issue last week, our helpline was not demonstrating that there was a crisis. Our analysis identified that there were shortages of fodder in certain areas but that farmers were helping each other, and all credit to them. Some farmers were beginning to source it from outside Northern Ireland. Last week, our discussions with the UFU and the other stakeholder groups demonstrated that the shortage was becoming more widespread. It was at that point that we decided to look at it in more detail and discuss the whole issue further with stakeholders, and we took the decision that we needed to intervene.

If we had intervened three or four weeks ago, we might well have been criticised for intervening when it was not necessary to do so. It was a judgement that we had to make, but we certainly reacted on the basis of the evidence as it began to reach us.

Mr Milne: Listening to the discussion that has unfolded, it is difficult to find more questions to ask. I very much support the initiative, and I commend the Department for the speed and smooth running of the operation.

I would ask people who think it was a case of "too little, too late" whether there have been any reports of cruelty to animals due to lack of feed. Have there been any animal deaths due to lack of feed? Is it not a fact that local people exchange silage? They bought locally and used reserves, and the crisis only really came about — if there still is a crisis — within the last week, when the local reserves were eaten up.

Mr Small: That is our assessment.

Mr Milne: That is my understanding of it. I live in a farming community and my family members work that way. They buy and sell silage on a local basis and exchange bids for the new cut that is coming in. People are doing those things. I welcome what the Department is doing, regardless of who the Minister may be.

Mr McMullan: There has been a lot of talk about prices. Until a week or fortnight ago, large bales of hay changed hands at £150 each. We must bear that in mind. That was in the local market. Farmers who went out looking for hay had to pay those prices. They had to pay up to £100 for bales of silage. As Ian said, things are going well at the moment. Let us not be too critical. The scheme has been working for only a couple of days. It will be interesting to see how it all pans out by the end of the week. I live in the middle of an area that suffered as badly as any. My phone does not ring at 7.00 am, because I go out and meet the farmers. I go round their doors, into their farmyards and meet them. I know the situation that they are in, and who is suffering and who is not, because I meet them. We have meetings on a reasonably regular basis. As Ian says, farmers swap silage and help each other out, but those reserves are now depleted. That is where this lifeline comes in. Some farmers will remember the prices that they had to pay suppliers: £150 for a bale of hay. The farming industry knows where I am coming from. Farmers were held over a barrel, and they had to pay those prices. The scheme is a far better option.

Mr Buchanan: I welcome the measures that have been put in place. There may be concerns about who will be the real beneficiary, and so forth, but we have to realise that we are in an emergency situation. We must deal with this in a quick and speedy way. To have put it out to tender and done all those other things would have held us back, and the Department, the Committee and Assembly Members would have come under much more severe criticism. There is no doubt about that.

It is welcome that the Department moved in this way. It should maybe have happened two or three weeks earlier, but, as has been said, we are at this point now. I hope that the scheme will be of benefit to those farmers who are in dire need. They are the people who really need to be looked after at present.

The Chairperson: You are monitoring this carefully, and so you should. The haste with which the Department reacted, once it realised that there was an issue, has been remarked upon. I said that at the start. However, you have £1 million here. You have said that you are worried about a distortion in the market for silage and mentioned the amount of silage coming in. How long will that £1 million last? At the moment, we have a scheme that will last from midnight last Saturday to midnight on Friday 31 May. Will the £1 million last that long?

Mr Small: It is very difficult to judge. At the moment, I would say that, based on what has come through reports so far, it should last. However, the scheme has been operating for only a few days and we need to see what level of uptake and interest develops over the next few days. We will continue to review the situation and see what is available. At the moment, that is the figure that was secured and that is what we need to operate with.

The Chairperson: There is one thing to do with the haste that worries me because I have received a number of calls about it. I go to a newsagent's shop in the morning, and one of the ladies who works there complained to me last week that she was really concerned about the shortage of fodder. She

told me a story that is very similar to Oliver's about people trying to source fodder across the Province, finding it, and then going to get it. There was one price quoted over the phone, but that changed when they got there, and they had to take or leave the fodder at the more expensive price. Having travelled down a couple of counties, some had to return empty-handed.

Those things are happening, but when I spoke to her today, fully expecting her to know about this scheme after being really concerned last week, she was surprised when I told her about it. Is the message getting out there yet that the scheme is in place? I know that we have a tight window, and I understand why, but are we getting the information out that the fodder scheme is available? We are on the second working day since it started on Sunday. Is there anything more that the Department or, for that matter, the Ulster Farmers' Union can do to get out the message that this is available and the list of hauliers that are taking part? The second question that I heard was, "Well, what haulage company do I go to?" I said that there was a list. I struggled to relay to her the number and the names. I was able to refer her to the website, but the internet is not always accessible to older farmers.

Mr Small: We can certainly give further thought to how well this is being publicised and promoted. We do not want to operate a scheme that no one knows about. We will give that some further thought, in discussion with the UFU and Countryside Services, which are working with us on this.

The Chairperson: Tomorrow, I will be able to give that lady the very helpful farmer guidance that you issued today. That is very useful.

There are no other questions from members, so it remains for me to thank you for coming, at very short notice, to present to the Committee on the scheme, which has been hastily put together by the Department. Members appreciate the speed at which the Department worked, over a weekend, I add, to implement this. I know that the Minister announced the task force on Thursday and that it met on Friday to produce what you now have. That was good, and we commend it. If one thing is for sure, it is that the Committee performs its scrutiny role very well, but it is also here to support and advice when needed. We are fair-minded in that regard, so thank you very much for your presentation.

Mr Small: Thank you, Chairman. I appreciate your comments.