



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Badger Setts Survey/Test, Vaccinate or
Remove Exercise: DARD Update

25 June 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)
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr William Irwin
Mr Declan McAleer
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Ian Milne

Witnesses:

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

The Chairperson: On behalf of the Committee, I would like to welcome the witnesses from the Department. They are Kate Davey, the acting assistant secretary, Colin Hart, the deputy chief veterinary officer, Roly Harwood, a senior principal veterinary officer and Ian McKee, a principal officer. None of you are strangers to the Committee and you are all very welcome, as always.

We are trying to do things slightly differently to manage our time better. You can assume that the members have read the briefing papers. I will give you five minutes to present, and I ask you to use those five minutes to tell us something that we have not already read. We will then go straight into questions and answers. I obviously also ask members to be succinct with their questions and to keep out the statements and one thing and another. We will try to keep it as succinct as possible. Kate, will you be leading off?

Mrs Kate Davey (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): Yes.

The Chairperson: OK. I will give you five minutes and I will then ask you to stop.

Mrs Davey: It will be less than five minutes.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you.

Mrs Davey: Mr Chairman, thank you very much for the opportunity to brief the Committee on progress with the test, vaccinate and remove (TVR) wildlife intervention research project. Members will have seen the briefing, so I do not intend to go through that again.

Last July, the Minister announced that she had asked her officials to design a specific wildlife intervention research project, which involves testing live badgers and vaccinating and releasing the test-negative badgers and removing the test-positive ones. Since then, substantial work has been completed.

It is important to remember that there are a number of stages to the TVR project, which include preparation and design as well as the actual intervention stage. However, badgers are a protected species, and any intervention with them, even in relation to a scientific study, requires careful consideration. The issues are extremely complex. We have only one opportunity to get this right, so the preparation and design phase of the project is vital.

We recently received the Food and Environment Research Agency's (FERA's) report, which used Northern Ireland data to model the TVR approach. That report, which is extremely technical, is still being considered by our epidemiologists, and we will provide it to the Committee and place it on the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) website shortly. The FERA report indicates that, for the purposes of managing the TVR project, the TVR study area should be at least 100 square kilometres, with a closely matched control area of 100 square kilometres. It is anticipated that we will monitor the prevalence of tuberculosis (TB) in badgers and cattle herd breakdown rates. No decision has been taken in relation to which area will be the intervention or the control, and I think that that is important to note.

Before any TVR study can commence, we need to be able to identify the location of the badger setts within the selected area. That is why we have commissioned the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) to undertake the badger sett survey work. We are very pleased with the level of farmer participation in the badger sett surveys. AFBI expects to be able to provide us with a preliminary report on the survey findings in the coming weeks. That information will help us to finalise the TVR design and the costs.

One important point to note is that the FERA modelling report could not establish whether TVR will cause any badger perturbation. The only available evidence of perturbation is the randomised badger culling trial in England. However, that trial is very different from our proposed TVR study, as a large number of healthy and diseased badgers were removed. It is not anticipated that TVR will result in levels of badger perturbation that the trial in England saw, but FERA was not able to model this. Basically, there is insufficient data to allow it to be modelled. However, following the FERA report that highlighted this issue to us, we commissioned AFBI to develop proposals to establish baseline badger behaviour and ecology monitoring. The purpose of that work is to gather baseline data on normal badger behaviour movement that we can use during the TVR impact assessments.

Subject to AFBI securing the relevant licence approvals from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), the ecology study will get under way later this year. We anticipate that any remaining badger sett survey work will also be undertaken later this year when the cattle are housed and the vegetation has died back. Our veterinary epidemiologists are working to finalise the overall TVR design mandate. As I said, this is a complex area and we have only one chance to get it right. A lot of good work is going into this.

In addition, we are working to finalise the outline business case, which needs to be submitted to DFP later this year to support any funding bid. Subject to DFP approval of the business case and securing the necessary funding, it is anticipated that the TVR intervention stage will get under way in mid-2014.

As badgers are a protected species, the Environment Minister's approval and licence must be received. It is important to note that no activity that directly impacts on badgers can be progressed during the badger closed season, which runs from December to May each year, hence why the intervention phase will not start until mid-2014. Mr Chairman, I hope that that provides some extra information to the Committee. We are happy to take questions.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, Kate, for your presentation and for keeping within the realms of time that I offered you. I hope that members can keep their questions succinct.

The Minister made a statement to the Committee on 3 July 2012. Why has it taken so long to get to this point?

Mrs Davey: As I said, we basically had to design the survey. There are various stages to this. The project has started. The FERA modelling was one of the first steps, so that had to be commissioned

and undertaken. The second step is the badger sett survey work. As you know, that has been ongoing since January and is progressing. Those stages are critical. We have now established that we have a third phase, which is to monitor the badger behaviour, and that has to be completed before we start the final phase, which is the intervention. Work has been ongoing on this, and it may seem a long time, but the work is very complex. Substantial money has to be spent on the project, so we have to take time to plan it and get it right. We have only one attempt at it.

The Chairperson: I have a problem. When the Minister made her statement to the Committee, we were in the throes of the report and work that we were doing on bovine TB. Suspicions are now creeping in that that statement was made and that the Department made the decision to go down that road maybe just to get the Committee off its back. I would not like to think that.

Mrs Davey: I think that it is too major a project to take that view. This is a substantial project. It has never been done anywhere before, and it will give us valuable information in our fight against TB. It just takes time to plan.

The Chairperson: There may be a valid reason, but why has the surveying been suspended for the summer months?

Mrs Davey: It cannot be undertaken when there is vegetation and until the growth has stopped. It is basically impossible to find and identify the badger setts when they are overgrown. We had no choice but to stop it and restart it when the vegetation dies back.

The Chairperson: Surely that will cause even more delay.

Mrs Davey: No, it will not. We have got to the stage where the survey work that we had completed was right up to the amount of permissions that we had from farmers. A large amount of the survey work has been completed. We anticipate having that finished later this year, and it will not delay the start of the intervention in mid-2014.

The Chairperson: With regard to the percentage of people who have come back to say that they will take part in this, is it 75% and 61% in the two areas.

Mrs Davey: Yes, that is right.

The Chairperson: Is that percentage high enough to make this a successful programme?

Mrs Davey: As you say, there are two areas. The area outside Banbridge is literally 75%, and that is sufficient. We need some further uptake in the Castlewellan/Seaforde area. Obviously, the snow had an impact, as that area was affected badly with snow. However, we do not anticipate that being a problem. We will make further calls to the farmers, and we expect to increase that to the 70% that we require.

The Chairperson: Do you have the exact date for when the survey was suspended? We have only had growth this past —

Mrs Davey: I do not think that it was suspended until 31 May. It was only very recently.

Mr Ian McKee (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): It should be made clear that all the land that was in substantively has been surveyed. A few fields were suspended where there was a dispute and where one farmer claimed it, but when we went out we discovered that someone else had the authority. A few fields here and there throughout the area required agreement as to whether we could survey or not. Some reconciliation work has to be done, but that will have to be after the vegetation has died back and after cattle are brought in from the fields. There is a health and safety issue about being on some fields at the moment.

The Chairperson: Surely the arrangements, discussions and negotiations can be done now?

Mrs Davey: We will do the preparation work to finalise the study over the summer months so that we are ready to kick off.

The Chairperson: Another thing frustrates me. I know that this is complex and that we have employed FERA, to do the modelling, and AFBI, who are experts in that field, to do the badger sett survey. We have then discovered, after doing those surveys, that we need to do another survey. We do not have any model to fall back on or any other example to use. How will we survey badger behaviour when we have not commenced the TVR programme?

Mrs Davey: The badgers are part of the ecology study. The badgers will be captured and collared, and their movements will be tracked. AFBI will take forward a project on that in the months towards the end of this year. It will be an ongoing monitoring process so that we can see the effects of the TVR when we start the intervention.

The Chairperson: Are you doing a TVR without testing and vaccinating?

Mrs Davey: No, that is not the case. The monitoring work will be done first, and that feeds into our TVR. The TVR is test, vaccinate and remove. That starts in the middle of next year. That will be ongoing so that we can monitor that there is no adverse effect of what we are doing. That is key work, and the need for it was identified as part of the FERA modelling.

The Chairperson: Is the work needed to progress an outline business case to get approval from the Environment Minister ongoing?

Mrs Davey: Yes, that work is ongoing. We are almost finished and are just finalising the outline business case. We are waiting until we get the interim reports from AFBI on the badger sett and the sett survey work. That will feed into it and allow us to finalise it. However, we have modelled it so that you can work in tandem so that everything is lined up and ready to go. That is what we are trying to do.

The Chairperson: I do not want you to break confidence, but what is the attitude of the Environment Minister? Have you engaged with him? Is it positive? Will he grant approval for the work?

Mr McKee: Right from the very start, once an announcement was made on TVR, we engaged with the NIEA, and a member of that agency sits on the TB stakeholder working group. So, it is aware of our ongoing work and proposals. The Environment Minister has a special role in granting the licence. He cannot give, and it would not be right for him to give, a commitment until he sees the exact proposal. We have to ensure that we have a scientifically robust TVR design, because he then has to take the decision, guided by his officials, on whether a licence should be granted. That stage has to be gone through. There is nothing to indicate anything untoward at this stage, but we cannot really fully engage and ask him to give a commitment because it would not be right for him to give that commitment as we still have to bottom out details of the scientific protocols.

Mrs Davey: We do not see it as a stumbling block at this time, and we are working towards having everything co-ordinated.

Mrs Dobson: The Chair has touched on most of the questions that I was going to ask. Maybe we can explore a bit more the support that you need from the Finance and Environment Ministers to progress this. What happens if you do not get their support? What is your plan B? Do you have one?

Mrs Davey: We have to look at the finances, and this is one that our Minister will be taking forward as well. We have to finish our business case. We have to identify the costs, and we also have to ensure that we have a robust project and then put it to DFP. I cannot answer for DFP at this stage as to whether it will accept that or not, but if we prepare a proper business case and put the arguments forward, we have got to put it on the basis of what we currently spend on TB and how this will contribute in the longer term to helping our understanding of it. All those arguments have to be made, and we are optimistic that they are convincing ones that will show there is value for money in going down the road we have taken. We are not planning on having "no" for an answer.

Mrs Dobson: I know that you are not, but are you saying that you do not have a plan B?

Mrs Davey: At this stage, we do not feel there is a necessity to have a plan B.

Mrs Dobson: So, you do not have a plan B?

Mrs Davey: At this stage, no.

Mrs Dobson: OK. Again, the Chair has already gone over this, but, 74.5% of land in the Banbridge area and 60.8% in Castlewellan was surveyed; what percentage of farmers in those areas gave permission? We are all mindful that one farmer could own a large proportion of the land, so do you know the percentage of farmers that gave permission?

Mrs Davey: I am just looking at the statistics, because I do not think that we have that information. We could certainly let you know. We can give you the detail of how many "yes" or "no" responses we had, if that is helpful. In Banbridge, we had 393, which is 63% of farmers who said "yes"; 61 said "no", which was 12.9%. We had no responses from 145 farmers, which is 23.4%, and a small number were undeliverable. I can give you the same information for Castlewellan, where the numbers were very similar: 373 farmers said "yes", which was 51.8%; 41 said "no", which was 5.7%; and 290 have not yet responded, which is 40.3%. Over the summer months, we will be going back to those farmers to try to obtain their responses and to secure their land.

Mrs Dobson: This information is very useful for me as it is in my constituency: can you provide me with the percentage of farmers who gave permission? Can you explain a bit more, Kate, the impact that you feel not having permission from a quarter of farmers in the Banbridge area and two-fifths in Castlewellan will have on the overall results of the survey?

Mrs Davey: Through the modelling, we need 70%, and we have acquired that already in Banbridge, so there will not be any impact. We are trying to acquire that in the second area as well, bearing in mind that the second area started later and was impacted by the snow. We still believe we can secure that.

Mrs Dobson: Will you come back to me with those details?

Mrs Davey: Yes.

Mrs Dobson: You highlighted the perturbation effect in which studies show that increased incidences of the disease can occur on adjoining lands. How will you be able to accurately measure this in the case of these two areas?

Mrs Davey: I will let someone else come in on this as well, but this is part of our monitoring work on badger movement. This is why we are doing some of the monitoring, so we can see where the badger movements are. Colin, did you want to add to that?

Mr Colin Hart (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): One of the things we look for is changes in the badgers' behavioural patterns; the distance the badger travels and so on. We can look at that across the area, both in the area and in that marginal ring around it. In the longer term, we can look at the incidence of disease in badgers and we can monitor that throughout the project, as well as the incidence of disease in cattle, potentially, although that will be a slower process.

The number of badgers being removed is very different to the English system. The randomised badger culling trials (RBCTs) in England, as Kate has mentioned, involve a large number of badgers being removed, both infected and non-infected. With the much smaller number of badgers here, there is no data available at the moment to assess the perturbation effect. That is why we have asked AFBI to design a project for this summer to try to capture that baseline badger activity so that we might get early warnings during the TVR if the badgers start to become perturbed. Those are the sorts of things that we will be looking at. I do not have all the answers yet because we have asked AFBI to come back with advice on these ecological studies, which we will be focused on this summer.

Mrs Dobson: You spoke at the start about FERA models and said that you recommended the ecological studies that AFBI is currently designing. Will those involve studies on lands adjacent to the two areas? Might you need further permission from other farmers who are on adjacent land and have yet to be contacted?

Mr Hart: Yes, because we plan to look at potentially something like a wedge or perhaps pockets within, towards the outside, and maybe just outside. I do not yet have the detail from AFBI, but that is the general idea.

Mrs Dobson: So, it is yes to both lands adjacent and to requiring further information from farmers.

Mr Hart: Potentially, yes.

Mr Irwin: I, as a farmer, welcome the fact that we are moving towards assessing the badger situation. I am slightly disappointed that a bigger set of farmers did not agree to include their farms in the project. MLAs should be encouraging farmers to take part, because we have been fighting for a long time to get the Department to do something. Then, when it does decide to do something, it is a pity that more farmers do not agree to it. Have the trials that you have done and the survey of TB prevalence within those badgers been initially assessed?

Mr Hart: Yes, we have data on that, which we fed into the FERA modelling study. This area of County Down has a high prevalence of disease in badgers. It has a high cattle density and a high herd incidence of disease. So, it has all three factors. The advice from FERA was that this type of area was ideal for this sort of intervention. I can't say I'm right, but, from memory, I think that the badger infection level is 30%.

Mr Harwood: That is right.

Mr Hart: This is an area where a lot of badgers are infected. The attraction of that is that one of the key measures of this study will be the reduction of the prevalence of disease in badgers, because that will happen first, even before we see the reduction in the cattle herd. Not all cattle herd breakdowns occur as a result of badgers, so there will be a dilution effect there. Therefore, it will be longer before we see the results in cattle, and one of the parameters that we will look at carefully is a reduction in badgers. The FERA modelling suggests that we should see something fairly quickly, particularly in a highly prevalent badger disease area such as this.

Mr Irwin: If the survey, trials, tests and vaccinations succeed, do you hope to roll it out to other areas of Northern Ireland in the long term?

Mr Hart: The study will give us data that does not exist at the moment. There is no data, for example, in relation to how a combination of vaccination plus removal works in field situations. In our study, we will be removing a percentage of highly infectious badgers. The idea is that our tests should enable us to pick up those infected badgers, which is, intuitively, a good thing, because if you vaccinate a population of animals that are already diseased, the question becomes one of how your vaccine works. So, if you remove some of those badgers and reduce the prevalence of disease in the badgers, hopefully the vaccination will work altogether better in those that are left. How a vaccine interacts with an already-infected animal has never been shown other than experimentally, and we are interested in that. Experimentally, it has been shown that the vaccination can affect the progression of disease in the badger, but that has never been looked at in a field situation. We may get a bit of a mixture of effects here, so the TVR, certainly in the FERA modelling, and if we do not see a lot of perturbation, should be more effective than vaccination alone. That is really what we are interested in. We will be adding something unique to world science in looking at badger infection and vaccination here. It is quite an exciting prospect.

Mr Irwin: I wish you well. I hope that it is of big benefit in the future. I know that it is a slow process, but it is a start in the right direction.

The Chairperson: You mentioned that 30% of badgers in that area have the disease. How do you know that?

Mr Harwood: Our epidemiologists estimated that figure. A lot of it is based on information from the road traffic accident survey and other information that they have.

The Chairperson: Surely that road traffic accident survey was Province wide.

Mr Harwood: It was, yes. They know the areas where badgers are —

The Chairperson: Could we say then that 30% of the badger population in Northern Ireland has the disease?

Mr Harwood: No. The percentage would not be that high. On average, it would be around 18% to 20%, based on survey results. Obviously, in some areas, it is higher, and, in others, it is lower.

Mr McMullan: Thanks for your presentation. I, too, am glad to see that it is under way because we have been getting hammered week in, week out, month in and month out, as to what we were doing and people are saying that we were doing nothing about it. Now, we are doing something that quite a lot of other areas and, even, some countries are not doing. You should be congratulated on that. We knew from the start that this would be a four- to five-year programme. So, there really is no plan B. We have one plan A. Let us get on with it.

I, too, am a little disappointed with the numbers of farmers who are taking part in it, but I suppose that, looking at it, it is something new. Maybe they are a wee bit sceptical about what it is about. When they learn more about it and when local politicians, etc, use the influence that they say they have, more will come on board. I am convinced of that. As William said, this is something that farmers were kicking up about. They asked what we were doing. Now, when we are doing something, they should take the lead. More and more should now be coming into the programme, because it is for everybody's benefit. I wish you well with it because, again, it is a unique and challenging scheme.

When we suspend for the summer, work will be ongoing, so the programme does not stop. There is always something there to catch up with. That message has to go out to people as well: we do not stand still when we stop for that time. So, again, I congratulate you on the programme. If anything else is to come out of today, the Committee should call publicly for more farmers to get into the programme and to give their permission, because it is to everybody's benefit. Thank you.

Mr McAleer: I want to ask a couple of questions about the design that you used for the study. Earlier, it was mentioned that there was a study area and a controlled area. I am guessing that those areas are quite similar in characteristics and that you have used a test and retest method, whereby you went into the experimental area and the study area and did the TVR. Then, you went back during the retest period to test the impact on the badgers.

Mrs Davey: That will happen in the future. That has not happened yet.

Mr McAleer: You have not done the retest aspect of it yet?

Mrs Davey: No, we have not done any testing yet. The badger sett survey work that we are doing is establishing where the setts are and the number of badgers, which is in preparation for us to do the test work.

Mr McAleer: You will gather the baseline.

Mrs Davey: Yes. That is part of the baseline. The second part of that baseline is monitoring the movement, so that we know not only where the badgers are but whether, when we intervene with them, we have disturbed them in any way that causes them to have an adverse reaction to us and to move. Those are the prep stages. Next year, we will do the intervention. As you described, there will be an area of intervention and a controlled area. They are very similar to each other.

Mr McAleer: The controlled area where you will not do an intervention is used for comparative purposes.

Mrs Davey: That is right.

Mr McAleer: In the test area, when you make an intervention, do you have to go back to assess the effectiveness of it?

Mrs Davey: It will be year-on-year. It is not just a one-year project but a five-year one. So, we will be back in the same area for five years.

Mr McAleer: What controls will be in place to prevent badgers that were outside the experimental area from making their way into it during that time? Why is the experimental area not situated somewhere that is naturally separate, such as Rathlin, for example, where that would not happen?

Mr Hart: Badgers are fairly territorial. They tend to stay in their local environment. They travel to some extent so, undoubtedly, some badgers that are outside the area will come into it. Work that has been carried out in the South of Ireland shows that they will come into an area, even if it is not the area under study. Obviously, some badgers will come in and go out. That will be a feature of the study.

We will be testing badgers each year, over five years, and we will be vaccinating all the badgers that we catch, because the vaccine has to be given annually. We will also identify the badgers, probably with a chip, so we will know whether we capture the same badger again, and we will also vaccinate it again. So, each time they are caught, they will be vaccinated. We will not get all the badgers each time we go out to capture them, but we will get a percentage of them and, hopefully, in that way, we will be able to compensate for the badgers that come and visit and then go out again. We will be doing this repeatedly. Does that answer your question?

Mr McAleer: Yes, thank you.

Mr Byrne: Thank you for the presentation, which was succinct. There are some stark facts that we will have to examine. We have spent £317 million in 15 years. Five years ago, we had the incidence down to below 4%. Currently, it is running at over 8%. TVR seems to me to be an unproven system so far, and we are depending on FERA to come forward with a modelling system to advise us on the type of exercise that we should carry out. Are we looking for a needle in a haystack? We have not yet got a model that has any proven track record?

Mrs Davey: This is research, so it is about us doing something different. There are obviously similar types of work going on, in the South of Ireland and in England, but we are doing something here that is unique. It is not about looking for a needle in a haystack, but about adding to our knowledge. This is being done as an additional piece of work. Obviously, all the other TB controls are in place, and we continue to look at them. Other research projects are going on as well, so this is not being done in isolation. There is a focus on trying to reduce our TB levels, and that focus continues, but what can come out of this study will give us a new and unique perspective.

Mr Byrne: Earlier, Kate, you mentioned that more money would be needed. How can we quantify how much more is needed?

Secondly, DEFRA has come out with a recent report that is quite damning on attempts to eradicate TB from badgers.

Mrs Davey: There are a couple of questions there. First, I will deal with the one about the money. We have not finalised our figure work, so I cannot put a figure on the table today. That is being informed by the development of the mandate to carry out this project, and our business case is being developed. So, we do not have a figure. When we have it and we advise the Minister, we will advise the Committee. We are working up those costings.

As to the English report, I am not aware of a damning report about badgers. Colin, do you want to come in on that point?

Mr Byrne: Mr Paterson, the Minister in DEFRA has made some really strong comments.

Mr Hart: I think that Mr Byrne was referring to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee report, which came out recently. I read that and was encouraged by it. Although they were asking significant questions about the use of vaccines, they were also very positive about government investment in vaccine development and TB research and development. The report was also very positive about continuing to build on our knowledge of this very difficult disease. It said that not having all the answers about badger vaccination is a strong reason for carrying out further research. I thought it was quite encouraging. Although it made the points that you mentioned, there were encouraging aspects in that report.

Mr Byrne: OK. I have made my point.

Mr Milne: I think that William has stolen my fire on this, but, at what stage in the five-year process would you like to see a reduction of TB in the herds? What I am saying is that, given that it is over a five-year period, surely somewhere in between that you will see whether it is working.

Mr Hart: FERA has given us some very encouraging modelling on this. What we will see initially is a reduction in the badgers, so a key element of this project is to look for a reduction in the badger incidence. When we capture the badgers in the first year, we will have a firm baseline of what the disease level is in badgers. Thereafter, and quite quickly, we are led to believe, if perturbation is not an issue, we will see a reduction in their number. That, in turn, will have the effect that those badgers will not be spreading disease to the cattle, so we will see the cattle change but over a slightly longer time. It will be more gradual, because not all cattle herds are infected from badgers; some of them are infected as a result of the buying-in of infected cattle or by receiving it from their neighbour across the hedgerow if the cattle are in direct contact. As the badger is likely to be a significant element of spreading the disease between herds, we will see the cattle effect, but it will be slightly delayed.

Mr Milne: So, you may not see the effects until after the five-year period?

Mr Hart: That is possible.

Mr Milne: There is no point in going over old ground, so thank you very much for your presentation, I wish you well.

The Chairperson: I want to add to a point that Colin made. There is another fact about the disease being prevalent: the test misses so many, which is another issue.

As you would imagine, and as you have acknowledged, I am a wee bit more sceptical on this issue than a lot of my colleagues around the table are. I believe that this is the way to go and that testing, vaccinating and removing badgers is the best way we can ever cope with the badger element of bovine TB. My issue, my problem and my suspicions are that the Department does not have the will to do this. Having said that, one question I would ask is this: what other study or survey will the Department put in place once we have finished the badger ecological survey?

Mrs Davey: There are two points here. First, the Minister is fully supportive of this measure and wants this to happen. Certainly, her officials will make it happen for her. There is definitely a will for this to happen in the Department, there is no question about that.

The Chairperson: Has there been a survey done in the Department as to their belief in this programme?

Mrs Davey: There does not need to be a survey done in the Department. We are the Minister's officials and this is the Minister's policy. It is our job to make it happen.

The Chairperson: Yes, but if you can do a survey to ask employees whether they want to relocate to a new building, on something as substantial as this, with the cutting-edge technology and surveys you talked about earlier, surely —

Mrs Davey: This is not relevant to the views of staff in the Department. The views of the TB team and the veterinary team are that this is the way to go and it is our job to make it happen. That is what we are dedicated to doing and the Minister is fully supportive of it, as I said, and has promoted it here on a number of occasions. There is definitely a will to make this happen.

The Chairperson: What other surveys and studies will need to be done after the badger ecological survey?

Mrs Davey: Before the intervention?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mrs Davey: Just the ecological study has to be done over this winter period and then we are into the intervention. As I said earlier, the reason why we could not start the intervention any earlier is that there is a closed period when we cannot have any intervention with the badger during its breeding

season, which runs from December through to May. So, during that period, we cannot do anything. Even though we probably could be ready to do something in that period, we could not get a licence to do it. We have to wait. Once we have completed these steps, we are ready to go.

The Chairperson: Do you need a licence for the ecological study?

Mrs Davey: Yes, we do, because we are actually collaring the badgers. We are expecting to do that before December.

The Chairperson: Could you not have done that during the breeding season?

Mrs Davey: We cannot do it through their closed season, which will be December through to May. This became an issue for us only once we got the FERA report. It said that we really need to have a baseline for badger movement. We have got to do it now.

The Chairperson: Surely, we have always talked about badger behaviour and perturbation. We have always talked about this. Why did the Department not have the foresight to do this?

Mrs Davey: We really needed some evidence. We have put our data through and the model is saying that we should be doing this. That is what is coming out. We have a very valid reason for doing it, as opposed to doing it on a whim. This is a natural step. It will give us a lot of information that we can use, but doing this is not going to delay what we would have done anyway.

The Chairperson: How many DARD officials are involved in the research to date?

Mrs Davey: Most of the work on the ground is being taken forward by AFBI. It has been commissioned. So, DARD officials are not on the ground doing the work; AFBI is doing it on the Department's behalf.

The Chairperson: If AFBI is doing this work, who is surveying and studying bovine TB and the potential impact of liver fluke and Johne's disease?

Mrs Davey: AFBI manages its work programme. For this, it will contract in whatever staff it needs to do this on the ground. That is what happened during the badger sett survey. I was out at badger sett survey work, and my understanding is that AFBI had 10 teams working across the two areas. It will manage its manpower as it needs it and that will be built into the cost of the project. We do not see manpower being a difficulty. We do not see this stopping AFBI doing other work. It is about the planning stage. We have been working very closely with AFBI on this, so it is aware of each of the steps and is part of the project team.

The Chairperson: What work has been done on the test itself? Are we sure of that test? Are we convinced that we have the right one and that that will not delay the process?

Mr McKee: It should not delay the process. Decisions have still to be taken on the test, but it is more than likely that the Brock Stat-Pak test will be one of the tests that are employed. There will be the opportunity, when badgers are sampled year on year, for variations to that during the course of the thing. Protocols still have to be worked up for the scientific process, but that is something that will be taken forward in the planning phase. It is not something that is causing a problem at this stage.

Mr McMullan: We have got to bear in mind what Europe is saying about TB. Europe has made it very clear that these compensation levels cannot carry on. Whilst we can go into all these surveys, there is nothing else to do other than what we are doing. We have debated this long and hard, and there is no other way. If we went down the road of vaccination, it would take Europe at least 10 or 15 years — what were we told? — to give the nod for a vaccination. That is the length of time that we are talking about.

I think that it will be quite exciting to see how this will end up; five years will not be long rolling in, and it will give us a better idea then. One of the pivotal things is to get the farmers behind this. Even though they are not, in numbers, behind the survey, it would help us, if we go down the line of security, if we could get them to buy into the idea of making their farms more secure. That is all part of the process. It is not just a vaccination process; it is a farm security process as well. That was made very clear

when we were over in Europe. That was one of the first things that the gentleman in Europe said when we asked the question. The two things that he mentioned first were the figures being paid out and security on farms. That is all part of the product of the survey.

The Committee has done a good job taking everything to where it is today. I do not know whether we should now be surveying the Department to see whether we should be trapping you. *[Laughter.]* I say carry on. Put it this way: there is no other show in town. We are doing the best job that we can. Other areas will be looking at what we are doing to see whether they can learn from us.

Mr Byrne: Just one point. Scotland is a pretty close neighbour with pretty much the same sort of farming system as we have. Is it a fact that Scotland enjoys disease-free status and therefore has under 2% incidence? Can anybody confirm that? Surely, we should be carrying out some sort of comparative with Scotland to find out how it has reached the state of 2% incidences and disease-free status. We should maybe consider, Chairman, writing to the corresponding Committee for an update on what it has done and achieved and how it has got to the stage that it has.

I stick by my claim: I believe that the Minister is sincere. The Minister is no more technically, intellectually or scientifically competent than us. From a policy perspective, I think that she is on the same page as us. The question is this: are DARD and AFBI capable, willing and motivated enough to tackle this issue? Thanks, Chairman.

The Chairperson: OK. There are no further questions from members. Thank you very much for your attendance today, your presentation, your answers and your insight.