



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

First-day Brief: Mr Andrew Muir MLA,
Minister of Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs

5 March 2024

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Tom Elliott (Chairperson)
Mr Declan McAleer (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr John Blair
Miss Nicola Brogan
Mr Patsy McGlone
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Miss Áine Murphy

Witnesses:

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| Mr Muir | Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs |
| Mrs Katrina Godfrey | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs |

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McAleer): I welcome the Minister, Mr Andrew Muir, and the permanent secretary, Mrs Katrina Godfrey, to the meeting. I invite them to brief the Committee, and then I will open the meeting to questions. The Minister has to leave no later than 3.45 pm. We must be conscious of that, and also that members may nip in and out for Question Time.

Mr Muir (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Good afternoon, Deputy Chair, Chair online and Committee members. I thank you for inviting me here and congratulate you all on your new roles on the Committee. I am delighted and privileged to be here, addressing the Committee as the new Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. Joining me is my permanent secretary, Katrina Godfrey. We are both keen runners, so we have proved to be a good tag team to date, and hopefully over the time ahead we will continue to be that.

Mrs Katrina Godfrey (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): One is a lot faster than the other, though.

Mr Muir: We will not disclose who is faster.

Also, I put on record my thanks for facilitating this Tuesday afternoon meeting. I totally understand that people need to leave and come in and out. I greatly appreciate that. I have been asked to focus, in my opening remarks, on my key issues and priorities for the Department. You have received the first-day brief, which should inform the discussion this afternoon.

The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) has an extensive and diverse portfolio that impacts on us all, including responsibility for protecting and improving our natural environment, farming and food production, animal and plant health, fishing and forest regeneration. It also plays a crucial role in supporting our rural communities. Our agriculture, food and fisheries sectors are vital for our food security, a cornerstone of our economy and what knits rural communities together. In many ways, they lead the world in carbon reduction and environmental action.

Nothing will be gained from pitting agriculture and environment against each other. We must all move forward together with an understanding that our economy and the environment are intrinsically linked. During my term, I therefore intend to focus on the full remit of the Department, seeking to implement policies and strategies the aim of which will be to benefit our climate and the environment while supporting our economically and socially significant agriculture, food and fishery sectors alongside our important rural communities. I intend to listen to, engage and strive to work with the Committee, the Assembly, stakeholders and partners in every part of Northern Ireland, as well as working North/South and east-west. I strongly believe that we can achieve a lot more collectively. That said, there are immediate key issues that I need to tackle, including Lough Neagh, the environmental improvement plan, ammonia, bovine TB and, as outlined this morning in my ministerial statement, XL bullies. Those are the immediate issues that I need to address, but it is important to say that, in the next few weeks, I will also set out the key priorities for my whole portfolio.

In my first week in office, I made it a priority to visit Lough Neagh and meet the Lough Neagh Partnership. I am fully committed to urgently addressing the serious issue of blue-green algae, not least to ensure the protection of our beautiful environment but also to safeguard public and animal health and the economy that heavily relies on the lough. Over the past couple of decades, the balance between growing our economy and safeguarding our environment has not been correctly struck. That being the case, Lough Neagh has been identified as a first-year priority for the Executive.

The starting point for Lough Neagh is the environment strategy and Northern Ireland's first environmental improvement plan. The blue-green algae issue — most notable in Lough Neagh but also present in other water bodies in Northern Ireland — cannot be seen in isolation from the natural environment more generally; we cannot tackle the problem in isolation. The environmental improvement plan, otherwise known as the "EIP" — I have got used to the fact that there are lots of acronyms in the Department — is the plan for significantly improving our natural environment. It will contain actions setting the direction of travel for the coming decades relevant to improving water quality, including at Lough Neagh. Once the plan has received Executive agreement, I will bring a further, more specific paper on Lough Neagh with a more detailed action plan to a subsequent Executive meeting.

I reiterate that our natural environment is under significant pressure. Sadly, most indicators are moving in the wrong direction. My officials are preparing a paper for the Executive Office and a head of Civil Service action plan in a bid to secure the significant additional investment likely to be needed to tackle the Lough Neagh algae blooms and water quality issues. I have also had a constructive meeting with the Earl of Shaftesbury on matters relating to the lough.

I cannot fix this alone. It is clear that collective action is needed across government, the private and public sectors and local communities. I am determined to continue with my pledge to engage with partners and stakeholders to ensure that we work together to improve water quality across Northern Ireland, including in Lough Neagh. Unfortunately, despite the actions that we will take in the immediate future — it is important that we take them — there is no quick fix, and there is likely to be a recurrence of the blue-green algae blooms this year. If anything, I should detail to the Committee, they have already reappeared. Real and sustained improvement will take decades. Due to the nature of the algal blooms, actions in the first year may not have the immediate impact expected by the wider community. However, the identified actions, if funded in year 1, will see a longer-term benefit to Lough Neagh and, in turn, other water bodies across Northern Ireland, much sooner than would be the case without the early intervention that is needed.

I turn to the ammonia strategy. I am acutely aware that action on ammonia is urgently required to support our local farm businesses and rural communities to thrive and be sustainable, while protecting our environment and meeting our legislative requirements. Agriculture in Northern Ireland produces 97% of Northern Ireland's ammonia emissions, and changes to some farming practices will be required, including increased uptake of established and new technologies. My Department is finalising two measures to deliver reductions in agricultural ammonia emissions that will deliver better outcomes for nature and public health. The first measure is the ammonia strategy, which will deliver Northern Ireland-wide reductions in ammonia emissions through mandatory manure management requirements

and additional voluntary measures. The second measure is new standing advice, which is under development and will be used to provide statutory advice on planning applications. I turn next to the climate action plan. I am determined to deliver on the ambition of the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 and its target of net zero for Northern Ireland by 2050. The climate emergency is one of the defining policy challenges of this generation, and it is one of my key priorities.

We must greatly increase the pace of progress in carbon reduction to deliver on the legal obligations that the Assembly has set for us. The next step on our journey is to set our carbon budgets and the interim emission targets for 2030 and 2040. They represent legally binding limits on our carbon emissions. I intend to seek agreement soon from Executive colleagues for the first three carbon budgets and the interim targets.

In Northern Ireland's first climate action plan for 2023-27, we will set our approach to net zero and our first carbon budget. I use the word "we" deliberately: while my Department is responsible for preparing and publishing the climate action plan, developing a credible climate action plan that delivers on the ambition of the Assembly is a challenge that sits across the entire Executive.

Net zero requires transformational change across wider society and the economy. I am fully committed to delivering a climate action plan that can achieve that change in a way that is fair, evidence-based and informed by stakeholders. I am determined that we will publish the draft for consultation in the time ahead. I look forward to engaging with the Committee throughout that process. I note that, while the climate action plan is, as I said, for 2023 to 2027, we are now in 2024, which shows the challenge that we have as we take office.

I am keen to talk about the upfront cost of climate action or, as is more appropriate, investment. Investing in a net zero pathway now will mean an improved society for future generations, a society where we live in better-insulated homes, lead more active and healthier lives and create more green jobs, delivering value for our economy and society.

On behavioural science relating to climate change actions, I believe that science and evidence-based decisions are at the forefront of how I want to deliver my remit as Minister. You will see that in how we address the issues in Lough Neagh and in how I will deliver on our climate change commitments. Changing behaviours will be fundamental to achieving the transformation required. Last week, I opened an event for the chief executives forum on how behavioural science has been used to support the transition to net zero across the UK and Ireland. There is much to be learned from our closest neighbours, and an evidence-based and science-led approach is key to ensuring that the delivery of the Executive's statutory commitments on climate change and net zero is as fair as possible for all our people and communities.

As well as behavioural science considerations related to climate change, my Department is assessing more broadly its social science needs. A group has been convened that is considering our current knowledge, skills and use of social sciences. The group will also consider future requirements and assess how best to deliver solutions where gaps exist.

I welcome the ongoing work on a new farm support and development programme, and I thank the officials who have done the work on that over the last number of years. There has been significant work and engagement, and I am greatly appreciative of that. The programme's objectives are to transition to more sustainable farming that benefits the climate and environment whilst supporting our economically and socially significant agriculture sector. Firm foundations of farm support and development have been laid. Importantly, the planned schemes and measures provide levers to contribute to statutory obligations under the Climate Change Act. I do not intend to disturb those; rather, I intend to build on them and move forward at pace.

As members will be aware, bovine tuberculosis is one of the most challenging issues facing cattle farmers in Northern Ireland. I share the Committee's concerns about the current high rate of TB incidence and the impact that that is having on hard-working farm families. With herd incidence currently just under 10%, one farm in 10 has experienced the difficulties associated with a new TB breakdown in the past year. I have already heard directly from the industry about the devastating impact that that is having. Tackling the disease also has a significant impact on my Department's budget. In the last financial year, £53 million was spent on the control of TB, £38 million of which was paid in compensation for cattle that were slaughtered for disease control. A similar amount is expected to be paid this year. I am also aware that the Secretary of State's direction — his direction, may I note — to consult on reducing TB compensation has not been welcomed by the farming community. The consultation is due to close on Friday 8 March, and I urge everyone with an interest in the matter to

express their views. The Secretary of State's approach to the general issue of revenue raising causes me great concern and has impeded a lot of the discussions on the matter. Given the extreme pressures on public finances, it is clear that the high cost of controlling TB is not sustainable for farm businesses or for my departmental budget. I assure members that tackling the disease and all the factors that contribute to its spread and endurance is a top priority for me in my new role.

I want to be an advocate on animal welfare issues. We can all agree that improving animal welfare and stopping animal cruelty should be a priority for everyone. Working with stakeholders and partners across the piece, we can find a way to modernise animal welfare legislation and not just bring it in line with other jurisdictions but become an exemplar for others. Members will have seen that, this morning, I announced the introduction of new safeguards surrounding XL bully dogs in Northern Ireland. I will not go into too much detail on that, because I outlined it this morning, but I am happy to take questions on it.

On the rural development programme (RDP), as Minister, I am fully aware of my responsibilities to fully consider rural policy post EU exit. I reassure the Committee that, despite the cessation of the Northern Ireland rural development programme, my Department continues to invest in and support our rural communities through a range of Northern Ireland Executive and departmental interventions. As a priority, I am considering the future of rural policy, including how rural communities can be supported. However, it is important to note that responsibility for addressing social and economic issues affecting rural communities rests primarily with the Departments that have that statutory remit. Members will be aware that the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 places a duty on public authorities to have due regard to the social and economic needs of people in rural areas when exercising their functions. The Department continues to support public authorities to help ensure that the Act is implemented effectively and delivers better outcomes for rural dwellers.

I have touched on only a few of my key issues and priorities, but, given my Department's wide and varied remit, I could not have addressed them all in my opening remarks. Members can be assured that that does not mean that I do not consider them to be important. I look forward to working closely with the Committee in tackling all the issues and to working alongside you all on areas of shared interest.

Chair, that concludes my opening remarks. I look forward to taking questions.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Thank you, Minister, for that wide-ranging report on your first-day priorities. I will hand over to the Chair of the Committee, Tom Elliott, who may have a few questions.

Mr Elliott: Thanks to the Minister for the presentation. I have a couple of quick questions. A court case stopped the badger cull or wildlife intervention scheme. What is the Minister's view on taking that process forward?

Mr Muir: I thank the Chair for his question. I know about that legal challenge. The court found against the Department on three grounds, which were that the Department failed to properly undertake a consultation process that complied with the relevant legal requirements; that it did not disclose relevant scientific papers; and that there had not been adequate consideration of the responses to the consultation. I am aware of that, the strength of public feeling on the issue and the petitions on it that were presented to the Assembly at the time.

To tackle bovine TB, I need to work with stakeholders and be guided by the evidence and science to find a way through that tunnel. Currently, there is no light at the end of the tunnel, so I will explore options on that. Our party's policy is no secret, but, as Minister, I am coming to the matter with a clean desk, and I am looking at the issues and trying to find a way forward. I am conscious that it is a significant issue, particularly in Fermanagh, and that the herd incidence rate is 10% while, in the South, it is 5%. We need to find a way forward. The Chief Veterinary Officer often tells me that this is a complex, multifactorial matter, and I totally get that. I am coming to this to look at the different issues, and I will hopefully come back to the Committee in the time ahead. That will not be in the next few weeks, because we need to make sure that whatever we do attracts the support of stakeholders and is legally robust so that I can proceed with it.

Mr Elliott: Thanks, Minister. In other words, you have nothing firmly in place or in mind at the moment to take that forward or even to take the overall TB strategy forward.

Mr Muir: I will consider the TB strategy and what is sitting there. I know that a number of the actions that have not been implemented in relation to that are longer-term. There has been significant internal engagement in the Department about the issues associated with that, and officials will come back to me with some options for that. Is there anything more that you want to say, Katrina?

Mrs Godfrey: To pick up on the Minister's point, Tom, the devastating consequences of this are felt at farm level, and the public purse is not helped either. Our priority is finding an accelerated way through that has stakeholder buy-in and is underpinned by the most robust scientific evidence. For us, as officials, the priority is to make sure that the Minister has that advice and that the way forward will make a difference, is affordable and is absolutely evidence-based.

Mr Muir: One thing that causes me concern and that I have probably outlined previously in the Chamber is what will be available to me from next year's Budget. It will cause me concern if the Budget does not allow me to continue with the current level of compensation. I totally understand from my engagement with stakeholders the devastation that occurs when TB arrives in the herd, as well as the need to support what are essentially businesses, often with families supporting them. They are livelihoods, and I want to find a way forward and a road map out of this while continuing to provide the support that they need. That is why budgetary cover is absolutely essential.

Mr Elliott: OK. Chair, maybe I could be permitted one other question. It is about the ammonia strategy, which could have a devastating impact on agricultural development in the future, Minister. I wonder where you are with that.

Mr Muir: I am conscious of the implications that that has for planning applications and of the frustration around the delays associated with that. Being out on farms over the last number of weeks, I have seen the operational circumstances. I do not say this lightly: the question of how to tackle ammonia is extremely complex. I am conscious that we are in the situation that we are in and that Katrina took the decisions that she had to take because, frankly, there was no option. I would like to put on record at my first Committee meeting my thanks to the officials — Katrina and so many others in the Department — for the work that they have done, particularly over the last two years, without Ministers being in place. They have done a fantastic job without Ministers in place, and I am so grateful for the work that has been done.

We are in the situation that we are in because we needed to make sure that we were on the right side of the law. It is important to outline two areas around this. The draft ammonia strategy underwent public consultation in 2023. The response from that consultation is being compiled and will be with me shortly. I want to bring forward a reworked ammonia strategy and new standing advice in the time ahead, but I want to make sure that whatever I bring forward will be sustainable into the future. I totally get the frustration around this and the impact that it has, particularly in rural areas and especially in the west. I get that. We need to find a way forward that safeguards the farms but also, importantly, the environment.

Mrs Godfrey: This is not unconnected to the wider work that the Minister talked about, particularly in relation to Lough Neagh and the environmental improvement plan. The link between ammonia and water quality is absolutely clear. While I have not seen the summary of the consultation responses, I think that it is fair to say that the responses were probably fairly evenly divided between those who thought that the draft strategy did not go far enough and those who thought that it perhaps went too far. That gives an illustration of the complexity of the issue and of the views and aspirations that need to be balanced.

Mr Muir: Deputy Chair, you have probably seen a copy of the first-day brief that I got. About half an hour after I was appointed as Minister, we went through that, and I got a quick understanding that a lot of the issues that are on my desk are not simple or easy. They are complex, and there are probably two challenges: to do something that is sound that we can stand over and to bring people with us. I am trying my best to bring people with me, and I want to thank the people whom I have engaged with to date for their flexibility, their kindness and their willingness to engage with me. I thank in particular the Ulster Farmers' Union, which has shown itself in a really good light in its ability to engage with me as Minister.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Minister, I want to underline what Tom said. We are both from the west, where there are a lot of environmentally sensitive sites. We appreciate the impact of ammonia on those sites, but the fact that there are more environmentally sensitive sites in the west has a knock-on impact for farm businesses in the area. The make-up of the population of the North

creates an equality impact in the west because it is disproportionately hit by the damage. It is also important to look at low-emission spreading equipment for slurry, which would facilitate small hill farmers. That is a more challenging environment.

I agree with you completely that the Secretary of State's intervention in the TB conversation was very unhelpful, and I want to impress the importance of moving that on. Like you, I was at the NI Farm Family Day last week at the Assembly. I was speaking to the farmers' union at length, and the devastation of TB on farms is unbelievable. During the conversation, one example was given of a farmer who had built up 40 years of bloodlines on his farm that were wiped out in one go. His 18,000 cattle had to be culled last year because of TB, so it is a serious issue, from an animal welfare point of view, that we need to get to grips with.

There are two wee things that I want to mention. Has more consideration been given to including a sheep scheme in your future agriculture policy? Have you had any engagements with the UK Government through the Treasury on securing a future budget for what I term the "new single farm payment"?

Mr Muir: I will deal with those two issues and some of your other comments. On the ammonia issue, I spoke to Minister Charlie McConalogue on Friday when I was in Lifford for the launch of protected geographical indication (PGI) status for Irish grass-fed beef. We have agreed that one of our immediate priorities is to meet at the North/South Ministerial Council to discuss issues such as ammonia and bovine TB, because they are shared challenges. I will be interested to have a discussion on how we both are dealing with that. I am speaking to my Scottish counterpart tomorrow, so, North/South and east-west, there are opportunities for collaboration and engagement.

You asked about the farm support programme and support for sheep farming. On Wednesday, I was at a sheep farm in Park in the Sperrins. That was a really useful opportunity to engage and understand the issues and economics associated with, in particular, hill farming and sheep farming and the need for support for that. I am conscious that there has been a working group that has come back with a report on this, and I want to consider that because my clear impression is that the economic challenges of being involved in sheep farming are great. In the context of that and other issues, the question of how we attract more younger people into farming causes me concern. That is a key challenge for the Department and me, as Minister.

On the budget for the farm support programme, obviously, the Chancellor will announce his Budget tomorrow. I have concerns about that. I have concerns — this is a political comment — that the UK Government seem to be set on tax cuts rather than on investing in public services, supporting our farming community and addressing the need for budgets for the next number of years to properly reflect the challenges that the industry faces. We need to be able to invest in a just transition. That means supporting our farming community in the time ahead. It is not lost on me that that budget is ring-fenced, and that is useful. The issue is that, over time, it has not kept pace with inflation, so, in real terms, it has been cut. We need to see that changed. We need to ensure that the UK Government change tack and ensure that the budgets that come to Northern Ireland to support our valuable sectors reflect the challenges that they face.

I have reached out to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and have invited him here. I have also said that I will go and see him. I am trying my best to engage with the UK Government from that perspective. I have also met the Secretary of State, and, in the first few days following restoration, the Prime Minister. I am committed to working with the UK Government, but there has to be an appreciation that the funding settlement for Northern Ireland is not sufficient for our needs, and I see that when I engage with our agricultural community. They are doing a lot of work, but they need more support, and we need that from the UK Government.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Thank you, Minister. I will move round the room. John is first.

Mr Blair: Thank you, Minister for your presentation. It is a particular pleasure to welcome you here today as a Committee member, and I extend the welcome to Katrina. I will add, Minister — you took the lines from me, but I am not complaining — that I was going to open with thanks to the team that Katrina leads in DAERA for the way they have kept MLAs, party spokespersons and our respective teams updated during the collapse of government and the impasse. We were grateful for that, and we know that your challenges were greater because of the absence of government.

On the specifics of the presentation, I thank you for the emphasis you have placed on the fact that your Department has three distinct divisions or directorates — environment, agriculture and rural affairs — and that none of them has priority over the other because, putting it bluntly, it has not always felt like that, either at Committee, in the Assembly or in the media. In light of that, as someone who has called for every policy and practice to be on the table for review against the backdrop of the Lough Neagh ecological crisis, I ask whether, in the examination of our waterways — we know the condition of all of them, and none of them is rated as "good" — the general waterways issue and specifically the Lough Neagh issues will be considered and given particular attention in the environmental improvement plan that is being brought forward?

Mr Muir: I echo the comments about officials. It has not been easy without Ministers in post, and it is important to put our thanks on the record.

Lough Neagh was one of the first visits I undertook as Minister, and I am grateful to the Lough Neagh Partnership for welcoming me and to the departmental officials for showing me the lough. I say this from a genuine place: I feel a sense of shame that Lough Neagh has been allowed to get into the situation it has, but what is different this year compared with last year is that we have Ministers in place, we have an Executive in place and we have an Assembly Committee in place. It is right that the Committee is in place to scrutinise and to hold me and the other Ministers to account. That is really important.

We can shape a course out of where we are. If the focus is just on the actual lough, which is the bed, the soil and the immediate area, that is losing any understanding of where the problems came from. What happened last year is that the problem that had been bubbling below the surface came to the top. What was bubbling below the surface occurred over decades, and it occurred because of environmental mismanagement. I make it clear that one of the first motions I responded to in the Chamber was about Lough Neagh. I am not into blame games, because, if we go down that road, no one will win. It may feel good to blame people, but it does not move us one step closer; if anything, it moves us backwards.

We have to understand how we chart a course forward. The environmental improvement plan is a wider Northern Ireland strategy. There is a river basin management plan as well that links into that. There are many different things that link into the environmental improvement plan, which reflects the catchment area of Lough Neagh. One of the first times I met Katrina, we went through maps of Lough Neagh that showed the catchment area. It would be useful if that could be shared widely to the people of Northern Ireland, so that they understand that it is not just a problem in Toome; it is much bigger than that. We all know that there are contributing factors around that. We have agricultural run-off. We have waste water infrastructure, which needs massive investment. I have concerns about getting capital funding from the UK Government to allow us to do that. We have septic tanks. We have the arrival of zebra mussels, which have contributed to the issue. We have climate change. We cannot have a situation whereby we are hoping and praying that the weather will be better this summer so that the problem will not be as bad. Climate change is here, and it is here for the long term for us to tackle, but all those issues are feeding into the problem.

If we genuinely and sincerely want to address the issues with Lough Neagh, a concerted effort across government and society will be required, as will funding, which is key. We will therefore have to put in money. We need to help our agriculture community adapt to new ways of working. We need to invest in our waste water infrastructure and to provide a way of getting replacements for the old septic tanks. We need to find a better way of managing Lough Neagh.

There has been a lot of media interest in my meeting with the Earl of Shaftesbury. It has been greater than the media interest in this meeting, unfortunately and perhaps wrongly, because I consider this meeting to be more crucial. This is where we have scrutiny and discussion of the wider policy issues. Changing the ownership of Lough Neagh will not solve those fundamental issues. In some ways, it is a distraction from the key issues that lie ahead and the difficult decisions that we have to take.

I have been heartened by the level of consensus among political parties, politicians and society in getting into the issue. That is to be encouraged, and I would rather that we continue on that road and work together. When I announce the action plan, which, hopefully, will come in April or May, I want to do so after having buy-in from stakeholders. That was quite a long answer, but Lough Neagh stands up there as a reflection of what went wrong and of how we can turn things around.

Mr Blair: I have a couple more points to make. The Minister's statement on his intention to conduct an environmental governance review is welcome. The stats and the science on our waterways, air quality

and peatlands suggest that it is very much required. Is it the case that that governance review will look at the potential for nature protection and recovery as well as at the mechanisms of governance?

Mr Muir: Coming into this post, I was conscious that the environmental governance landscape is a very changed one. We have the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP), which plays an important role, but we have also left the EU. I am meeting Minister Charlie McConalogue on Friday. The environmental governance landscape is very different for him than it is for me in Northern Ireland. I want to do that review. It will be an internal review with officials of whether our environmental governance is fit for purpose.

My party has a long-standing commitment to establishing an independent environmental protection agency, but, if I am to bring forward proposals, I need to bring people with me. I need to demonstrate to people the associated benefits of having it. It is a commitment for parties in the New Decade, New Approach agreement, so it is important that we consider it in that context. Environmental governance is key, and, from my perspective, it should be independent. It is important for me to be here at Committee, but we also need a body that is independent and that can call me out on issues. The OEP plays an important role, but it is just one part of the landscape. Hopefully, that answers your question.

Mr Blair: It does. With the Chair's permission, I have a final point to make about the Department's connection with communities. This may be a point more for officials, but the Minister and permanent secretary can decide. The permanent secretary will be aware that I have written to her a number of times about the need to address the current state of the Department's public angling estate, which appears to have closed. It has certainly been stopped. I have also written to her about a crucial community outreach programme that would have connected well with the more disadvantaged and isolated members of our communities by assisting in engaging people in angling and providing what one might call, for want of a better phrase, social fishing. All of that has been frozen.

Those things are often the low-hanging fruit, but, very often, the removal of that low-hanging fruit mostly affects the most disadvantaged members of our society. Are there any moves afoot to try to re-establish that community outreach, which both the marine and fisheries division and the Forest Service in DAERA are very well placed to do, and to reinvigorate and relaunch the public angling estate?

Mr Muir: I will let Katrina answer most of that, but I have received a significant volume of correspondence from members of the public, angling groups and elected representatives about the stocking of the angling estate, as a result of zebra mussels being discovered in the Movanager fish farm in June 2023. I am aware of that and will engage with officials in the time ahead on how to deal with it. That is not simple, by the way, because there is an issue there around the legislation and how we deal with that. I will let Katrina answer on some of the other issues around the angling estate.

Mrs Godfrey: I will add something about the public angling estate. We have about 90 public angling waters, about 27 of which are stocked from Movanager. That means that the bulk of them are available and well used.

Your point, though, John, is not at all wrong: by its nature, quite often, some of the discretionary stuff that we do across government is the stuff that is different, exciting and innovative. When budgets are so tight, we end up coming back to the things that the law requires us to do, and that means that we do fewer of the discretionary things that can be really meaningful. A challenge for both of us in our respective roles will be around the Budget settlement and working out how we use whatever budget we get to the best possible effect on well-being matters and supporting those who most need our support. I do not know what that will look like until we see how the Budget irons out, but I absolutely take the point.

Mr Blair: OK, thank you.

Mr McGlone: Minister, it is good to see you and Katrina in this formal capacity. You mentioned that Lough Neagh, which is a topic that is near and dear to my heart and very near to where I live, is a first-year priority for the Executive. In practical terms, what does that mean? If you will bear with me, I want to attach that to another question. You also mentioned improving water quality. I have just asked a question of the Minister for Infrastructure — I tagged on to the end of it by way of a supplementary — about the flow from sewage disposal works into Lough Neagh.

I am not saying that he practically said that he questioned the evidence that was given by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) on the quantity of input from the likes of, say, phosphates, into the lough, but he said that he wanted more robust evidence. I am not sure whether that was kicking the tin down the alleyway or what. I am interested to hear on those two items. First, you mentioned some measures for Lough Neagh, but how is the lough a priority for the Executive? Secondly, on water quality, what liaison is going on between the likes of NIEA and NI Water/Department for Infrastructure? There seems to be a wee bit of difference there.

Mr Muir: Yes, no problem. I have good news on the question of what is contributing to the situation in Lough Neagh. The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) has been doing a piece of research on that. We already have Northern Ireland-wide figures, but AFBI is doing a particular analysis that will feed into that. I have spoken to Minister O'Dowd about the investment in waste water infrastructure, echoing some of my concerns about the capital investment and our capacity to invest in waste water infrastructure. That is not only holding back housebuilding and economic development but contributing to pollution, so it is having a real consequence for Lough Neagh. I will continue to engage with Minister O'Dowd in the time ahead, because we need to find a way forward.

On the question of the Executive's year-1 priorities, the issue was on the agenda at the Executive's first meeting. Working with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, there has been engagement around that in recent days in order to ensure that the issue is high on the Executive's agenda. This is a matter of public concern, not just for the people who live near, work on or visit Lough Neagh but for the whole of Northern Ireland. We see that as a demonstration of what we need to do to improve our environmental governance.

The ultimate demonstration of our commitment will be the budgets that are associated with that. Without the required investment, we will be impeded in making the interventions that are needed. Is there anything else that you want to say, Katrina?

Mrs Godfrey: On Patsy's point, the lough is linked into a wider Programme for Government. You cannot tackle Lough Neagh in isolation from looking at the environment more generally. The Minister mentioned the catchment area: the map of the catchment area tells you that it is half of Northern Ireland, so you cannot see Lough Neagh in isolation. It is important to then work through the environmental improvement programme and support it with the Lough Neagh action plan and make sure that there is full recognition of the environment in the Programme for Government, when it is agreed, and in the investment strategy and the Budget.

On working with DFI, it would be a bad job if Denis and I, given our respective previous roles, were not working well together. As recently as yesterday or the day before — this is only Tuesday, so it must have been yesterday — the senior water stakeholders met. They included NI Water and the Department's Drinking Water Inspectorate, so those conversations are very much alive and well.

Mr McGlone: That is good. I like to see cohesion between all the Departments that are relevant to Lough Neagh.

Minister, I am not quite sure if you used the phrase "robust science", but it was used in regard to TB. Do you feel that the science that the Department has collated until now has not been robust enough? The Committee seems to have been talking for a considerable number of years about TB and the various elements of research that have been done on it.

Mr Muir: I am aware that TB has been on the agenda for a number of years, as you outlined. TB herd instances are now of significant concern. There is value in me, as Minister, coming to it with a fresh approach. I do not want to criticise the Secretary of State again, but I will. The budget that the Department was given this year meant that, essentially, we had to make very difficult, retrograde decisions, but they had to be made in order to balance the budget. For example, the testing regime had to be reduced to try to keep us within line, and it is important that we try to get back to the testing regime as it was pre the budget cuts. That is because, with TB, we need to do some of the basics by ensuring that we are testing to the most efficient level possible so that we can identify herd infections. I will bid for funding for that in the budget for next year so that we can get back to higher levels of testing.

Mr McGlone: Maybe I am a bit confused. Testing is one thing, but, to me, robust scientific evidence means something else, such as sources and the likes of that. You used that phrase, Katrina —

Mrs Godfrey: Absolutely.

Mr McGlone: — so maybe you want to come back to me on what it means.

Mrs Godfrey: That is a fair point, but the key thing is that science does not stand still, so the challenge for us is making sure that we keep up to date with the very latest evidence and data. The role that our Chief Scientific Adviser plays in that is crucial. In recent months, we have tried to reposition the science so that it is much more firmly embedded in the way that we provide policy advice to Ministers across every part of the Department and to ensure that we have the right networks to keep abreast of the very latest developments.

For example, with Lough Neagh, we made sure that we had an expert science working group so that the people with very up-to-date expertise in that area — that is, people from across these islands with expertise who are also able to tap into an international network — were providing that information. Whether it is the science that many of us understand — I mean chemistry, physics, biology — or, increasingly, as the Minister mentioned, behavioural science and social science, science will be how we find ways through some of the challenges that we face. If you look at the Climate Change Committee's advice on climate action plans, you will see that we will be increasingly reliant on science and innovation if we are to meet the challenge of net zero.

Mr McGlone: Can I conclude from that that science has not been sufficiently central in departmental thinking or the action process until now?

Mr Muir: I do not think that it is fair to say that, Patsy. The issue is that the scale of the challenge now means that we have to —.

Mrs Godfrey: We are more reliant.

Mr Muir: We are more reliant on it, and we have to explore every avenue that is available to us. Yes, this is affecting our budgets, but what worries me more is the impact on farming communities and the devastation that it is causing. I will make sure that we look at every opportunity to find a way out of the situation.

Mr McGlone: Thank you for that, Minister. I have no doubt about your commitment to that.

I have one final question. You mentioned AFBI. AFBI has been really important in all aspects of what the Department is doing, including food science and all those types of things. Do you anticipate significant investment in AFBI to carry out the environmental work that hit us last year with Lough Neagh and work on other aspects of what the Department's role will now be? As Katrina said, it is an evolving role.

Mr Muir: There are three aspects to that. One is capital investment. Some of our estate is older than me —

Mrs Godfrey: It is older than me too.

Mr Muir: — so we need to invest in that.

Mr McGlone: The two of you are the one age. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Muir: It is not as old as *[Inaudible.]* *[Laughter.]*

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Good comeback.

Mr McGlone: A veteran — is that not what they call it?

Mr Muir: We need to invest in that. There is capital funding, and good work has been done to lay the land for that. The second one is about North/South stuff. I am keen to explore much further what we can do on the Shared Island programme. The third one is our focus on our budgets.

There is another element that, as Minister, I have to give more profile to, and that is the importance of science, so that it is not undervalued. That is why, recently, as part of the Northern Ireland Science Festival, I was at the research vessel in Belfast. I saw a boat that was pretty old but reliable and decent, with fantastic staff. It was really good to see young people coming on board and getting involved. That is something that we want to see. We want to make it an attractive career for people, and people are choosing it, but we want to get more people to invest in it. There is an opportunity for us, if we play our cards right, to sell Northern Ireland as a place that is seen as an exemplar for investment in science and its association with businesses. I am keen to work with the private sector to see what we can achieve.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McAleer): We have been rattling the TB point around for a long time. Tom Elliott will remember, when we were on the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee about a decade ago, being out in a field in County Down at 5.00 am, looking at the test and vaccinate or remove (TVR) operation. We also had the TB partnership, so there is a serious body of evidence and research.

I have one other thing before we move on with Michelle. It would be worthwhile to include Lough Neagh in your conversations with Minister McConalogue, because, as you will be aware —

Mrs Godfrey: The catchment area, yes.

Mr Muir: Yes.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McAleer): — the Blackwater river runs into it through County Monaghan.

Miss McIlveen: You are welcome to the Committee. Thank you for your presentation. I am delighted that tackling TB is one of your priorities and that you are committed to that. I would, obviously, like to see some progress on the strategy that includes wildlife intervention. Reading between the lines, I am reassured that the outcome of the compensation consultation might not be a *fait accompli*. We will wait for the results of that.

We had presentations from your officials last week, and it was concerning to hear the Chief Veterinary Officer talk about the challenges in recruiting vets, remuneration and so on. We will, hopefully, see something that will encourage vets to come to the Department and ensure that we do not lose them to elsewhere.

I have a series of questions that are unrelated to that, if the Chair will indulge me. Have the Minister or his officials had direct engagement with the Government on commitments that were contained in the 'Safeguarding the Union' Command Paper?

Mr Muir: Yes, I have had engagement with the UK Government. I met the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State on the Monday after restoration, and I have continued to engage. Ultimately, it is a UK Government Command Paper. I have said in the House and say again today, in a genuine manner, that, as I come into this role, I seek solutions where there are problems. I do not seek to exacerbate the problems; I seek a way through them. I always say to people that, if they have any issues or direct concerns, they should bring them to me and my officials, and we will seek to work through them.

The Windsor framework was a significant step forward in enabling businesses in Northern Ireland to operate. I am keen that we use the opportunities that arise from that. I know that the road from EU exit is not a simple, plain, easy road; it will always be bumpy. I am determined to play my role, wherever I am given the chance to do that, and to be constructive. For example, I engaged with officials last week on the issue of veterinary medicines. I know that the deadline is December 2025 but that, in reality, it is much sooner than that. I will engage with stakeholders on how to bring solutions to that. I know that, primarily, this is an issue between the UK Government and the EU, but I am determined to try to play a constructive role in bringing solutions to it. That gives you a flavour of my approach towards trying to deliver on the obligations upon me — there are legal obligations upon me — and doing that in a proportionate manner that delivers for the people of Northern Ireland.

Miss McIlveen: In saying that, will you support the elimination of all routine physical and identity checks on goods moving within the UK internal market system, as envisaged in the 'Safeguarding the

Union' Command Paper? Will you be supportive and not stand in the way of any transfer of powers that may then have to be taken back to Westminster in order to ensure the removal of those checks?

Mr Muir: I am conscious that the Command Paper is a Command Paper. We all know what the legal standing of a Command Paper is. At the moment, my go-to as Minister is what my and my officials' legal obligations are under the law. We will uphold the law. I said at my first Question Time that it is my duty to uphold the law, and I will implement the law. We do not seek to do that in a way that is disproportionate or overzealous. We will do it in a way that is correctly in line with the law.

Miss McIlveen: I am cognisant that some of the legal changes have not yet taken effect. However, I just want to check something out with regard to some of the checks that haven't taken place over the past while. Since you have taken up office, have you or your officials given a direction to increase the level of visual checks at NI ports on agri-food from GB? I ask that because, anecdotally, we are hearing that that may have happened, particularly for some supermarkets. One retailer has told us that, out of 47 chilled trailers arriving into Northern Ireland from GB over a four-day period last week, 40% were stopped for inspection by DAERA, and 10% were detained for a considerable time. I just want to be reassured that there has not been a direction given in respect of that and that people are not being overzealous for a particular reason, because obviously there are impacts on fresh food, in particular.

Mr Muir: I can make it very clear to the Committee that I have given no direction of any sort in relation to that, and I have no desire to do so. One of the frustrations that I have around this is anecdotal reports. If people have concerns or issues, they need to bring those to me and my officials so that we can consider and find a way to address them. There has been no direction given, nor has there been a desire to be overzealous in that. My job as Minister is to implement the law. It is my clear desire to ensure that we support businesses in the time ahead. I do not seek to make any issue out of it. All I seek to do is do my job, stay on the right side of the law and ensure that we engage with people to bring solutions to any problems that they bring to me.

Mrs Godfrey: I will just add to that, Michelle. From a civil servant's perspective, our code of ethics requires us to uphold the law. I do not see any scenario in which we would take action other than as required by the law. In most cases where I have seen concerns raised, we have been able to trace those back to a lack of compliance; we have been able to reconcile what happened to a level with the level of compliance that it demonstrated. As the Minister says, it is not in anybody's interest to do anything other than uphold the law. That is very much where I and my staff are.

Miss McIlveen: OK. Thank you.

I note from the first-day brief that the Department placed a bid for £5.6 million for 2023-24 to the Treasury for the implementation of the Windsor framework, and £4.7 million was received. Have officials managed to work within the budget received? Can you shed some light on what next year's budget might be and on whether the Treasury will continue to fund that or whether it will become a future burden on Northern Ireland's budget?

Mr Muir: I will let Katrina come back in with more detail on that, but I will say that, if the UK Government have a desire to ensure the smooth implementation of the Windsor framework, they need to ensure that they properly pay for all the costs associated with that. The ball is in their court. I will let Katrina talk about it in more detail.

Mrs Godfrey: This year — you are right — we were slightly short of what we asked for, and we are doing everything that we can to live within what was allocated. We are awaiting the details of what we might be allocated next year. It is important to stress that the Windsor framework cuts across many parts of the Department. It is not just agri-food or sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) checks. It takes us into areas that link to the environment, to herbicides, pesticides and chemicals, to all aspects of animal health and to packaging. There are lots of pieces of work that officials need to do to make sure that we continue to be compliant.

As I have said in other fora, in many ways, the Windsor framework is your "forever friend", because there is not a date at which you achieve implementation. We constantly have to understand the risks of divergence. There is a lot of work across several parts of the Department. We have been trying to identify what that work involves and what staff we would need to put to it.

When I look at the agreements reached on funding for the devolved Administrations, I see that such a level of activity is not comparable to activity in, for example, Scotland or Wales, so it seems intuitively right to me that it should be a separate allocated fund. I am more than happy to account for it as an earmarked fund, but I do not yet know what we will get for next year. I know, though, that we have a huge work programme that we need to work through to make sure that we constantly deliver.

Miss McIlveen: Has the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) shared with DAERA the final costs of the facilities at Larne, Belfast and Warrenpoint, and when is completion likely?

Mrs Godfrey: They have to be completed, if I remember correctly, by July 2025. That is a requirement. They are in various stages of progress. DEFRA is leading the construction and is accountable. Our interest is to make sure that the facilities being built are operable by our staff, because it will be our staff who will perform the competent authority requirements, whatever they may be. There is good joint working. I do not have the costs in front of me. I can ask DEFRA for them, if that is helpful.

Miss McIlveen: Does the manning cost for DAERA come out of the money that has been bid for?

Mrs Godfrey: The construction costs are being met directly by DEFRA, because it is doing the construction. The costs of staffing for the points of entry are being met by Treasury.

Miss McIlveen: I have one question in the absence of my colleague William Irwin, who has apologised.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Oh, right. You [*Inaudible*] there. Tom Buchanan is not here as well, you know. [*Laughter.*]

Miss McIlveen: I have not thought of a question for him yet.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McAleer): I will give discretion to a former Minister.

Miss McIlveen: Can you provide an update on the situation around bluetongue in GB and the barriers to the movement of animals to Northern Ireland? That is becoming more and more critical. I have experienced that with farmers in my constituency.

Mr Muir: I will make sure that I give you the correct information on bluetongue. I am aware of the issue, because I have received correspondence and Assembly questions on it. On 11 November 2023, GB confirmed a single case in a cow in Kent. There have now been 118 individual cases in England. As a result, we are aware of the restrictions associated with that. DEFRA, in terms of the UK Government, has not applied for regionalisation associated with that.

I am aware of the concerns, which come from two perspectives: one is to protect us from bluetongue, and the other is with regard to animal movements. I have been engaging with the sector on those issues and will continue to engage. I am conscious of the implications of this but also of the need to protect us from it.

Mrs Godfrey: Officials have been keeping in touch with key stakeholders and a few weeks ago had a meeting with them specifically on the issue. The overriding message was the importance of preventing the disease getting into Northern Ireland. That was the area that they wanted us to focus on most.

Miss McIlveen: Are you looking at a compensation scheme to assist farmers who have purchased livestock and cannot get them across the Irish Sea?

Mr Muir: We are not presently looking at that. We would have to explore whether we had budget cover for that and, particularly, the vires associated with that.

Mrs Godfrey: Absolutely. It is the inability of the GB authorities to sign the export health certificates that is the barrier.

Miss McIlveen: There is, obviously, a cost.

Mr Muir: We understand that.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Thank you. I have a couple of wee bits on the rural affairs end of things.

We are three years past the last rural development programme and under the *[Inaudible.]* We are seeing the last of the spending happening now.

Mrs Godfrey: Spend under LEADER.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Honestly, I think that, at some point, rural communities will start really feeling the pinch. We do not have a village renewal scheme or basic services schemes, for example, which are the heartbeat of rural communities. It is a source of frustration that the Department for Communities does not fund regeneration in settlements of below 5,000, which rules out rural villages and towns. Is there a chance that, in the new rural programme, we will see another small settlement scheme, a rural micro grant scheme or a basic services scheme? That is so important if we want to invest in health and community cohesion.

Mr Muir: I am engaging with officials this week on that area. We have had good conversations about it in recent times. The whole area of rural development funding and support has been a casualty of EU exit; it has been overlooked in some ways. I intend to see what I can do to address that. The only thing that will inhibit me from that will be the budget cover that I have to be able to do it. There is also a wider picture: Departments need to have a wider understanding and appreciation of their need to ensure that they give proper consideration to rural affairs. There is the Act and the requirements that are associated with it, but if we, as a Government in Northern Ireland, are to step up to ensure that rural communities are properly supported, that has to happen across the Government.

As I said, I will meet officials this week about future rural policy. I see the benefits that were associated with the LEADER-type approach. I totally get that. We need to identify what the positives were in the past. We have talked to Committee members in recent days and weeks about the rural micro capital grant scheme. Officials are finalising work in that regard, and I hope to make an announcement about that, alongside the rural business development grant scheme, soon enough. There is also the tackling rural poverty and social isolation (TRPSI) programme. We have more acronyms in the Department than any other, but I will not get into that. Tackling rural poverty and social isolation is quite important. In the four weeks since I have taken on this role, I have seen isolation: I have seen minority groups feeling particularly isolated; and I have seen women feeling isolated. I am really conscious of that.

Lastly, mental health is a massive concern for me. If you run a farm business and get, for example, a TB infection in your herd, that has a devastating impact on not just your business but your family, your livelihood and the wider community. We need to see how we can better support people in rural areas. As I said, I am engaging with officials on that this week. We also need to increase the understanding that, when you spend money in that area, you get a much better return on your investment in terms of what we can do. Previously, there was the community hall scheme, and I know about the benefits that were associated with that. Be assured that this is on the agenda. I understand the frustration about where we are at the moment.

Mrs Godfrey: It is worth mentioning PEACE PLUS as well. One of the specific measures in PEACE PLUS is very much around rural regeneration and social isolation. We are working very closely with the Department of Rural and Community Development in the South and the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). One of the programmes is already open. I think that it is hoped that the rural isolation fund will open for applications later this month, so that will be another source of investment in rural areas.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Will DAERA distribute any of that, or do you deal directly with PEACE PLUS or through the councils?

Mrs Godfrey: We are partnering through SEUPB and the Department of Rural and Community Development in the South.

Mr McGlone: Apologies if this is already been covered; I had to go out to make a phone call. On the whole question of rural isolation, mental health issues and stuff like that, today, I got a response to an

AQW — I want to avoid those acronyms — an Assembly question for written answer. In the trust area in which I live and which I represent — the Northern Trust — 1,157 people are waiting for a package of domiciliary care, which is one of the highest figures. Now, where am I going with that? In many cases, they are people who live on their own, in rural isolation, and are the last ones on the list. In many cases, they are waiting for someone to die so that they can avail themselves of a care package.

For those of us who represent rural areas, mental health problems are a big issue. Where I am going with that is to look at how the rural development plan works with the likes of the health trusts and Department of Health on such issues, because there are people who are living on their own, alone and lonely, who are unable to get care packages and are suffering from deteriorating mental and physical health. To my mind, it would be useful to work with the health professionals on any support that goes into those areas to, in some sense, try to address those many issues.

Mr Muir: I am quite keen to pick that up with the Health Minister and the trusts because I am conscious that the health service transformation programme that we need to deliver to ensure that we get better patient outcomes has a particular rural impact. It is important that I pick that up following our conversation, because, if you move services around in the greater Belfast area, the impact that that has on people's travel times is very different from it would be in rural areas. Let us not forget that Northern Ireland is a largely rural region and society, even though, sometimes, the impression is given that it is otherwise. We need to be cognisant of that.

Mr McGlone: Thanks very much.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McAleer): One of the best examples, Patsy, is the joint funding between the Department and the Public Health Agency for the farm family health checks plan. That is a classic example.

I might just give the last word to the Chair. Is that all right, Tom? I would say that you are looking back in.

Mr Elliott: Thank you for that, Deputy Chair. Finally, thanks to the Minister and the permanent secretary for attending today. My apologies for not being there in person. I will not ask the Minister to concentrate too much on it today, but, in the future, I would like to hear about the massive bill, the financial outlay, that there will be on climate change, whether that has been factored into the Department's budget and, indeed, whether anything has been factored in for businesses and households as well, because, obviously, that is coming down the line and has to be assessed and dealt with.

Mr Muir: No problem. It is an important issue. It relates back to the climate action plan, which I am working through. The costs that have been circulated, and that you are aware of, are indicative costs. We still need to finalise what the potential costs will be.

I do not see those costs in the same light as some people have seen them. Investing in addressing climate change is an opportunity for Northern Ireland. There is a cost, but there is a cost associated with not doing anything. There is a great opportunity to go with the green growth agenda and, essentially, deliver a real opportunity for a green new deal here in Northern Ireland, but we need to be able to do that with people rather than against them. That is where the funding is crucial.

I have concerns about the trajectory on which the current UK Government have set themselves, which fails to understand the wider issues. To achieve net zero by 2050 requires investment now rather than kicking the can down the road. That is where my concern is. The current UK Government do not understand the need for investment. That relates back to points that were raised at the beginning of the meeting about, for example, investment in waste water infrastructure. If we are able to invest in waste water infrastructure, we are able to protect the environment in a much more economically sustainable manner, recognising that Northern Ireland Water is the largest user of electricity here in Northern Ireland but that there are exciting plans for decarbonisation associated with it.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Happy enough, Chair?

Mr Elliott: Yes. Thank you, Declan, Minister and permanent secretary.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Thank you, everyone. The next meeting is this Thursday at 10.00 am. Tom, you will be back in action again. Is that right? I will adjourn the meeting. Thank you all for attending, particularly Katrina, the Minister and, indeed, officials. I really appreciate that. I should also add my thanks to Katrina for the briefings and meetings that we had during the two-year hiatus. We really did appreciate that. I should have said that at the outset. I will put it on the record now, OK?

Mrs Godfrey: Thank you. It was really useful for us to be able to test thinking during that period. Certainly, for me, it was very useful. I am conscious that I have been in post for 18 months, and this is my first engagement with the Agriculture Committee. I look forward to many more.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Thank you very much. We will still be here, no doubt.