



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Budget 2024-25: Department of Agriculture,
Environment and Rural Affairs

6 June 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 William Irwin
Mr Patsy McGlone
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Miss Áine Murphy

Witnesses:

Mr Roger Downey	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr Richard McAuley	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr William Peel	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott): I welcome Roger Downey, William Peel and Richard McAuley. I hand over to Roger and his team to brief the Committee.

Mr Roger Downey (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thank you, Chair. Good morning, everyone. Thank you for the opportunity to brief the Committee on DAERA's opening budget for 2024-25 and its June monitoring round proposals. With me are William Peel, deputy director of finance, and Richard McAuley, head of the future years financial planning branch.

I will start with an overview of the block Budget position. There is a slide pack in the information that was shared with the Committee. I propose to go through the slides and ask for questions at the end, but I am happy to take a question at any stage.

On the overall block position, Departments bid for £3.2 billion resource departmental expenditure limit (DEL) against the £1 billion that was available for allocation. Capital DEL bids across the Departments totalled £2.8 billion against the £1.8 billion available for allocation. There are inescapable capital DEL requirements across the Departments that total £1.9 billion. Usually, when inescapable capital bids are funded by the Executive, there are a few hundred million left over to fund high-priority bids across Departments, but that has not been the case this year.

On the Budget 2024-25 outcome, the Executive agreed the budget allocations on 25 April, and there are huge challenges for all the Departments. DAERA bid for £95.8 million resource DEL, which was against the opening 2023-24 position, and £155.2 million capital DEL from a zero base. However,

DAERA received only an additional £15.2 million resource DEL and £95 million capital DEL. There was also £332.5 million of Treasury-earmarked resource DEL, and that is almost 58% of the total resource DEL allocation for the Department. It means that only 42% of the Department's resource DEL allocation is funded by the Executive.

A number of resource DEL issues impacted on the exercise. You will recall that the Executive agreed significant funding for 2023-24 public-sector pay in February. However, that was an in-year allocation that did not roll forward to this year. The starting point for this year's Budget exercise was the opening 2023-24 baseline, and, therefore, we have to fund that pay again. In a new development, there was also a significant increase in pension contributions for existing staff in post that followed a Government Actuary's Department (GAD) review that raised the rates to 34.25%. There are also unfunded statutory obligations in the Department, such as TB compensation and the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP), and contractual pressures — I mentioned pay and pensions — as well as Department of Finance (DOF) recharges and rising utility costs.

The next slide summarises, at a high level, the three main budgets in the Department: the non-ring-fenced resource DEL of £577.3 million — I will refer to it as resource DEL; the ring-fenced resource DEL, which is our non-cash depreciation and impairments; and our capital DEL of £95 million. The total DEL is just over £700 million.

The next table breaks down the resource DEL with the opening baseline that is rolled over from 2023-24. Then, there is the additional allocation from the Executive and the Treasury-earmarked funding for agriculture, agrienvironment and the wider rural economy. Within that, £3.1 million is for fisheries, and the rest is for the other elements. We have £1 million for PEACE PLUS, which covers five investment areas in that programme.

The additional £15.2 million in the opening budget is significantly less than our £95.8 million bids. The outcome of £243.8 million is £0.2 million less than the closing £244 million resource DEL for last year. As a result, that is an extremely difficult outcome for the Department. There is no additional funding to take forward new work. Our statutory obligations and contractual pressures are not covered. There is no additional funding to reverse the 2023-24 decisions that were taken to help us live within last year's budget, nor is there additional funding to reinstate 331 of the 450 vacancies that were removed from HR Connect in May 2023 to help us live within last year's budget.

What is available for allocation? A number of actions were taken last year in order to live within the 2023-24 budget during the year. As DOF ran the exercise against the opening baseline, those savings also rolled forward. In addition to the £15.2 million from the Executive, savings have been rolled forward in general administration expenditure (GAE), the non-farmed animal welfare council subvention, not replacing a number of leavers and the Forest Service subsidy. The Minister also wished to prioritise some funding to his top priorities of climate change and protecting our natural environment. Therefore, he agreed difficult reductions in three groups — FFRAG, VSAHG and SPCSG — in order to fund additional work in NIEA, EMFG and CCSIG.

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott): I am sorry, Roger: can you explain a wee bit more about where the Minister has switched funds from? There were a lot of acronyms there. It would be useful to know what those are that he has taken funds from.

Mr Downey: DOF ran the exercise going back to the opening 2023-24 baseline. That rolls over, so there would have been a starting point where each of the six grade 3s in the Department would have had a rolled-over baseline. The Minister has asked us to look at overtime, agency costs and not replacing staff in the rolled-over budgets in three groups in particular: the food, farming and rural affairs group (FFRAG); the veterinary service and animal health group (VSAHG); and the strategic planning and corporate services group (SPCSG). We have done some work on that, and £2.4 million has been generated that helps towards additional work in the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), the environment, marine and fisheries group (EMFG) and the climate change and science innovation group (CCSIG). I will explain where some of those changes are later in the slide pack.

There is £23.2 million available for allocation, and the next slide shows how that has been broken down. The table sets out the original bids that went to DOF on the £95.8 million. The allocation is £23.2 million against each of those bids. The allocations include specific amounts for inescapable statutory obligations on TB compensation of £3.7 million and the Office for Environmental Protection of £0.8 million, as well as the inescapable contractual pressures on pay of £10 million and other contractual operational costs, which are split on a pro-rata basis across the top four bids. There is also £2.8 million for the environmental improvement plan (EIP), including Lough Neagh, in the second bid

and £2.4 million for climate change in the third bid. The column on the right sets out our June monitoring bids, which were based on the unmet elements of the opening allocation. I will discuss the June monitoring bids later in the presentation.

The next slide provides a breakdown of the resource DEL budget in more detail. Starting with income, just under £35 million is due to come in this year. The highest amount in the opening budget is the regulatory income on the NIEA side and for the Food Standards Agency for the work that the vets do on meat inspection. In running costs, our salaries are the largest element, at £146 million. Almost 60% of DAERA's net budget goes on staff costs.

Over the page, you will see non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs). The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) is our largest, with staff costs of almost £19 million and running costs of just over £9 million. There are much smaller amounts in our other three arm's-length bodies (ALBs). Of our programmes, TB compensation is by far the largest amount. With the additional allocation of £3.7 million, it is now up to £32.3 million. For comparison, in 2019-2020, the TB compensation bill was £19.5 million, so you can see that we have had to divert resources in each intervening year to increase the TB compensation baseline. That does not cover the projected amount this year. I will come to that when I talk about the June monitoring bids.

The next slide shows the breakdown of the opening budget by group. That is where all the acronyms are expanded. You can see that, of the £577 million resource DEL, the largest element goes to the food, farming and rural affairs group. That is, largely, the £329 million for agriculture, agrienvironment and the wider rural economy. Strategic planning and corporate services group is next; that includes the funding to AFBI. Veterinary service and animal health is the third largest group in resource, largely due to the TB compensation budget.

Turning to capital, on the next slide, the figures are grouped in seven main areas under green growth and climate change. The top element is agri-food, at £14.3 million. There are four elements in that: the farm business improvement scheme of £9 million, AFBI green growth at £1.5 million, bovine genomics at £1.8 million and the soil nutrient health scheme at £2 million. Forestry and nature is the next largest element, with £3.4 million for Forests for Our Future and £2.4 million for the environment fund. There is also £3.2 million in there for Lough Neagh, of which £1.5 million is for sustainable utilisation of livestock slurry (SULS). I understand that members had a briefing on that last week. There is also £1.7 million for Lough Neagh research and monitoring.

The largest programme is tackling rural poverty and social isolation (TRPSI), with allocations for the rural micro capital grant scheme, the rural business development grant scheme and the village catalyst programme. The programmes also include the household waste programme with councils, which is for expanding the wheelie box system in Antrim and collections in Belfast.

In our IT, a lot of digital transformation is going on across the Department to help make us more efficient. Of that, £19.7 million covers those projects, and there is £2 million for the Northern Ireland food animal information system (NIFAIS). The largest element of the estate transformation allocation is for the ruminant emissions research facility that is being constructed at AFBI Hillsborough.

The next main section is on research and development. Back in 2015-16, Treasury introduced new guidance on staff costs and other operating costs. If those costs met strict Treasury criteria on being related to research and development, they could score in capital instead of resource. AFBI, as you can imagine, undertakes a significant amount of research and development work that meets those criteria, so it got £34 million for staff and running costs. AFBI also brings in income on the back of that research and development.

The largest element of recurring capital DEL is the AFBI research vessel. The current vessel is over 30 years old and approaching the end of its useful life. That funding is to take forward the building of a new one. There are also some smaller items that relate to the city and growth deals and the complementary fund.

You will see that those amounts total more than the £95 million than we received from the Executive. That is because, when the Executive agreed the opening budget, they agreed an additional £1.6 million for Lough Neagh. That was not part of the opening budget, but it has been agreed that it will be allocated to DAERA in the June monitoring round.

Given the nature of capital DEL, there is likely to be some slippage, and there will be opportunities to bid in monitoring rounds each year. There is an overcommitment of £15 million to allow the Department to take forward high-priority bids, since there was no funding for those from the Executive.

The next page sets out our other Treasury-earmarked funding. It is not in the opening allocation, because DOF notified us of it only on 22 May, following confirmation from Treasury. It is, however, due to be formally allocated to us as part of the June monitoring round. Again, that is in the three Treasury budget categories: non-ring-fenced resource DEL of £49.2 million; ring-fenced resource DEL of £2.6 million, which represents a depreciation; and capital DEL of £2.7 million. That is everything on the opening budget.

I turn to June monitoring. As I said, the bids are based on the unmet elements of the Budget bids, once the opening allocations have been taken into account. The top four bids include an element for unfunded pension costs for staff in post and contracted operational costs. They also include bids for staff to undertake new work in those areas. In addition, there are specific bids for bovine TB compensation, which is a statutory obligation. We do not have enough to cover what that is currently projected to cost by Brian Dooher and his team. On capital DEL bids, as previously mentioned, there is an overcommitment of £15 million to take forward a range of high-priority bids. In this exercise, we are bidding for that £15 million along with a further £5.1 million, which totals £20.1 million. Those figures are set out in the table. I mention several of those bids in the previous slides. Our June monitoring round return was submitted to the Department of Finance last Friday, before the deadline, and is due to be considered by the Executive later this month.

Finally, I will look back on last year. We recently completed our 2023-24 provisional out-turn exercise. The return was submitted to the Department of Finance on 14 May. In it, we set out that our resource DEL spend was £600.3 million against a final budget of £600.7 million. That spend represented 99.9% of the budget. On capital, we had a spend of £97.3 million against a final budget of £97.5 million. Again, that spend represented 99.9% of the budget.

That concludes my presentation. I am conscious that there were a lot of figures, particularly relating to the first two exercises. William, Richard and I are happy to take any questions.

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott): Thank you very much, Roger. It does not paint a great picture. To a large extent, you seem heavily reliant on June monitoring for some of those aspects, including the TB programme. How confident are you that you will receive that money?

Mr Downey: I suppose that it is up to the Executive. I am sure that you have seen in the media the pressures on the likes of Health, Education and other Departments. There is only so much funding available. All Departments' bids will be considered in the round. Department of Finance officials will be pulling them together at the minute, and we will see the Finance Minister's proposals in due course. I do not expect to get all the bids met, but TB compensation is a statutory obligation, so I expect —.

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott): If you were not to get the money for TB compensation, given that that is a statutory obligation, what would you do?

Mr Downey: We have two more bites at the cherry on this. We have October monitoring and January monitoring, so we would go again then. You will probably ask me what we would do if we did not get the money in those monitoring rounds. TB is a volatile disease. The rates go up and down, and they are high at the minute. At each monitoring round, we ask the vets to give us their best projection. They have low, medium and high projections. We usually go with the medium projection, and that changes as the year progresses. If we do not have that money by January monitoring, we will take into account the best projections from Brian Dooher and his team. We will consider TB along with the rest of the pressures and easements that are in play at that stage and see how best we manage it. Budgets change as we go through the year, and the plan that is set out at the beginning of the year will change as we go through the year.

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott): I notice that there is very little in there for Mobuoy. I assume that, if there was an agreement around an approach to resolve the Mobuoy project, there would have to be separate bids for that money. Is that right?

Mr Downey: Yes. There is, I think, £0.9 million in there for Mobuoy, and that is to undertake the monitoring work that NIEA is doing on the River Faughan. That work is being taken forward in line with the obligations and duties that we have under the Water Order 1999. I understand that, if more work

was going to take place, a consultation would have to take place first. We have to go through that process. We have to go out to consultation and get the responses back, and proposals would then have to go to the Minister on that. Given the time that it takes and the significance of the issue, it is unlikely that, even if all those processes went quickly, there would be spend on the ground this year. We would look to factor that into the budget exercise for next year and beyond.

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott): Is there no indication at this stage of how much each of those options for Mobuoy will cost?

Mr Downey: There is. There has been work on it. There has been a range of figures but no firm figure. The business case has not yet been finalised and signed off by our economists. It has not been presented to the Department for the casework committee to consider, and it will then have to go to DOF. It is still in the early stages of that process. It has to be informed by the consultation as well. That process has to be worked through.

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott): I assume that, with each option, there will be an estimated cost.

Mr Downey: Yes. The nature of the business case is that, depending on what work you do and the timescales, there will be costs.

Mr McGlone: Thank you for your presentation. I want to drill down a wee bit. The document mentions £5.7 million for tackling rural poverty and social isolation and the rural business community investment programme. Give us a wee bit more indication of the projects that that might go into and what you anticipate the outcomes of those to be.

Mr Downey: A total of £4.4 million of that is in the opening overcommitment, so we are bidding for an additional £1.1 million in June monitoring, because there is an option to do that. Of the £4.4 million that has been allocated to rural affairs division in the Department, £2.6 million is for the rural micro capital grant scheme, there is £1.6 million for the rural business development grant scheme, and there is £0.3 million for the village catalyst programme.

Mr McGlone: How is that disbursed? How does it get to the people who count?

Mr Downey: It depends. The two schemes are tailored at different levels. Bear with me a moment. The rural micro capital grant scheme is for grants of between £200 and £1,500 to rural community and voluntary organisations. That is to purchase capital items that help their organisations. The rural business development grant scheme is slightly bigger. It is to fund up to 50% of costs up to a maximum of £4,999. The total costs of the projects must be a minimum of £1,000 and not exceed £20,000. That includes things like computer equipment, software, new equipment, machinery and mobile machinery, such as scissor lifts, forklifts and things like that.

Mr McGlone: I would appreciate a wee bit more detail, if you could send it along to us here and share it with us, about eligibility for that and how people can apply to it. That would be helpful, please, Roger.

I want to go back to Lough Neagh — clearly, it is in an issue that is close to my heart — and the actual amounts that are to be allocated for it. I realise and recognise that a good bit of that is for enforcement and monitoring through NIEA. What else is being spent there, and what for?

Mr Downey: Due to the reprioritisation exercise that the Minister has undertaken, £2 million of additional are going to NIEA for Lough Neagh this year. Of that, £0.3 million is to provide funding to key partners in the Lough Neagh catchment to support communications and engagement. That was discussed earlier with the Minister. A total of £0.1 million is for additional environment fund projects in the Lough Neagh area.

Mr McGlone: That is £100,000.

Mr Downey: Yes. That is for additional environment fund projects. Then, there is £1.6 million to fund an additional 28 posts in the agency. Those posts will cover a number of areas. Do you want me to give you an outline of that?

Mr McGlone: Please. That would be helpful.

Mr Downey: The first one is to create an additional enforcement team — the Minister mentioned it earlier — which, in the first year, would increase visibility and focus on key hot spots in the Lough Neagh catchment, increasing inspections under the nutrients action programme across compliance. It would also deliver enhanced water framework directive monitoring. It would support the delivery of the river basin management plan programme of measures to improve water quality across the Lough Neagh catchments. It would reduce waste water pollution by enhancing the capacity and capability to engage with data modelling to improve the investment in waste water treatment. It would help to deliver soil sampling and slurry tank construction investigations to help to reduce the risk to water quality. It would also deliver enhanced communications to farmers, landowners and stakeholders in conjunction with the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) and the environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOS).

Mr McGlone: Is that, basically, it? It is around enforcement and awareness. That is the thrust of the departmental policy.

Mr Downey: That is in NIEA. The EMFG is also getting almost £800,000 for 14 posts at Lough Neagh. Half of that funding would provide water quality strategic policy development in support of longer-term recommendations to tackle blue-green algae in the Lough Neagh action plan. The other half would help to address some of the vacancy gaps that have arisen in that group since last year and allow for sampling, analysis and monitoring.

On the capital side, I mentioned that there was £3.2 million. Of that, £1.5 million is for the sustainable utilisation of livestock slurry, on which I understand that the Committee had a briefing last week. There is £1.7 million for further research and monitoring on that side. There is just under £3 million extra in resource and just over £3 million in capital.

Mr McGlone: With your forbearance, Chair, may I ask another question? Where does the small business research initiative (SBRI) factor in? Where will the funding come from to support what the Department is doing? Is it being drawn down from the UK Government?

Mr Downey: Yes, that is from the Executive.

Mr McGlone: OK. How are things progressing on the initiative? What is the expenditure, and how is the initiative developing?

Mr Downey: We are in phase 2 of the SBRI. Phase 1 has been completed. Phase 2 is when they bring it to scale to see how it will work in practice. The business case has been presented to the Department's casework committee and been cleared to go to the Department of Finance for it to consider. That is with the Department of Finance at the minute. We hope that that process will be completed fairly soon, and the initiative will be launched after that.

Mr McGlone: Have you a time frame for that? I suppose that it depends on another Department, but you usually have an idea.

Mr Downey: The same people in the Department of Finance are undertaking the June monitoring round exercise and the Main Estimates exercise, which is also coming soon. They know that this is a priority. We have asked them to look at it. Our Supply team in DOF looks after the Department of Health as well as DAERA, so it will depend on the number of projects coming through from the Department of Health. I do not have a firm date, but we are trying to get it progressed.

Mr McGlone: It is a bid to the monitoring round. Are you getting good vibes about it?

Mr Downey: It is not a bid to the monitoring round, sorry. We have the funding. It is in the opening allocation. The issue with the Department of Finance is that it needs to consider and, if content, clear the business case.

Mr McGlone: OK. That is all right. Thank you very much.

Mr McAleer: Thank you for your presentation. In that, you have an opening position of £0.3 million for the city and growth deal and are bidding for £0.7 million. That would be around £1 million, if it worked out. Can you clarify how that would be used by DAERA?

Mr Downey: William, do you want to come in on the city and growth deal?

Mr William Peel (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): On the resource side, the bid primarily relates to staffing costs to help to deliver the various elements of the city and growth deal and the funding around that.

Mr Downey: When we went into the budget exercise, there were no dedicated resources for PEACE PLUS or city and growth deals in the Department, so the Minister agreed to allocate £400,000 on the rural affairs side and £200,000 on the NIEA side to help to take forward the work on PEACE PLUS and city and growth deals. That could not fund all that they were seeking, which is why there is an additional bid. Do you want to come in on the £0.3 million, William?

Mr Peel: A £0.3 million allocation is included in the capital for city and growth deals. That relates to the digital transformation flexible fund. That is for small business and microbusiness grants to help those businesses to invest in digital technology. That scheme is run by the Department for the Economy, so that allocation would be transferred to it in a future monitoring round to bring that work forward.

Mr McAleer: Thanks for that. You have an opening allocation of £2.2 million for Project Stratum in your presentation. Is that for rolling out superfast broadband to premises that do not have it? How will that be used?

Mr Downey: Yes. DFE is the lead on that. Since that project started a number of years ago, DAERA has always bid for some funding, because it is in rural areas and transferred that funding to DFE in-year. In 2021-22, we bid for £7.5 million. We secured it, and we transferred it to DFE. In 2022-23, a similar process took place for £10.3 million. There was nothing last year, but there is £2.1 million this year. That is in our baseline. It is part of the opening baseline, and we are transferring it to DFE this year.

Mr McAleer: My last point is a clarification point on the question that Patsy asked you. It goes back to TRPSI. Your opening budget is £4.4 million, and you are bidding for £5.7 million. In an ideal world, you will have a TRPSI pot of over £10 million. What do you envisage using that additional £5.7 million for?

Mr Downey: No, the £4.4 million is within the £5.7 million.

Mr McAleer: Sorry, yes.

Mr Downey: It is part of the overcommitment. This was not a contractual commitment, so it was not funded by the Executive. Ministers agreed to have an overcommitment to allow certain high-priority projects to still be taken forward, and that is on the understanding that there is likely to be slippage in capital and that there is an opportunity to bid in-year. As part of the opening allocation, the full £5.7 million could not be funded, but £4.4 million could be funded within the £15 million. As I mentioned to Patsy, that is the rural micro capital grant scheme of £2.6 million, the rural business development grant scheme of £1.6 million and the village catalyst programme of £0.3 million. We are now able to bid in June monitoring, so we are bidding for that full amount and a bit extra.

Mr McAleer: Thank you, Roger.

Mr Blair: I have two or three things. The first, if you do not mind, is to seek clarification. This is probably for another business area. On the Project Stratum stuff being done by DAERA, I take it that there is a business area handling the detail of that, whether that is rural affairs or one of the other areas. It is not all being done by finance, I imagine.

Mr Downey: It is very limited. DFE is the lead on it, so rural affairs liaises with DFE on the amounts. It bids for the money through us, we get the money, and we transfer it. DFE is the main —.

Mr Blair: For your information, Chair, I am being contacted increasingly about the number of overhead cables going in where cables used to be buried. I am being contacted about the visual impact and the overall negative impact on rural areas, but I will take that up in another business area. It may be

something that we consider at a later stage. There seems to be a change in delivery that is not for the better. I accept that that is not financial. I wanted clarification for that reason only.

The next one is purely financial. This is based on my own crude mental arithmetic, so I apologise in advance for that. I notice that the business areas around the environment — environment, marine and fisheries and, obviously, NIEA — account for around 12% of the overall budget allocation in the slide that is titled:

"Breakdown of DAERA Opening Budget by Group".

Was that always the proportion, or has that decreased or increased over the years as a proportionate share dedicated to the environment and environmental protection?

Mr Downey: First, the food, farming and rural affairs element is skewed because all of the Treasury-earmarked funding — the £329 million for agriculture, agrienvironment and the wider rural economy — is in there. AFBI is a big NDPB, and I suppose that that skews the strategic planning in corporate services, in that there is significant funding for AFBI staff costs in there. With the veterinary service animal health group, TB compensation is a large element. If you start stripping some of those out, you will find that the percentages are more comparable. The climate change and science innovation group was created only last October, and it came by stripping out some elements from the environment, marine and fisheries group and bringing some other areas together from other parts of the Department. So, this structure has been in place only from October last year, and it evolves. The Minister has agreed to take some funding from the top three and allocate it to the lower three in that table to help to take forward priority work in those areas.

Mr Blair: I am happy to do some more work on that, Chair. It is worth pointing out, given the last answer, that the funding for the climate change and science innovation group is a fraction of that for the others. I refer to the percentages table: the climate change and science innovation group will make a very minimal difference to the roughly 12% that I quoted.

Secondly, there are some movements within the Department estate: for example, the NIEA will move. Will costs be incurred by the move? When was the last overall estate strategy to examine whether every business premises in use by DAERA was fully occupied and utilised?

Mr Downey: First, the 1,350 staff that used to be in Dundonald House and the Klondyke Building have been decanted over the past year. Most of those staff have moved to Clare House, with some of the NIEA staff from the Klondyke Building moving to the Lisburn site. The floor area has been reduced by 46%, and that is a significant reduction in the last year in housing staff in those areas.

We have reduced DAERA's floor area in Jubilee House to the ground and first floors. The second floor is now rented to the Department for Communities to take forward work for the Department for Work and Pensions. The Jubilee House floor area has been reduced, and the Department is getting some income to help to manage our rising costs across the estate.

An AFBI strategic review of its property portfolio is under way. It is due to report later in the summer and will set out a way forward to rationalise the estate.

A number of things have been undertaken, and others are under way.

Mr Blair: Fisheries and forestry have a number of offices and outstations, and some have been inherited by former NDPBs as well. Have they been assessed in recent times, especially in the context of increased working from home meaning that there may not be full utilisation of the DAERA-branded space? Some of those are substantial premises.

Mr Downey: The estate transformation division is looking at all the properties across the estate as part of a wider review. We have 860 buildings across 240 sites. That is just the nature of the Department: it is quite broadly spread across the country. The review is being done on a rolling basis, and we are making sure that it is compliant from a health and safety perspective as well. I am not sure about the status of the work. I do not have that information to hand.

Mr Blair: That is OK. I have no further questions. Thank you.

Ms Á Murphy: I have a quick question. Declan mentioned the city deals at the last meeting, and paragraph 29 outlines the £0.7 million bid for dedicated resources to take forward the PEACE PLUS programme and the city and growth deals. Where do the city and growth deals fit into DAERA?

Mr Downey: DAERA is responsible for helping to take forward £14.2 million of the city and growth deals. I am not sure of the split between the three areas.

Mr Peel: Bushmills is about £6.7 million, Cushendall is £1.5 million and Dungiven is £6 million of the £14.2 million funding available, which is funding to support the council's delivery.

Ms Á Murphy: I assume that that will be for employing staff through the council to work on the specific projects.

Mr Downey: No. The project is for DAERA staff. We have been charged with taking forward those three elements of the city and growth deals, and we will use the arms and legs of the existing staff who are in post. We need dedicated staff to ensure that the projects are taken forward in a timely and compliant manner. That is to help to make sure that that happens. Similarly, we are responsible for taking forward €165 million of PEACE PLUS across five investment areas. However, we had no dedicated staff and there was no separate pot that we could bid to, so we had to bid to the Executive for it. We were able to identify some money there, so there are some dedicated staff to take it forward now, but that money is not enough, and that is why we are bidding for more.

Ms Á Murphy: Just on that, how is the £0.7 million bid divvied up resource-wise between PEACE PLUS and the city and growth deals? I assume that it will be top-heavy on PEACE PLUS.

Mr Downey: Yes, that is my presumption as well. Do we have that spread?

Mr Peel: I do not have the exact spread. However, going by the bids from business areas, the resource is heavier towards PEACE PLUS.

Ms Á Murphy: OK. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott): Thank you very much for that. Obviously, there is a challenging financial time ahead. I am sure that we will hear from you again in the not-too-distant future regarding a number of queries. Thank you for now.