



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and
Rural Affairs

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Veterinary Service Animal Health Group

9 June 2016

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Linda Dillon (Chairperson)
Ms Caoimhe Archibald (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sydney Anderson
Mr Maurice Bradley
Mr David Ford
Mr Patsy McGlone
Mr Harold McKee
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Edwin Poots
Mr George Robinson
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Ms Geraldine Fee	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr Colin Hart	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr Robert Huey	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr David Torrens	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): I welcome Robert Huey, deputy secretary, and his team: Geraldine Fee, Colin Hart and David Torrens. We will give you 10 minutes for the presentation, and then members will ask questions.

Mr Robert Huey (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you for the invitation. I will just pass round two documents. The first is an organisational chart of the top team for the veterinary service animal health group. The other is the document I intend to talk to to put some structure on this, because I am not going to read; I am going to talk.

The veterinary service animal health group is a newly formed group within the restructured DAERA. It brings together the former veterinary service; a group formerly known as AFIB — the agrifood inspection branch — led by Alan McCartney, which carried out inspections on farms and a lot of official controls; and a group previously led by Geraldine, the policy group for animal health and welfare. It is a new grouping, and we are still in the process of forming and finding new ways of working.

The document I have given you gives a little insight into how confused my head can be sometimes, but it shows the main strategic things I am doing. Rather than go through a big long shopping list of all the things that the veterinary service animal health group now does, because it is so wide, I thought I would start at the top of the document and give you the strategic things we are working on, and the issues will fall out of that. You might recognise the boxes in yellow at the top as the objectives in reforming the Northern Ireland Civil Service. Malcolm McKibbin is encouraging us to ensure that our organisations are well led, high performing and focused on outcomes, and I have put that along the top to help us keep in mind that that is our modus operandi — that is how we now operate.

The middle box shows the veterinary service animal health group formation steering group, which oversees our three main projects. Apologies for the alphabet soup, but it will become obvious. The three main projects that we are involved in delivering are the TB strategic partnership group and the new way we will be looking at TB when that report is made; a restructuring and a reforming of the former veterinary service — the abbreviation on the page stands for veterinary service target operating model; and the Northern Ireland Food Animal Information System (NIFAIS) project.

I will start with the restructuring, because it illustrates what we are trying to do and the way that we think about things. Back five or six years ago, we started looking at how we could be more effective and efficient in the veterinary service group. We formed a strategy group. We made assumptions about things going forward, and the important ones were things like the assumption that we would be required to make 5% savings year on year between 2015-2020. We got that fairly close to being right. Another was that we would still have TB to deal with and that brucellosis would be something we would be working towards making a thing of the past through our control programme. Those were the sorts of assumptions we made. There were 47 of them altogether.

We laid out a plan. That looked at things like our port controls. Currently, or until recently, we in Northern Ireland had 24/7 cover at our ports. That exceeds what they do in Dublin, for example, with the result that we had stronger controls between Great Britain and Northern Ireland than between Dublin and Holyhead, for example. We looked at that, and we decided that we can do this on a risk basis rather than 24/7, which will allow us to reduce our number of staff at the ports from 42 to 24. That is just an illustration of the work that we are trying to do to modify our services to make them more efficient while still being able to offer the services expected.

We are also looking at restructuring our field offices. We have 10 management units in the field at the moment. We are going to reduce that down to six. We have started that process. That is not about closing offices; it is just about restructuring. The structure we had was there for 50 years, and farming had changed in that period, so we are looking at a way we can deliver our services in a more holistic way.

One of the most important things we did was to review and restructure the way in which we deliver TB testing through our practitioner colleagues. Our practitioner colleagues deliver £6.5 million of TB testing to farmers in Northern Ireland. It had never really been properly procured. There were issues in delivery, and those had been criticised in 2009 by the Public Accounts Committee (PAC). We needed to procure the TB testing, and we found a method of doing that and at the same time delivering 9.6% savings. If you want to talk about that later, we can talk about it.

The NIFAIS project is moving on. We have got to the stage where we have awarded a contract, and there will be more about that later, if you want to go into those issues. We talked a good deal last week about the TB strategic partnership group. Again, I am sure questions about that will come out later.

Down the left-hand side of the diagram, there are a number of strategic things we are looking at. The permanent secretary has asked me to look across the new Department at science. The departmental board was aware that the new Department did a lot of science. In fact, we do most of the science now, outside Health. The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI), of course — a non-departmental public body (NDPB) — delivers the service for DARD, but the former DOE Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) also has its science programme. I am having a scoping look with our group at how we do science. We are looking at the state, how we procure science, the science that is done and the evidence and surveillance to see whether there are overlaps and whether there are savings and efficiencies that can be made. A report on that will go to the departmental board and this Committee in due course.

Independently, Geraldine and I came to the same conclusion, which was that we would very much like to have an animal health strategy for Northern Ireland. We have never had one, but a number of the

other jurisdictions in these islands do. Why is it important? It is important so that I have a framework in which to work, because a lot of the decisions we make at the moment would be better if they were done in a strategic framework direction, and we do not have one of those. As an illustration, last week I was talking on the verges to Mr Poots about malignant catarrhal fever (MCF), which is a production disease that is very devastating for the farmers that have it. How do we deal with diseases? Which ones do we intervene with as government? Which ones are better done by the private sector? How do we relate to the agrifood industry out there? How do they input to our policy directions? There is no strategy document that says how that should be done, and we want to look at that to see how it is done. Wales has produced one, Scotland has produced one, so we do not need to start with a blank sheet of paper. We hope to take that forward sometime this year, resources allowing us to do that.

Beneath that, we are also looking at surveillance. Surveillance comes in two sorts: passive surveillance and active surveillance. It is an important underpinning of trade and is the way in which we quickly find diseases we do not want. It is the way in which we offer reassurances to third countries that we have freedom from disease. It underpins everything we do. We have never stood back and looked at what we do; we have been doing the same thing for 50 years. England, Wales, Scotland and even the Republic of Ireland have had reviews of how they do surveillance, and I am starting a review of surveillance in Northern Ireland. I have asked Owen Denny, who is mentioned in the diagram, to look at this. He is a senior epidemiologist — a man of experience in these areas, and he has the right contacts to think about it. He is taking an initial look to see whether we are doing the right things with surveillance. Are we looking at the right numbers of farmed animals for the right things? Are we looking companion animals, horses and wild animals? Are we doing the things we should be doing, and are we doing them in the most effective and efficient way? That is coming along. All this underpins our international strategy and market access.

I should have apologised first up that Perpetua McNamee is not with us; she is in Dublin today on other duties. Perpetua leads for me on international strategy and market access, but I will cope with the questions as well as I can. It is simple economics that, if you drive an industry to produce more and you have not got the markets for it, you are going to depress prices. The emphasis is on us and the veterinary service to ensure market access because every market for animals and animal products requires an animal health veterinary certificate, and that has to be agreed between folks like ourselves, chief veterinary officers (CVOs) and authorities before any exports can happen. Frankly, it is used across the world as a trade barrier to slow down trade, and we have to involve ourselves in those negotiations. Again, I will be happy to answer questions on that later.

Related to that, as shown in the diagram, is the case for a negligible risk for BSE status. That is, again, related to trade. I am happy again to take questions on that. AMR is about antimicrobial resistance, which is a huge issue on its own. We in DARD have no statutory obligations for this issue, but I have professional obligations. The question on the use of antimicrobials in animals and animal production is an important one that I need to keep up to date with to try to influence and steer the industry in how it uses these valuable resources.

Down the right-hand side of the chart is the equine policy and delivery project. The Department has always considered horses a bit of a Cinderella; they are not agricultural animals, yet I have an interest in them as far as exotic diseases are concerned. There are some very serious and scary diseases that horses can get, such as African horse sickness and equine infectious anaemia etc. We have a responsibility in DARD for horse identification through the passport system and in a number of other ways. Of course, we have the great resource down in Enniskillen of the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE). It is something that does not have a real home within the Department, and the permanent secretary has asked me to look at how we deal with horses and to try to give things a better structure. That is what that is about.

There are 26 groups in Northern Ireland that represent the horse. They have an umbrella organisation — the Equine Council for Northern Ireland — and it is our preferred consultee that we talk to first on most issues. We need to try and do a better job for the equine industry, which is a significant industry that employs a lot of people in its various places. This is also a very good example of a cross-departmental area, because when you start talking about horses you also start talking about sport, recreation and tourism, and it is something that I personally feel we are not making the most of as a region. You have only to look south of the border to see the examples down there.

On customer contact, we are not in the lead with that. That is about the DARD Direct offices. You heard from the permanent secretary last week that DAERA has a network of 70 offices across Northern Ireland. I can guarantee you very little, but one of the things I think is almost hammered on

is that this time next year we will not be in 70 places in Northern Ireland. That will have an effect on everything we do; it is another strategic issue.

The final point in that box is a pilot of the inspection review. You will have heard from senior officials about the review of inspections and how we are looking at what we are doing. That review has now reported, and veterinary services have agreed to carry out a pilot. That is important for veterinary services because virtually everything we do has an inspection label and follows the red tape and good regulation challenges that we have had in the past. We are piloting better ways of working, and that is getting on. Of course, that feeds into our veterinary service structure and into looking at our target operating model.

Underlying all this — I have talked very little about this — are all the other things we do as business as usual. I have not talked about animal welfare, delivering meat hygiene service for the Food Standards Agency (FSA) or animal identification. Welfare, which is one of the most important things we do, I have not mentioned. That is all business as usual and is supported by professional development and training, which is illustrated at the bottom of the page. What makes our group different from the rest of DAERA is our unique knowledge, and we are of use to you and the agriculture industry only if we maintain that knowledge. So, it is very important for me to ensure that we have a good programme of professional development and training because, by having experts within my staff, can I deliver what you expect from me.

Chair, I hope that gave you an opening flavour of things. I suspect the questions will put some shape around them.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): I would say they will. Thank you very much, Robert, I appreciate the presentation.

I think the animal health strategy is a good idea, and the fact that you already have examples in Scotland and Wales is a good start. Are there cost implications involved in that, or would you hope that it might actually negate some costs if we had a proper strategy in place?

Mr Huey: Yes, there will be costs involved. My current feeling is that we can do this in-house and will not necessarily bring in consultants, which is the normal way of doing things. I am not a great supporter of giving someone a pen, paying them to write down what you tell them and then having to act on their conclusions. I would prefer to do this in-house. We have difficulties with the resource on Geraldine's side in policy because we have lost, as I said last week, some key staff. However, I would prefer to start this in-house. I have talked to the other CVOs, as you would expect, in Scotland and Wales about their approach. They tell me it can be done effectively without involving a lot of resource.

One of the things I would like to fix is how we consult, report to and receive information from the agrifood industry. We have an animal health and welfare stakeholders' forum, which has been going now for how many years, Geraldine?

Ms Geraldine Fee (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Long before my time.

Mr Huey: Long before her time. It is one of those committees that is running out of steam, and it has become very much a place where we report what we are doing, but it does not really do what I would like. I would like to have a more robust group that questions us more, challenges us on our directions and gives us real and meaningful input. One of the things this will look at is the governance of what we do for animal health and welfare. That is the area that we want to look at.

It is also this business of deciding what is an appropriate disease for government to be involved in and what our relationship with industry should be. We now have Animal Health and Welfare Northern Ireland (AHWNI). That is looking after bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) for us, which is a production disease. Animal welfare intends to move on to a Johne's disease control programme. What should our relationship be with Animal Health and Welfare Northern Ireland? What should we do, and what should we facilitate? If we do facilitate, how far should we go? Those are questions we deal with on a one-to-one basis, rather than having a consistent strategy on. I think the time is right to do it.

To be clear, Chair, there were intentions previously to do that. There were concerns at that time that it might in some way undermine the all-island animal health and welfare strategy. I do not see that as being a difficulty; I see those as being two sides of the one thing. My colleague, Martin Blake, CVO in

Dublin — if he has not yet published this, he intends to publish it — has an animal health and welfare strategy for the South. So I think the time is right to do this.

Mr Swann: Thank you very much, Robert, for your presentation. You have been introduced as "deputy secretary": are you still the chief vet?

Mr Huey: Yes, both. For the same money, Robin. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Swann: Value for money, Robert.

Mr Huey: I am head of group CVO. That is my title, if you want it all.

Mr Swann: Thank you. That is not my question, by the way, Chair. *[Laughter.]* Robert, the main thing I want to start with is the animal and public health information system, APHIS, or as you referred to, NIFAIS, which is our new scheme. APHIS served our industry well through the BSE crisis and got us through our identification. It was a role model to the world of animal identification. Where is APHIS now?

Mr David Torrens (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): APHIS is alive and well, and as Oscar Wilde said, rumours of its demise are exaggerated. However, it is an old system. BSE happened, we are talking, 20 years ago. We are talking about it being a long time since we first started traceability in Northern Ireland. NIFAIS is the project I am leading, which is to procure the replacement for APHIS. The Committee has had previous briefs, and we are going to give a fuller update in September. We have awarded a contract for the replacement for APHIS over a three-year period. The project plan, which is just about to be nailed down, is that in three years' time we will be able to switch APHIS off but resume all the functionality it delivers at present through the NIFAIS vehicle. It is a fairly complicated move because it is not just about BSE; it is not just about disease control. It is all that market access, cross-checks against subsidies and animal welfare. It involves the whole range of what the veterinary service animal health group does. So we have had to be careful about how we manage the transition.

I have to speak carefully. I can advise you that the successful company is the company that built APHIS, so we at least have continuity there and we have an awareness on its part of how critical the system is to our business. They stood by us through BSE and, in fact, talked to the Commission at various times. They are aware of the criticality of it and of the complexity of what they are trying to build and replace. That gives us a degree of assurance that we will be able to move from APHIS to NIFAIS with minimal risk of disruption.

The other way we are seeking to minimise disruption — this may be a disappointment to some — is that for that period of build, we will do our utmost not to change anything. We do not want to be changing all that complicated functionality in mid-air, if you like, but the plan will be that, as soon as we get to NIFAIS, we will have the modern, up-to-date technological platform that we can do further things on, be it working with Animal Health and Welfare Northern Ireland (AHWNI) or helping to support the genomics initiative, which you have maybe heard about, or supporting the new way of delivering TB, whatever may come out of the TB strategic partnership.

Mr Swann: I have one supplementary question on that. There is a bid of £4.4 million in the June monitoring round. If that bid is unsuccessful, where does it leave the project?

Mr Torrens: The project has been approved by the departmental board as being affordable, and the full business case has been approved by DFP. It is a capital bid, so we believe and have assurances from departmental management that it will be covered. In previous exercises, whenever a contract has been signed, that has committed the Department and the Government to that contract. The contract was signed on 21 April.

Mr Ford: Thanks again for the presentation. Since Robin beat me to the APHIS/NIFAIS question, I will focus on one specific bit of it, which is the BVD work that is under way. What was the uptake of people sending in ear samples under the voluntary element of BVD? What is the assumed percentage infection rate at the moment? Presumably, to go back to David's last point, when we get NIFAIS under way, it will then be possible for purchasers to be aware of the BVD status of an animal, even if, at the moment, they are relying on the honesty of the vendor.

Mr Huey: I will ask David to deal with that while the others think about the figures.

Ms Fee: I am just trying to find the figures.

Mr Torrens: We had a meeting with market operators who asked us whether it would be possible to have an interface that would demonstrate the status of animals and whether they were confirmed as persistently infected but not complying with the restriction to stay at home. We took the view that that was very similar to the medicines legislation, whereby farmers are required not to present animals for slaughter that have medicinal residues. When the farmer signs his movement declaration, that is on the clear understanding that there is no restriction on the animal. I take your point about honesty, but there is a solemn declaration that the animal is free to move and is not restricted.

By the time we get to NIFAIS, a couple of years down the line I think it will probably be important to review the situation. Without prejudice to what others may say, the anticipation is that BVD will be a much lower problem and the cost benefit of making significant changes not just to NIFAIS but to market management software to display that will probably have to be reviewed in light of that. NIFAIS will be able to do that — I think that is the main thing — technologically and contractually, which were the two limitations on APHIS.

Mr Ford: Just to be difficult, while Geraldine gets the figures, the difference between medicines and BVD is that the Department may hold the information on BVD but may not hold the information on medicines that had been administered in the preceding period.

Mr Torrens: Yes, there will be issues there. We have been facilitating the markets with all sorts of information down the years, such as farm quality assurance, the number of residences and that kind of thing, so the capability will be there.

Ms Fee: I cannot give you the figures in percentage terms, but I can give them numerically. Since the beginning of the voluntary programme, 598,000 tests have been uploaded. Since the commencement of the compulsory programme at the beginning of March, 167,000 tests have been uploaded. Broadly, we are very pleased that it seems to be going —

Mr Ford: It is a high percentage.

Ms Fee: It is a high percentage, and it seems to be going well. I am aware that there have been some teething problems with accessing the AHWNI helpline, but they are broadly to be expected at the start. The turnaround time for tests is high: 96% have been turned around within seven working days. We have an overview of what is happening with AHWNI, which runs the mechanical functions for us. It is an industry-led scheme, as you know, and we think it is working well at this stage.

Mr Huey: That is a really important point. This is an industry-run scheme. This is the first time that the industry has got together with the private veterinary practitioners and the farmers' organisations to decide that they want to eradicate this disease. They have largely funded it themselves and are largely driving it on themselves, and we are facilitating when we can. That is great and is a wonderful model to take forward.

Mr Anderson: Thank you, Robert, and your team for your briefing today. Can I touch on the TB situation and, as you call it, the strategic partnership group and suchlike?

Mr Huey: Yes.

Mr Anderson: Where are we with that report going forward, bearing in mind that £30 million is in the budget and that some percentage of that is for compensation costs? I see that inroads were maybe being made, but for some unexplained reason things maybe turned the other way. Where do we see ourselves in getting to grips with this whole situation?

Mr Huey: As I said last week, the situation with TB is not acceptable. It is not acceptable to the industry, and it is not acceptable to me. We have our programme, which has been examined by European Union inspectors. Food and Veterinary Office (FVO) inspectors came. They gave us the OK for what we were doing and said that we very much need to go in the direction of thinking about doing something more and moving the scheme forward. The scheme we have at the moment is considered by the European Union as fit for purpose. It supports it to the extent of some £4 million or

£5 million a year, but the inspectors clearly directed us towards thinking about taking some other actions. They talked to the members of the TB strategic partnership group, and the two groups were very much moving in the same direction. I will move over to Geraldine, as she is leading on that.

Ms Fee: The TB strategic partnership group has been working assiduously over the past 18 months, and it hopes to have the report out in the autumn. Robert and I both sit on the group as ex officio members. We are not full members, but we report to the group. So, we have a way of ensuring that, as DARD considers changes to the programme, we are not running contrary to the group's direction of travel, should that be accepted by the Minister and the Executive in due course. While we are waiting on the final report of the group, it is fair to say that there have been ongoing improvements made to the programme. Colin might want to say something about that in due course.

The group is currently getting independent consultants to look at and almost stress-test some of their recommendations. We are looking at it from cost-benefit analysis and behavioural perspectives and testing the science on that. That is taking a bit of time, because, albeit that it is an independent group, the procurement is subject to government procurement rules and there are processes to be gone through. We are hopeful that the report will launch in the autumn, but I would not want to give you the impression that there is nothing happening in DAERA to address the TB problem pending the production of that report. Colin, do you want to say anything about that?

Mr Colin Hart (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): One of the key focuses that we have at the moment is to work on the sensitivity of the testing of cattle. I think that it is a well-known fact that the TB skin test is not 100% perfect and that, in the hands of an expert user, it might be 75% or 80% sensitive. That means that animals that have the disease are being left behind because the test simply does not pick them up. Obviously, it is key to the programme to remove infected animals at the earliest possible time. It is important to us to make the best use of the tools that we have at the moment.

The way we have approached that is to have different levels of interpretation of the TB skin test. The test involves introducing an allergen into the skin of an animal, a swelling arises and, four days later, you measure the size of the lump. Depending on the size of that lump, the animal is a reactor, an inconclusive or a negative. We have started to use severe interpretation in a much more widespread way, which means that an animal with a smaller lump could be taken as a reactor. We have shown statistically that an animal that is an inconclusive but is a positive under severe interpretation is eight times more likely to have disease than an animal that was negative. We are using severe interpretation widely now. That is supported by the TB strategic partnership group direction. We discussed this with the group and have been using this widely for a year now. One member mentioned that the disease has levelled out since last October/November/December and is coming down now.

In addition, we are using the blood test for TB in a more flexible way. Again, we have had discussions with the TB strategic partnership group. It supports the increased use of the blood test, which can pick up animals that do not react to the skin test. We are trying to increase the sensitivity and, through that, leave fewer diseased animals behind using the skin test.

The skin test works at a herd level and over repeated tests of the same herd, so, at an animal level, the skin test is much less effective because it leaves one in five positive animals behind. When you test the whole herd and then repeat test the whole herd 60 days later, the skin test is a good tool, and we are keen that it is used properly. So we have severe interpretation, increased use of the TB blood test and a much more robust contract with private veterinary practitioners (PVPs).

What we are seeking to achieve in the PVP contract is that all testers, whether in DAERA or in the private sector, test animals to the highest possible quality and take as much care as possible to ensure that they identify reactors at an equal rate in DAERA and in the private sector. Our new contract places more emphasis on the practice manager and the lead vet in the practice to see that all vets are doing the job properly. There is now much more emphasis on the business to get it right, and, if it gets it wrong, there will be penalties on the business. A previous PAC recommendation was that there should be sanctions against businesses that do not test to the highest standard. Our new contract is robust and based on public service principles. We have, I think, 75 practices enlisted across the country to do this work.

If we improve the sensitivity of testing in the hands of all veterinarians, that should only help the programme. That has been a key focus of our work over the last year, and it is pleasing that the

disease, which had been rising at the end of 2014 and throughout 2015 until October, started to level out, has turned a corner and is coming down at the animal and herd incidence level.

Maybe that helps you.

Mr Anderson: There is a lot in there, Colin. There was an unprecedented increase over the years, and it is now coming down a bit. At the moment, it is costing the Department about £10 million a year, when you take the £5 million that comes from the European side. I do not want to pre-empt the report, but, when it comes out in the autumn, are we confident that we will make inroads towards eradication and the £10 million that is being spent year on year?

Mr Huey: I have to be careful because I do not want to pre-empt the independent report.

Mr Anderson: Let us get the figure right: what is the cost to the Department?

Mr Huey: In very round figures, we usually take it as £30 million, although it has been coming down from that over the years.

Mr Anderson: The compensation is —

Mr Huey: The compensation is between £12 million and £15 million. Last year, it was around £14 million. The £30 million is made up of compensation, practitioners' costs and the cost of my staff. That is where the global figure of —

Mr Anderson: So, it is £30 million, and you get £5 million from the EU.

Mr Huey: Last year, it was £28.6 million minus the £4 million that we got. So, £24 million or so was the cost.

Mr Anderson: That is a lot of money.

Mr Huey: It is not acceptable. The effort will be put in, and I am confident enough to accept a hard target for taking TB down, and down is where it is going. That is a foolhardy thing to do, because the TB bug does not read the report. We will have to do real things to make this happen. If we implement the report, it will, as I often say, be like invest to save. We will have to spend money, because, as Colin says, part of the answer is to bear down hard on the disease and get reactors out as quickly as possible. That is the same with any disease. When you do that, guess what happens to the incidence of the disease in the short term? It goes up a bit and then starts to go down.

There will also be costs involved in meetings with farmers and in the potential for wildlife interventions. That is being costed at the moment so that we can come up with a real figure. I will then accept a real target, with the ultimate aim of eradicating the disease in 20, 25 or 30 years' time. However, on our way there, I will not accept a target for three to five years and another for 10 years — I will not be here for that one. That will allow a strong business case.

If we get it down from 7% to even 5.5%, that will save £5 million, £6 million or £7 million. When we get it down to 3.5%, we will save around £15 million. This is serious money that we could deploy elsewhere, perhaps through Animal Health and Welfare Northern Ireland, to do something about another disease, but there is no money at the moment for any other disease because we are spending it all on TB. We have to do something about that. The TB strategic partnership group gives us the opportunity to take a new and different approach.

One of the things that I am most passionate about is the recognition that TB is an infectious disease. It seems obvious, but people have forgotten that. This is an infectious disease that kills people, but we have reduced it to a programme and a source of income for a lot of professional people. We have to get away from that and do something about the disease. Sorry, I am on a rant.

Mr McKee: I want to ask two questions on TB. TB-infected badgers are culled by lethal injection. What is the means of their disposal?

Mr Hart: The badgers are removed to the AFBI laboratory in Stormont. They are removed in accordance with regulations that govern the movement of high-risk material. They are delivered

immediately to the AFBI laboratory, where further samples are taken, further tests are carried out, and, ultimately, the carcass of the badger is disposed of by incineration.

Mr McKee: My second question is about compensation. At present, TB reactors in animals get the 100% compensation rate at market value. What is the percentage for pedigree animals, which usually have a higher value?

Ms Fee: It is 100% compensation.

Mr Hart: It is 100% of an unlimited ceiling at the moment.

Mr McKee: Compensation is an issue at the minute. It was in the paper a couple of weeks ago. Did you see that?

Mr Huey: I am well aware of that, but I cannot comment on a farmer with a particular problem. In general terms, a process of valuation is carried out by our staff. We have a team of expert staff who do the valuation. They keep themselves up to date and benchmark themselves. A lot of work goes into that. A very large percentage — 98% — of farmers accept the valuation, and it is paid in full on all animals. That is being looked at by the TB strategic partnership group, and it will come forward with its recommendations on compensation in the body of the report. What may be confusing you, Harold, is that brucellosis is different. It is not 100%.

Mr McKee: Comparing the pedigree to —

Mr Hart: Brucellosis was 75% above a certain level, but we are not valuing brucellosis animals now because there are so few. Animals are still removed under the brucellosis order that react to the test, and you occasionally see such animals because you get cross-reactions with the test methodology. Last year, our total expenditure on brucellosis was about £1,000. That is the level of expenditure.

Ms Archibald: A lot of my questions on TB have already been asked, so I will not touch on that again.

I will go back to BVD. Since the compulsory test came in in March, has there been any feedback or issues on compliance? Do you envisage any?

Ms Fee: As I said, we are pleased with how it is going. We have not had a report from AHWNI that there have been any compliance issues. We are monitoring that, and we get a management information report. Colin, do you have a view on the enforcement side?

Mr Hart: At the moment, our approach to enforcement of the programme is light touch. It is an industry-led programme, and we are keen for it to bed in before we get too involved. It is like anything else: people make mistakes. At the moment, that is not the level of interest that I have as a person who is responsible for enforcement of DAERA legislation at the operational end. What I am more interested in is where I have evidence that somebody is driving a coach and horses through the programme and actively seeking to buy and sell on animals that are persistently infected with BVD and, as such, have a very limited life expectancy. Although they look well at the point of sale, somebody could be buying an animal that is not fit for purpose.

We meet AHWNI regularly. We are developing systems that link APHIS information on animal movements with the AHWNI database information on infection. We are well down a pathway where we will be able to work with AHWNI to say who has moved a persistently infected animal or who has moved an animal that was the dam of a persistently infected animal because we might want to catch up with that cow and test her in her herd, as she might have moved legitimately. There are issues linking APHIS information to AHWNI information, and we are well down the road to being able to match that up. We will keep a close eye on it. The approach to enforcement is light touch at the moment, but, when we think that people are abusing the system, we will take action.

Mr Huey: The problems with the scheme so far have largely been teething ones, with farmers not putting the right postage on the box, putting the wrong paperwork in or not completing the paperwork properly. That is the sort of the thing that happens, but so far so good.

Ms Fee: Just to follow that up: there are criminal penalties in the order. If the offence involves one animal, there is a maximum fine of £5,000 and/or one month's imprisonment. They would probably be

deployed and a prosecution sought only in extremis, but they are reasonably significant penalties as a backstop.

Mr Robinson: I thank Robert and his team for the presentation. Will the veterinary department be part of the move to the new headquarters in Ballykelly in a couple of years' time?

Mr Huey: Yes. In fact, two members of my team are already there as part of the advance party. Colin is currently headquartered in Coleraine.

Mr Robinson: Foot soldiers.

Mr Huey: Colin lives not far from Coleraine. Perpetua is in Derry/Londonderry; her headquarters are there. My headquarters are going. I have just short of 100 people in Dundonald House. It will not be easy. It will be particularly difficult for professional staff who cannot move from Department to Department. There is nowhere else for them except the veterinary service or AFBI, which is a non-departmental public body. They are the only places where vets are employed. It will also be difficult for the staff on Geraldine's side who have background and historical knowledge of policy areas. We are actively trying to manage the situation. We will take advantage of folks who are leaving at the moment to fill with people ready for going to Ballykelly so that we can get some continuity. We do not see this as being a big bang. It will happen gradually. It has already started, and it will continue through the years until the transition has happened.

Mr Robinson: So you do not see any problems when —

Mr Huey: I see an enormous number of problems. If you want to examine the problems in detail, it is easy, because they did this some years ago in the Republic of Ireland. They moved the Agriculture Department down to Portlaoise and did a very good post-project evaluation — warts and all. If you want concrete evidence as to what is going to happen, read the post-project evaluation. That is what they are for. It gives us the chance to recognise the challenges and try to do something about them. No, this is not easy. We talk glibly about posts moving to Ballykelly. This is people. A lot of them are people who are happy in their job, have never sought promotion, have stayed where they were, have been working in the same job and giving good service for 25 years. They feel that we are walking away from them, abandoning them and saying, "You can get another job somewhere in Belfast". This is causing real hurt, but we are working our way through it. Are there problems? Yes.

Mr Robinson: It is not an easy transition.

Mr Huey: It is not easy, but we will get there.

Mr McMullan: Thank you for your presentation. Colin, in the last mandate, the finger was pointed at the two different standards of the veterinary service: the private and the departmental. To my mind, that was a red herring, but it kept being thrown up. Robert, you say that the standards will have to be at a high level. Have we got everything in place to monitor that and ensure that they will be of the highest standard?

Mr Huey: Yes. I will let Colin answer that, but I want to say that this new contract was a significant and difficult piece of work. In fact, Colin's efforts on it have been recognised by the NICS awards, for which he has a nomination. It was difficult because I had a clear view of what my outcome was, which was that I wanted, if possible, to keep the testing within the veterinary profession in Northern Ireland. My concern was that it had gone to open tender, that that might not have been the case and that it could have been a larger company from somewhere else on these islands that came in and did the testing from outside. For reasons of surveillance, I am very much for the direction of travel of the TB strategic partnership group. I wanted to maintain the relationship between a farmer and his private practitioner. Who better to give advice to a farmer than his own vet about a disease, as long as you are recognising it as a disease rather than just doing a test? That was the direction of travel. We had to find a way of getting to that result. Colin and his team found a novel way through something called recital 4 of the European procurement regulations, which allowed us to award the contract by benchmarking. That is the background. I will let Colin answer your question about the quality of the tests.

Mr Hart: We now have a proper public service contract. I have a full-time contract manager who is responsible for looking over all aspects of the programme. It starts at the induction training of new

vets and stresses the importance of the TB test to the TB programme. We now have ongoing development for our vets, both in private practice and in the Department, in the programme's priorities and the messages that we want those vets to convey to farmers.

We have the training aspect, and it is important for me to know, with the private sector vets as well as my own, which vet is testing, and where and when they are testing. On that basis, I carry out a programme of on-the-job checks. We have done this for some years. We found that, because of the way general practices are set up, there are regular changes as to who goes where, maybe because emergency work arises in the practice. In some cases, we found it very difficult to supervise the person we wanted to supervise. Under the new contract, there is quite an emphasis on telling us about any changes, even if it is a last-minute change, so that we do not waste time going out to supervise somebody whom we have already supervised and are happy with and, at the other end of the scale, keep missing somebody whom we really want to focus on. We need to know who, where and when, and then we will use our on-the-job supervision. We have teams of supervisors who are specially trained for this job and are expert in TB testing. They seek to make sure that the fairly demanding requirements of the TB skin test are met in full. Only by doing that can we ensure that the sensitivity of the test — I am back to the sensitivity — is as good as it could be.

We hear anecdotal evidence that pressure might be brought to bear by farmers. A farmer may be using a private vet to do the test, and he may be thoroughly inconvenienced by the TB breakdown. We must ensure that that farmer is not able to overly influence the testing vet. That is a key issue. In 2009, PAC asked whether there was a conflict of interest between the private vet and his client. Whatever way you look at it, it is a difficult position to be in. The approach we have taken is to manage that conflict of interest, because we think that the private vet is the person to do the test. That vet is in a unique position between the Department and the farmer. Most often, that vet commands the complete trust of the farmer, so he is in a very good position to communicate scientific messages about TB and other things to the farmer. We were keen to preserve that relationship as we procured this service. At the same time, we must ensure that conflict of interest or the potential for it is not an issue.

We have published the contract. There are financial sanctions in it and key performance indicators (KPIs) for practices. There is now a tight monitoring and management system, which is even more effective than the one we had previously. Through those measures and many others — I probably could not go through all the details today — we hope to ensure that all practices test to the same exacting standard. The majority have been doing extremely well over the years. We have had suspicions about some. We did not rule anybody out of this new contract, but we will monitor them very closely. That is the message. We have talked to the private vets, and they understand where the Department is at. They understand the reasons for it and have worked well with us to get to this point. The procurement that we introduced on 15 April was seamless. We moved from the old contract to the new one without any farmer being inconvenienced. We had lots of cooperation from our private veterinary colleagues, and, going forward, I do not expect anything less.

Mr Huey: Only one private colleague decided not to take up the new contract. He decided that, at the age of 94, he should perhaps stop testing. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McMullan: One of the big problems with testing and finding reactors etc is lockdown. Can we do something to alleviate the problem of lockdown for such a length of time on farms? It is throwing up more and more problems as we go on, Robert. Last year, we had problems with feeding and getting feed in.

Mr Huey: A key aspect of any disease control is that, whenever you have identified a disease, you do not allow it to spread. I do not underestimate the inconvenience that that causes farmers, but I have to think about the next farmer who might be inconvenienced even more by infected animals. Remember: this is a disease that could spread to other farms and there is the expense from that and all the rest of it. It is always a balance.

One of the things that we have been looking at for some time is alternative control herds and how we could, in particular circumstances, assist both ourselves and the farmers with the problem of restrictions. There are situations with herds that only finish and where all the animals go for slaughter. We have looked at those. It is ongoing work, and the TB strategic partnership group has looked at those issues as well. Where we can, and where it will not cause a risk of a further spread of disease, we will try to work with the industry.

Colin, do you have examples, or is there anything that you want to say about control or at-risk herds?

Mr Hart: One example is calves from dairy herds. When dairy herds are locked up, male calves from dairy breeds are not normally retained by dairy farmers, so they could find that the normal line of supply that they had to the market is suddenly stopped and they could have many male calves that they have no wish to keep.

One of the possibilities is to use some sort of integrated system. That is the sort of thing that we have been discussing with the industry. We have asked whether we could allow those animals to be moved to a facility that is biosecure so that we are managing the risk of disease in another way by possibly housing those animals. In turn, when they are then mature enough for slaughter they will go directly to the abattoir. We call those alternative control herds, and that solution has been offered to the industry. The alternative control, rather than testing the animals and allowing them freedom to be in whatever field the farmer wants to put them in, is to control them in a different way. It involves containing the animals — we already know that they are at a very high risk of spreading disease, so they must be contained so that they do not spread disease to other cattle or, indeed, to badgers that could then spread it to other cattle.

So far, the industry has not taken up the options that we came up with; we are still talking to the industry about that. It is a difficult position. Commercial farmers operate in a certain way, and although certain commercial farmers may be prepared to buy animals that have come from a TB breakdown herd — they have tested clear, but they are still not allowed to move and farmers could use them — those farmers, by and large, want to operate in a way that is not dissimilar from how they currently operate, which is, quite often, to graze the animal. If you have animals that are much more likely to have TB grazing the countryside, you can guess what will happen.

We have been very nervous about measures to introduce alternative controls and the recommendations that we have made to the industry so far have been based on the protection of the wider industry. You should bear in mind that, with the herd incidents of 7% that we have at the moment, and 93% of herds free of disease, we do not want disease spreading to the 93%.

Maybe I have said enough, but, broadly, that is the conundrum that we are faced with at the moment. Yes, we would like to do more, but to do more puts farmers at risk, so the result is that farmers who have breakdowns are locked down. It is a burden on business; there is no question about that. The best thing that we can do for them is to help them to get free as soon as possible by good-quality testing, helping them with biosecurity advice, and by and large working with them to clear their breakdown up as soon as possible.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): We really need to move on to the next presentation, although Robin and Harold have indicated that they want to ask a question. If they are related and we can get brief answers to them —

Mr Swann: I will be very brief, Chair. Robert, you mentioned that bee inspections were under way in Northern Ireland .

Mr Huey: Bee inspections are carried out by Forest Service for plant health; it is part of working together to have a more integrated inspection system. We will carry out a pilot programme that involves bee health and other farm inspections to see whether we can do it more efficiently.

Mr Swann: Are bee inspections a new thing?

Mr Huey: No, they have always been there.

Mr Swann: Are we seeing a trend?

Mr Hart: Yes, we are, and it is in the public domain. The statistics are circulated by our plant health colleagues in forestry. We have European foul brood and African foul brood in the country. Plant health colleagues are already doing inspections and have found new outbreaks this year again. It is an area of great concern, and they are working with the beekeeping public. They produce a bulletin that goes to all registered beekeepers to notify them of the risks of not taking biosecure measures.

Mr McKee: Brucellosis is almost eradicated. I believe that the farmer played a major role in that for the simple reason that any female animal over one year old going to a show had to be tested before it was allowed to move to that show, and within 30 days, particularly for local shows. Obviously, that has worked. Do you see any case for that in TB?

Mr Huey: They are very different diseases. I recognise the part that everybody played in getting us to freedom. It is also worth noting that there are benefits from freedom because it has allowed deregulation of the farmer in that he is now carrying out much less testing. It also gives savings to us, which is good.

Mr Hart: The substance of the question is pre-movement testing for TB, which is a complex issue. At the moment, we do not do pre-movement testing. Every herd in the country is tested every year. We trace and test every animal that misses a herd test, so we ensure that every animal in the country is tested every year, but we do not insist that an animal is tested within 30 days of movement, except for export. The question is whether we should be doing that. Of course, with the TB test you have to go out twice, which makes it costly. It is not 100% effective, and we talked about the sensitivity of the test.

There are a number of reasons why it is not simple, but it is something that the TB strategic partnership group has looked at in the round of proposals.

Mr McKee: An animal can be moved onto another farm within, say, 11 months if it is sold. There is no testing done.

Mr Hart: No, but our computer triggers that animal and we know which herd it has moved to. After, I think, 13 months, a test is set up, no matter what herd it is in, so we catch up with it.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): OK. I will move on to the next presentation.

Mr Huey: Chair, if I could just have your forbearance. I understand how complex some of this animal health business is. We offer one-to-ones, and if anybody wants to do a field visit or call and get us to help them to understand some of the programmes, we are very happy to do that. If there is a group that wants to talk about TB, for example, or go to a farm and see a TB test, we can do that, to help you through. This is complex stuff, which is partially why we are so long.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): OK, thank you, Robert.