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Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and
Rural Affairs

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Single Applications and Area-based
Schemes 2016: Department of Agriculture,
Environment and Rural Affairs

17 November 2016

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Single Applications and Area-based Schemes 2016: Department of 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 David Ford
Mr Patsy McGlone
Mr Harold McKee
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

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| Dr Richard Crowe | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs |
| Mr Brian Doherty | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs |
| Dr Jason Foy | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs |
| Mr Mark McLean | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs |

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): From the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), I welcome Richard Crowe, the head of the countryside management unit; Mark McLean, the principal agricultural economist in the food and farming group; Brian Doherty from the EU area-based schemes unit; and Jason Foy from the EU area-based schemes organisational development unit. I ask you to keep the presentation as brief as possible — up to 10 minutes — to allow members to ask questions. I ask members to keep to one question if possible.

Mr Brian Doherty (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Good afternoon, Chairperson. I thank you and the Committee for inviting us to brief you on the 2016 area-based schemes. I joined the Department only recently as a director of EU area-based schemes, so, in order to answer your questions in detail, I have been joined by a number of colleagues. Jason heads up our payments team in Orchard House; Richard, as you mentioned, heads up our countryside management unit, which includes our inspectors; and Mark is a policy lead in CAP reform.

We provided the Committee with a written briefing document, and I will, indeed, confine my remarks to a few key points. Overall, we have had a fairly challenging year, but we have delivered for farms and farm businesses. The Minister set us a challenging target to introduce advance payments and pay 80% of eligible farmers. The Committee will be aware that we exceeded that target and made advance payments to nearly 91% of eligible farmers, totalling around £160 million. Our focus is now firmly on making the necessary preparations to make full or balance payments to farmers from 1

December. Our target is to pay 95% of eligible farmers in December, and we are on track to achieve that.

On the inspections front, we are making good progress. A total of 258 inspected farms received advance payments, and we are aiming to pay the majority of inspected farms in December, with the remainder as soon as possible in the new year. We are also making good progress on the assessment of 2016 applications for young farmer payments and regional reserve. A significant number of successful young farmers from 2015 have provided the necessary follow-up information and will receive payment in the coming weeks.

That is all I have to say at this point, Chair. I am happy to take questions from the Committee.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): That is probably the briefest presentation that we have ever had, but, as you say, you gave us a written briefing prior to the meeting. There is quite a bit of detail in that briefing, for which I thank you. We appreciate getting that kind of detail because it gives us an opportunity to look at it before a meeting and have a more productive questioning process.

I want to ask you about the young farmers' applications. It has been raised with me that appeals are outstanding from last year's applications. Will that have an impact on an application this year?

Dr Jason Foy (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Not necessarily. If farm businesses have already carried forward entitlements into 2015, in some circumstances, we have been able to make payments based on their existing entitlement allocation and value. If they are subsequently successful at review of decision, their payment will be recalculated and an additional payment made.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): My follow-on question is this: it is a year later, so why has the appeal not been heard?

Dr Foy: As the Committee will appreciate, we have had quite a high volume of review-of-decision applications for 2015. We have worked through a significant number of them. In the 2015 young farmer category, for example, we received 252 applications for review of decision, and 41 are outstanding at present. They may be outstanding for a variety of reasons. Perhaps we are waiting on additional information from an applicant, but we process review-of-decision applications in date order. We are getting through them as quickly as we possibly can, and decisions are going out on an ongoing basis.

Mr Irwin: As a farmer, I declare an interest. I have to give credit where credit is due: the Department should be commended for getting advance payments out this year. They have been a big asset for farmers who have been under a lot of stress. However, when criticism is necessary, I am prepared to do that too. The Department has made a lot of work for itself on the active farmer and young farmer issue. I do not know how many are still awaiting a review of decision, but I am sure that Jason will be able to tell us. A number of farmers are on to me daily who still have not been told whether they have been accepted as being active. Many of the farms that I have looked at have been farmed for maybe 20 or 25 years. They are small in nature, but they are still active. It looks to me like the Department has made a lot of work for itself on this issue. I want to know how many are still waiting for confirmation on whether the Department accepts that they are active.

I see that 415 young farmer applications have been fully assessed, with 226 accepted and 189 rejections. That is a very high rejection rate. Some of them have come to me and said that they are very unhappy because they have been rejected for not having a partnership agreement in place, even though their accountant had stated that they had a partnership agreement. The very fact that the Department had not got that in its hands meant that it rejected the application without asking for it. That seems to me to be very harsh.

The 189 who have been rejected out of hand have to go through an appeals process that will take months and months, and they could be rejected again. Surely there was a better way of doing this in some instances. In my eyes, if an accountant said that a partnership agreement was in place, would it not have been quite easy to ask for a copy of it, thereby resolving the issue?

Mr Doherty: There were, indeed, 189. For clarity: of that 189, 160 were rejected on the basis of an issue with their partnership agreement. For 73 of those, no partnership agreement at all was provided. The other 87 were rejected because, although the partnership agreement had been

provided, there were maybe some deficiencies with it. I will ask Mark to pick up on the broader policy issue around partnership agreements and head of holding.

Mr Mark McLean (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): It was emphasised in the guidance that a partnership agreement had to be provided, which means: provided by the closing date for applications. The difficulty is that, if we start accepting information that should have been provided by the closing date for applications, we open up a very large area not just of accepting more information but of people wanting to change, withdraw and add information. Indeed, the Welsh authorities, in response to a question that they asked the Commission, were told that evidence that should have been submitted by the closing date for applications cannot be accepted at a later stage or during the appeal process except in cases of exceptional circumstances or force majeure. That is the position with documentation, including partnership agreements not provided at the date of application.

It is not just the case that there was an issue about whether they had a partnership but what the partnership agreement said about who was head of holding. Brian referred to issues that we are experiencing with partnership agreements, of which there are two major ones. We are seeing clauses in partnership agreements that provide for dissolution of the partnership without the consent of the head of holding. If a person leaves a partnership, for example, that can result in dissolution. If you have that sort of circumstance, it undermines a young farmer having long-term control because, if he makes a decision with which another partner does not agree, that partner could then proceed to leave the partnership. If the other partner owns most of the capital to do with the partnership, it effectively leaves the young farmer with no business. We are also seeing restrictive clauses being put into partnership agreements, possibly to the extent that a young farmer is not able to trade with anybody whom another partner says they should not trade with. Again, that calls into question whether they are in long-term control of the business.

Mr Irwin: The difficulty for some of those young farmers is that they attended their local office on a number of occasions and brought everything. The local office would say: you need more detail, you need this, that and the other. I could mention names, but I am not going to do that. Two such farmers, in particular, came to me and said that the local office had told them that they had everything they needed before the application was sent away. They handed the application in to the local office. You might tell me that it is not the job of the local office to do that, but local offices can be helpful and friendly. On these two occasions, the local office assured the farmers that they had everything that was required, and the application was sent off. Then the farmers were shocked to find out that they had not sent everything that was required.

You can understand the frustration of some of those farmers, especially young farmers. I know where you are coming from in relation to some of those cases; but I think that some of the applications actually meet the criteria, but they did not have all the evidence there. In a few of the cases that I had, the accountant had stated in the letters that the partnership agreement was in place and that the young farmer had 51%. That was clearly identified and stated in the letter, but the actual agreement was not with yourselves. One would have thought that, when that much was stated in the letter, it was enough for you to ask for a copy of the agreement to be sent. I would have thought so.

We want to encourage young farmers. That is what this was supposed to do. However, in my eyes, for some of them, it has done the very opposite.

Mr Doherty: It would be a bit concerning if some of our colleagues on the front line, in the DAERA Direct offices, were giving an indication that what the farmers had provided at that time was complete and we subsequently said that it was not.

Mr Irwin: That is exactly what happened.

Mr Doherty: I will take that away, because the front line has an important supportive role to play, but we actually get into the detail of the processing, what is behind it and the reasons around those that have been rejected. Some 87 have been rejected because there is an issue with the partnership agreement rather than there not being one. I will take that point away.

I do not know whether, from a processing point of view, you want to add anything, Jason?

Dr Foy: In our assessment of these cases, the 189 that were rejected were not rejected out of hand; they were rejected after they were thoroughly assessed. These applications come with a lot of evidence from solicitors and accountants. Our staff go through these applications in very great detail

and assess all the evidence provided. We have some mandatory requirements around partnership agreements, accounts and various other items that are specified in the guidance, and those are all thoroughly assessed when the application is made.

Where we have scope to seek clarification from farmers, we do so, and we do that on an ongoing basis. However, where a piece of evidence simply is not there — not that it is unclear, it just has not been provided at all — as Mark has said, the Commission is very clear with paying agencies that we are not permitted to accept any further information after the closing date.

Mr Irwin: I did not get a response from you about the first-stage review on the active farmer issue. How many have you yet to assess? Quite a number of farmers are ringing me, and I do not have a response to give them.

Dr Foy: For 2015, we have received 886 applications for review of decision and, at present, 488 are outstanding.

Mr Irwin: We are past the middle of November. Is that acceptable?

Dr Richard Crowe (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Let me just add to that. With respect to the active farmer issue, all of those 886 individuals would have received a stage 1 review already. They are still in the stage 1 process, but we have undertaken in that process to provide a thorough technical appraisal of the cases that have come to us. They have all had an opportunity, prior to this, to have that technical review, and we found that they were rejected. We are now looking at those in detail with technical staff in order to identify the problems and give farmers the opportunity to demonstrate that they are active farmers. We are being very thorough on that basis, and that is why this is taking a bit of time. For example, rather than simply writing out to those people, we are contacting them by phone, and you may have constituents who have had that. That is to enable them to demonstrate to us that they are, in fact, active farmers. We said from the very beginning of this, and we still hold to it, that anyone who is actively farming should not have a difficulty in demonstrating that they are doing that. We have to work on information that can be provided, and we are working through that as quickly as we can.

Mr Irwin: If the Department looked at some of the herd numbers, it would know that they are active. If there are animals and a good number of cattle in herds, it would not have to ask any more questions, I would have thought.

Dr Crowe: It is a matter of us looking at some of the detail and relating that to, for example, the land areas that are involved. We are by no means trying to be obstructive in this at all, but we are simply trying to have folk demonstrate that they are active. We did have an issue in the region with inactive farmers claiming the single farm payment, as it was at that time, so we had to take this action. Again, we are being very thorough, and we base that on the fact that that gives every opportunity for people to demonstrate that they are active. That is why this process is taking some time to complete.

Mr Irwin: For anyone who does not realise it, this is for 2015 applications, not 2016 applications.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): I realise that.

Mr Swann: What was the time frame for the 2016 young farmers' application?

Dr Foy: The application window opened at the start of March, and the deadline for applications for young farmers was the same as the single applications, so it was Monday 16 May.

Mr Swann: Between Monday 16 May and today, you have assessed 415 of the 773.

Dr Foy: That is correct.

Mr Swann: That is 54%.

Dr Foy: We have fully assessed and reached a finding on 415. We have assessed a lot more than that, but, in cases where follow-up assessment is required from our technical staff or where we have to clarify part of the evidence provided by the farmer with that farmer, obviously that assessment cannot

be completed until that has been done. We are working through the remainder, and we hope to have the remaining cases fully assessed, subject to information being provided to us, by the end of December. We hope to have the initial assessments of those applications completed by then.

Mr Swann: Is that the 358 that are outstanding and on which you are seeking further information, Jason?

Dr Foy: Yes, that is correct.

Mr Doherty: That is the important thing. I would not want the Committee to think that there are 358 that have not been started. Those are at different stages. For instance, of those, you will have just over 40 at a stage 1 review, just over 70 waiting on an on-the-spot check and a further just over 100 with specific queries where we might have to undertake a short assessment. As I said, I do not want anybody to think that we have not started on it at all.

Mr Swann: OK, by the end of December. Of the 415 that you have fully assessed, 189 have been rejected. That is 46%. Is there an overburdensome application process if there is such a high rejection rate?

Mr McLean: I will put this in context. In the 2015 scheme year, the amounts paid out by 15 October —

Mr Swann: Mark, I am trying to concentrate on the 2016 scheme. My constituency office is busy at present with the 2016 applications.

Mr McLean: Yes, but this is relevant to 2016. At the moment, we have paid out for 2015, and that will follow through to 2016 because a lot of these people are reapplying. We have 52% of the UK total for young farmers' payment. We are paying out more than England, Scotland and Wales put together so —

Mr Swann: Mark, please do not get me wrong, I am not challenging how much you have paid out. I am trying to get where you are with those currently outstanding. I appreciate the information you are giving, but it is not answering the questions that I am actually asking you. I am trying to get to the bottom of the outstanding ones, and I have been challenging.

Of the 189 that have been rejected, 75 have no partnership agreements. What have the rest, the 114, been rejected for?

Mr Doherty: There are 73 where there was no partnership agreement provided at all.

Mr Swann: Is it 73 or 75?

Mr Doherty: It is 73 with no partnership agreement.

Mr Swann: The paper in front of us says 75.

Mr Doherty: Maybe it is a more up-to-date figure. I apologise if it is 75, and the information we did give to you is right, but it is about a 50:50 split of 160 cases where no partnership agreement was provided. For the remaining cases, a partnership agreement was provided but there was some issue with it. Mark, has already mentioned some of the issues there may be around the dissolution of a partnership agreement and getting a share around it.

The other 29 cases have other reasons. This Committee knows there are six criteria for the young farmer that have to be met, and the partnership —

Mr Swann: How many of them have been rejected because of the qualification?

Dr Foy: To date, of the applications we have assessed and made decisions on — five. Of those five, two were rejected because they did not provide any qualification at all.

Mr Swann: OK, and the other three were?

Dr Foy: The qualification did not meet the criteria. It was not a level 2 or did not contain a farm business management module.

Mr Swann: Is there a specific requirement on the application form for a farm business module?

Dr Foy: Yes.

Mr Swann: Will it be possible to get that by attending Greenmount for that one part of the course, or do you have to attend the full 10 sessions?

Dr Foy: You have to achieve the full level 2 qualification, and that qualification has to include the farm business management module. You would have to do the full qualification.

Mr Swann: To come back to the dissolution of partnerships, if a young farmer holds 51% and another partner holds 49%, and if the junior partner dissolves the partnership, it would be my understanding that if the partner holding 49% walks away, the young farmer who previously held 51% then becomes the shareholder?

Mr McLean: There are partnership agreements that provide for that. There are partnership agreements that provide for the business continuing if the junior partner walks away. Generally, we would see them as acceptable because the young farmer can continue to control the business.

There are other partnership agreements that provide, in those circumstances, for the partnership and therefore, effectively, the business to dissolve and end. That is the issue, because how does a young farmer have long-term control over a business that they cannot control the dissolution of and it can be dissolved without their consent?

Mr Swann: Mark, have you a breakdown of those?

Mr McLean: I do not.

Mr Swann: I am labouring this because I am aware of cases where the young farmer actually has the 51%, and they are at a loss to understand the Department's side. I can see the rationale you are starting to make if the holding reverts to the 49% shareholder. Is that in the contract?

Mr McLean: It can provide for the dissolution of the partnership. After that, the person who owns the capital, which could be the junior partner, would keep the capital and, obviously, will do whatever they want with it or continue to run a business — not the partnership but a business — where they are in charge of it. The young farmer's business would be effectively dissolved.

Mr Swann: Will the business number be retained by the senior partner or the junior partner?

Mr McLean: Effectively, the junior partner would be running a new business using the capital that is no longer available to the partnership.

Mr Swann: The young farmer with 51% holds the business number recognised by the Department and effectively manages the business. Mark, I am not talking about capital but the recognised business — the legal entity.

Mr McLean: The business ID is not, itself, a legal entity. If there were provisions in a partnership agreement for a partner other than the young farmer to dissolve the business, they would, clearly, notify the Department and rectify or make any business ID changes needed to reflect the legal situation on the ground.

Dr Foy: The cases all depend on their individual circumstances. We have it outside of young farmers as well, where there is, effectively, a scission of the business. If there are two partners involved, they would each have to set up new farm businesses with the Department. The existing ID would cease. It depends on individual circumstances.

Mr Swann: Has the Department taken legal advice on the dissolution of partnership?

Mr Doherty: There are occasions in all of them where there are requirements. We are working through some of those. We have questions with the Departmental Solicitor's Office (DSO) around clarity. As you will appreciate, they get quite technical from a legal point of view. We are already —

Mr Swann: Have you taken legal advice on any of the decisions that you have rejected to date?

Mr Doherty: We have sought the DSO's view on some of them. We currently have engagement ongoing with DSO with regard to other queries.

Mr Anderson: Thank you, gentlemen. Young farmers are generating some debate here today. I will continue that debate. The total number of rejected applications is quite high by any standard. Does that not set alarm bells ringing? Why is that happening? Brian, I think that you said that 73 did not even submit anything for the partnership agreements. How was the application sent out to those young applicants? Did it say, "Look, this is required"? Who gave out that information? Why would they have wanted to put an application in when they knew that they had to do something? You know where I am coming from. Did they not fully understand? Could they have been made better aware of what was needed before they reached the stage of going to appeal cases? Farming needs our young people. We have to encourage and do everything we can to get our young people to stay in farming.

Robin talked about qualification at level 2. I was told about an application that went in with an HND qualification from England, but it was not acceptable; they had to have that other one. They had that HND in agriculture. Surely there is something wrong when that is not accepted. Is it a line that you do not deviate from; that you must have that level 2? Could you be overqualified and get turned down?

Mr Swann: Yes.

Mr Anderson: If that is the case —

Mr Doherty: At a general level, those are all very valid questions. In terms of the qualification, it is about having the farm management element. We have had recent discussions about people who have a degree in agriculture but do not have the farm management element in the degree. It could apply to vets and people like that. It is a very valid challenge to us; it is something that we should reflect on.

Mr Anderson: Will that be reviewed?

Mr Doherty: I am happy to take it away and look at it. I think that the Minister would be very keen to be responsive to the industry. I do not think that she would be too keen for officials to be very dogmatic and say that we would not look at things. I am more than happy to take that away.

You raised an issue with regard to the partnership agreement. I will try to put a different spin on it: 55% of the applications that we have assessed to conclusion met all of the requirement. There is still a sizeable number of farmers who are able to go through the process. I suggest that they were able to get all the necessary information to allow them to make a complete application.

Mr Anderson: How was that information given to them?

Mr Doherty: The information is given to them through various sources. It will be on the application in terms of the six criteria that they are due to meet. We use our technology approach as much as we can with what we have on the website. I have to say that, being relatively new, I am a bit surprised that one important criterion, like a partnership agreement, you actually do not get it. Those who have put it in and maybe have not got it complete, realise what they have to do, and that becomes just a bit of a technical issue. Again, maybe it is something that we need to continue to work on to make sure that those who are making applications are aware of all the criteria they have to meet.

Just on the point that Mark made, with particular focus on the partnership agreement, the Welsh Assembly challenged that through their paying agency. It was clear, all the way back from the advice from the EU, what we needed to do, so we have to be compliant with that.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): The point about qualification has come up a number of times. That should be taken back and looked at because that could possibly be addressed.

Two of the things are more complicated. One is the partnership agreements, because you have to have it. It is as simple as that. There is no way around that. Maybe we need to find out from the other side of things, from young farmers themselves, where the complication is, because maybe they are having difficulty in getting those partnership agreements. Maybe they are having difficulty in getting all of the things tied down. Maybe their partner is feeling that it is too big a commitment for them. Is there something that we need to be addressing on that end of it rather than on this end of it?

Mr Anderson: I think more work needs to be done to find out what is [*Inaudible.*] and to see if there are ways we can get more of these applications through. That would be a way forward.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): On what William said about it not being in the application but saying in the letter that it is coming, far be it from me to defend the Department, because that is not my job, but I come from a council, and we had a similar situation with a scheme we were running. I said exactly what you are saying now, William, because I am always on the side of the people who are trying to access grants, improve their business and make better what they are doing. It was raised with me — and this just might be a question you will be able to answer — that we could come up against a legal challenge from the people who did have everything in on time. Why did they have to have everything in on time, if somebody else's application, which did not have everything in on time, can be considered?

I am accepting what you are saying, William. I am not saying that that should not be looked at, but I just want that question answered. Is that the difficulty for the Department?

Mr Doherty: I think it is about fairness. We are keen that those who are making applications get all the information in. We can make sure that they are very aware of what they have to get in, but if they do not, then we get into the scenario where we would have to start to chase down individual farmers and farm businesses, which, in many ways, would be helping you beyond anybody else who is compliant, shall we say, with the approach.

We are happy to take some of those things away and maybe give a bit of further thought to them.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): I appreciate that.

Mr McGlone: Thanks very much for your presentation. I said it before, and I do not know whether it was conveyed back, but thank you for your cooperation, particularly on Orchard House, in resolving some difficult and problematic cases, genuinely so.

I am coming to the environmental farming scheme. Are we well on course for February 2017? Is it definite that it will be launched then?

Mr Doherty: The Minister has already stated publicly, most recently in the Assembly in June, that we would be launching the environmental farming scheme in February. Our plans are to that effect. Indeed, after this, I am going along to a stakeholder group with the Ulster Farmers' Union, the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association (NIAPA) and a number of others to bring them up to speed with where we are.

Mr McGlone: Picking up on some of the issues that seemed to be around the other scheme, the more information we can get out there about processes and the like, the better.

Mr Doherty: We are. Part and parcel of that scheme is that we have a detailed and mature communications plan that involves elected representatives, representatives of the industry, those who will be applicants and planners, who will be a key partner in supporting farmers to put together their proposals. So, those plans are well advanced.

Mr McGlone: We, too, will be notified of that.

Mr Doherty: You are one of the key stakeholder groups.

Mr McGlone: That's good. That is all I wanted to know, Chair. Thanks very much.

Mr McMullan: How many of the forms that were rejected were done by form-fillers or agents?

Dr Foy: In general or for the young farmer payment specifically?

Mr McMullan: Aye.

Dr Foy: For the young farmer, I do not have that information to hand, but we can see if we can get it.

Mr McMullan: It would be interesting to see that. A total of 62% applied online. That has gone up and that is good to see. Are we seeing any hotspots where people are not able to apply online? I am talking about the broadband provision. I am even talking about the modernisation scheme that is out at the minute for agriculture, which does not fund IT equipment even though we are trying to get people online. Are we still having a difficulty with people going online, maybe because they do not have broadband? I worry a wee bit about that. What you are doing, on your side, is very good, but have we done any follow-up to see if broadband is an issue in areas and to try to get 62% up more?

I agree with what you are saying about the forms. With the majority of applications, you cannot take extra information after the closing date because that would give an unfair advantage to people. That is cruel, but it is a fact of life; you cannot do it. Can we look at that 62% some time and see if that is an issue?

Mr Doherty: We are very encouraged by the increase from the mid-40% figure to 62%, and we will continue to push very hard on that. My colleague Paul McGurnaghan was here previously, and hopefully he gave you some assurance on the broadband issue. I think that there was further written correspondence to the Committee to detail what has been done on the hardware side, which is the mobile access and the actual broadband. That continues to grow, but I think that we will continue to have issues with hotspots simply because of their nature.

From my point of view and looking to the future, we are obviously keen to get everybody online. I personally do not think that it is about the broadband access; it is more around the assisted-digital bit and how we can support people to get online. We work with our partners such as libraries and our DAERA Direct offices. Having somewhere you can go to get online will be fine, but helping to support people who have literacy issues and have not used computers is important. In my previous life — I maybe should not admit this now — I worked in the Social Security Agency, and we had a strong push to get people online. Assisted digital is the key issue, not so much the access to the equipment. As hopefully you are aware, we have been working on broader digital strategies with the Department for the Economy, and we have put some money in from the Department to try to continue to improve broadband and mobile access. It is then about what we can do on the ground to support those individuals and maximise that access.

Mr McMullan: We are still not getting to the nub of the problem. One of the suggestions from the previous Minister, Michelle O'Neill, was that we should think about using the Rural Community Network and bodies like that, which have access to that and are hands-on in the rural areas. That could be a way of getting that figure up. This is why Michelle O'Neill put that money into broadband.

Mr Doherty: I agree. There are probably many partners for us out there, including the Ulster Farmers' Union and NIAPA, whether it be our form-fillers or through our offices. As the Committee is aware, 2018 is our date to get everybody online from an EU point of view. We will look at all those avenues.

Mr McMullan: Will you look at that then?

Mr Doherty: Yes.

Mr McMullan: Good man. Thank you.

Mr Irwin: I just want to make a quick comment. It is not reflection on staff; the staff whom I approach are helpful at all times. It is just that a lot of people are frustrated, and I hope that you understand that.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): Thank you, William, that is appreciated.

Thank you very much for your presentation. There may be other questions, and we will forward them to you in writing. Perhaps you can pick up on Oliver's point about the IT equipment and the fact that people cannot get aid money for that.

Mr McMullan: It seems a wee bit silly because they are giving you extra points to apply online to get into that scheme.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): That is then ruled out of being able to get it. Previously, you were able to get IT funding, is that right?

Mr McMullan: You were. You can get IT in some of the equipment for farming like silo bins and stuff like that, but you cannot get it for this.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): Thank you very much. I appreciate your presentation.