



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and  
Rural Affairs

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Ministerial Briefing

30 January 2020

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

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#### **Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Declan McAleer (Chairperson)  
Mr Philip McGuigan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Ms Clare Bailey  
Mrs Rosemary Barton  
Mr Maurice Bradley  
Mr John Dallat  
Mr Harry Harvey  
Mr William Irwin

#### **Witnesses:**

Mr Poots	Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr Norman Fulton	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Dr Denis McMahon	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr David Small	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** I welcome Minister Poots this morning. Along with him are Dr Denis McMahon, the permanent secretary; Mr Norman Fulton, the deputy secretary and head of food and farming; and David Small, a grade 3 and head of the environmental, marine and fisheries group and chief executive of NIEA. I invite Minister Poots to brief the Committee.

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** OK. Thank you very much, Chair, and thanks to the Committee. Thanks especially for agreeing this morning to restrict the session a little in time. Very sadly, a very close friend of my son's was killed on the roads last week — 29 years of age — and the funeral is this morning. I appreciate having the opportunity to go to that funeral.

I am very happy to come back next week or at your earliest convenience if there are issues you want to cover but you feel have not been covered in enough detail. I suspect we will not get enough time over 50 minutes to cover everything we wish to. I am in your hands, and my availability to the Committee will be my first priority in the Assembly. You are the first call, and I will try to avoid organising things on Thursday mornings to leave time for the Committee. If you give us any notice at all, we will seek to facilitate you in the work you do. I have sat where you sit, and I appreciate your legislative and scrutiny roles. They are important roles. I do not see the Committee as an enemy; I see the Committee as another set of eyes, because I am only one person, and I have to keep an eye on all these characters here. Whilst they are good people, sometimes there are things we do not get quite

right, so having additional eyes to bring us into check sometimes will be a good thing, and I view that positively, not negatively.

I thank the Committee for the opportunity to share my priorities with you. I also thank you for your urgent consideration of the Direct Payments to Farmers (Legislative Continuity) Bill. Other legislative consent motions (LCM) will be coming up in due course. I hope we will be able to give you adequate and appropriate notice of those to allow them to move in the proper way. I also express my thanks to you for dealing with the backlog of statutory rules. I know that was quite a lengthy piece of work to have to engage in so quickly. Again, my senior officials will be available to you at any future meeting you request. We will ensure that they are made available to you.

I will run quickly through our priorities. I issued the first-day brief that I received, and I trust you all have that. Obviously, climate change was something that came very high on the agenda as it came in, and there certainly has been a lot of public commentary about it. We see a lot of things happening around the world. We look at what needs to be done in Northern Ireland, and we see that we need to reduce our carbon footprint. That is work that needs to be done across a series of sectors. Thankfully, we have made substantial progress in the energy sector. We are way ahead of the rest of the UK when it comes to renewable energies, and we should view that very positively. We have made good progress on recycling, but I think that there is much more to be driven out of that. We will get into a debate about how we dispose of the rest of our waste — obviously, there is incineration to consider — and that is a matter we need to delve quite deeply into to ensure we get it right. Things move, and over the last 10 years things have moved and technologies have changed and adapted, and I believe that there is greater opportunity for further and considerable recycling. In all that, decisions will have to be made that will help us when dealing with good environmental practice and reducing our carbon footprint.

I hope to do something very significant on forestation, as I believe we need to, as far as is possible, be sequestrating the carbon being produced. If there is a means of doing that, we should be doing it. We believe that over the lifetime of each tree we plant, it will absorb around half a ton of carbon. If we can plant significant numbers of trees, that will be beneficial to our environment and will make this a better place to live.

We have many challenges ahead with Brexit, and there are many uncertainties. I will be engaging with an inter-ministerial group and the appropriate Ministers and officials to fight our corner. I want to ensure that we get the best deal possible for people living here so that we can improve things and get better outcomes than would otherwise be the case, particularly in the absence of devolution.

Ammonia is going to be a considerable and key issue. Northern Ireland farming has grown over the years, and the consequence of that is that more ammonia is produced. How can we manage that? I was at Greenmount earlier this week. For example, the dairy unit it has put in — not every farmer will be putting the same the dairy unit in, because it is hugely expensive — has reduced ammonia production by some 60%. We need to look at what steps can be encouraged, and which are the most achievable and easiest in order to reduce ammonia coming from the dairy sector.

We also need to look at ammonia reduction in the chicken sector. Ironically, most of us have a preference for free-range chickens as opposed to housed chickens, which release less ammonia. However, that is not a route we wish to go down. We need to look at how we can deal with that in a better way and ensure that we continue to reduce the ammonia that is getting into the atmosphere. That is going to be a big challenge to us, and we can take useful steps to move things in the right way for that kind of farming.

For example, one of the areas where we can make significant reductions is in slurry spreading. Obviously, slurry is a by-product of farming, and it also contains many quality nutrients that you otherwise have to buy. By spreading slurry with splash plates, you lose an element of the nutrients, but it also allows more methane and ammonia to escape into the environment. Over the last number of years, the technology for trailing shoe mechanisms has advanced. We want to encourage and support farmers to go down that route, because they will get a benefit as more nutrients go into the ground, which will lead to their buying less fertiliser, but, more importantly, it releases considerably less ammonia and methane into the environment.

I want to look for those win-wins. We need to have sustainability going forward, so whether that is a sustainable environment, sustainable farms or sustainable food production, sustainability is going to be a key focus of my time in this Ministry. We want to identify ways to have that sustainability across all the services we provide. We want sustainable rural communities, and that is key.

Bovine TB is an issue that we really need to get on top of. They say the definition of madness is to keep doing the same thing and expect different results. Regrettably, we have pretty much been doing the same thing for many years, and TB has been growing. It is now a factor in the export of our beef. Some countries — for example, China — do not want our beef because of the high levels of TB. That is a very foolish situation to be in. We are also spending roughly £40 million of public money each year dealing with the problem, but we are not dealing with it. We cannot turn this around overnight, but we can make a significant change. We can improve the health of our bovine population. We can improve the health of our wildlife population at the same time and make massive reductions in TB. That is a challenge for us all, and it is an issue that we need to get our heads around.

Farm profitability is down 25% this year. That is entirely inappropriate. Farming is a very tough job. People work very long hours, and they deserve a return for their money. If you look at it, you will see that, regrettably, processors are doing quite well, supermarkets are doing quite well, but there is not enough money in the system to make sure that the farmers get a reasonable return to ensure the sustainability that I talked about, that there is succession and young people want to come into the farms and that there is the ability to invest in the farms and make good investment, which will enhance animal welfare, the environment and, indeed, the profitability of the farms. All those things should be happening, but if supermarkets and processors are gobbling up all the profits in the food industry, that is to the detriment of the wider public. I will be challenging on that particular subject.

Rural affairs is a critical part of this because the rural community is not just about the farming community; it goes far beyond the farming community. Many people living in rural communities need additional support. The lack of broadband access has been a big issue over the years. It is a course of work that is being done, and I hope that, in the not-too-distant future, the project to spend £150 million on rural broadband will be able to move ahead and a selected company will be able to provide broadband to many people who do not have it. That is only one of the issues.

Rural isolation, loneliness and people having trouble accessing the services that they need, such as doctors, educational services and so forth, are issues that we will have to deal with. I am in the east of the Province. It is not as bad where we are, but I recognise that there are issues in the west of the Province, where you have much longer distances to travel and poor public transport and all that. We all have ideas about how to respond to those things, and it is about how we can make best use of the money that we have available to us to make the biggest impact on people's lives.

That is a very quick dash through the sorts of issues before us. I am happy to take questions.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Thank you, Minister, for that very comprehensive briefing, and thank you for being here, given the tragedy that happened in your area and that you are heading off to the funeral this morning. A number of members have indicated that they want to speak, so we will try to get as many people in before you leave.

**Mr Poots:** Sure.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** I want to ask you a question about probably the most salient issue that was raised with me most recently, and it relates to some comments you have made since becoming Minister and in the Chamber last week around what the shape of a future agriculture policy might mean. I have been contacted by quite a number of beef and sheep farmers in the less-favoured areas (LFA) and areas of natural constraint (ANC) who are concerned at what they see as your preference to move away from an area-based approach to support farmers and your comments around stopping the transition towards the flat rate. That is all compounded by the fact that the ANC support payment has been withdrawn here, whilst it has been increased in other parts of the EU and in the South of Ireland. I want to tease this out: what would you say to those farmers in the LFA/ANC areas to alleviate some of the concerns they have right now?

**Mr Poots:** The problems I alluded to, such as how tough farming can be and how long hours are worked for a very modest profit, are probably exacerbated when you get to the hills. If it is tough on the lowlands to make a living, it is even tougher on the hills. I recognise and appreciate that. I am not coming in here to be a basher of hill farmers — far from it. I want hill farms to be profitable. I also want hill farmers to play a key role in a qualitative food chain, because if you are looking at really good-quality food, what is produced on the hills is amongst the most natural food you will get anywhere in the world.

You cannot grow vegetables or cereals on the hills. You are very limited in what you can do on the hills. Growing grass is the thing that, largely, you can do, so hill farmers are obviously going to be livestock farmers. I want to ensure that their part of that system is profitable and that they are producing the best-quality livestock, because they do, which will come down to the lowlands for finishing. Therefore, moving towards suckler cow support and sheep support are two courses that I particularly want to see happening on the hills. I do not want our beef herd to be reliant on dairy calves — on beef from the dairy herd. I want qualitative material coming from the hills — beef cattle — which will then make our beef, which we are selling across the world, the best quality anywhere. Hill farmers have a key role in that.

I am very happy to go to Fermanagh, Tyrone, north Antrim and the parts of County Down that have more hilly regions and to the less-favoured areas to talk to the people there about what they want to see and what I want to see. I do not think that, ultimately, we are that far apart. People always have hesitation about changing the systems, but, ultimately, I think we have the same aim, and that is to have profitable farms, whether on the hills or the lowlands.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Thank you for that, Minister, and I am glad you recognise those challenges. Obviously, under the current system, farmers are incentivised to maintain their lands in good agricultural and environmental condition. Obviously, there is a greening element to the single farm payment. Do you not feel that, perhaps, the approach that you might take would be challenging for meeting the environmental targets and protection if the focus is going to be on productivity and, perhaps, not incentivising farmers, which they are now, to be managers and custodians of their land from the environmental perspective, which they are doing very well?

**Mr Poots:** I think anything we do will be promoting animal welfare and the environment, and those will all be key factors. Production, animal welfare and environment will lead to a successful economy, because, if we produce fewer cattle, sheep and fewer dairy products, that means fewer jobs for the processing sector, where many people from rural communities work. We want a system that is productive and that works well.

There are quite a number of anomalies. Airports, prisons and other estates are claiming single farm payments, but they are clearly not farms. However, because they own the land, they can do so. People are coming in and taking a couple of cuts of grass and things off them just to tidy up or clean them up. My view is that we should be much more focused on actual farming and ensure that the money is being paid. It is a significant pot of money, but it is not going to get any larger. It is £293 million, so it is very significant. I want to make the best utilisation of that to ensure that we have sustainable agriculture going forward that is capable of developing, being profitable and meeting all the requirements that we will set for it for the environment and animal welfare.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Thanks, Minister. There are many other questions I could ask, but I do not want to hog the meeting.

**Mr Poots:** We will have plenty of time over the coming weeks. If we want to spend a day on this, I am happy to spend a day on it.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** I am conscious that I want to let everybody in who has indicated.

**Mr McGuigan:** Welcome, Minister. Thanks for your opening comments and your comments about the importance of the Committee's role and how you see that working out over future months. Thanks for your comments on the Chair's question. You are certainly tied down to coming to north Antrim to speak to the farmers there —

**Mr Poots:** No problem.

**Mr McGuigan:** — so we can discuss how we see that moving forward.

The first item in your first-day brief is climate change. Climate change is, undoubtedly, at the forefront of public concern. I welcome the commitments in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document that the Executive will take to deal with that and to address some of the problems of climate change and environmental protection legislation. As the Minister overseeing the environment, how do you intend to take that forward? I am talking specifically about a climate change Act and an independent environmental protection agency (EPA). Can you outline a timetable for when the Committee will

begin to see actions and get to scrutinise some of the suggestions from the proposals that you intend to take forward in order to see both those things come to fruition?

**Mr Poots:** It is early days, and, consequently, I have not got a timetable for it. Our team is looking closely at the opportunities that exist. An Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) has been set up at Westminster. We are looking at an independent EPA and the current service the NIEA provides. We will need to come to a decision relatively quickly on the management process for all those because we have a lot of work to do, and we have, basically, two years to do it. If we are sitting here in two years' time, we will not have time to introduce new legislation. At that point, we will be tidying up the tail of legislation as we approach an election. We need to identify and chart the way forward and get a timetable relatively quickly for that work.

None of that stops us working on reducing our carbon footprint and identifying means for reducing our carbon footprint. When I was in the Department of the Environment, we went ahead with setting up electric points for charging electric cars, and there were precious few at that stage. That is work that needs to be looked at. We are producing 37% of our energy from renewable sources, so having electric cars makes sense here. In Germany, nearly 40% of their electric is produced from coal, so the electric car might actually be detrimental by using fuels that are worse for the environment than petrol or diesel, but it makes sense here. We have a target for stopping the production of petrol and diesel cars. That is work that we could do. I know that, in the South of Ireland, they have entered into a partnership with one of the electric businesses that is paying for a substantial part of it. Thus far, we have paid it all from government sources, as I understand it. Those are courses of work that we can do to reduce the carbon footprint.

By going head with afforestation and doing something significant on that, we can reduce the carbon footprint. Ensuring that agriculture is encouraged and, indeed, incentivised to do its business in a way that reduces the release of methane and ammonia will reduce the carbon footprint. There is so much more that industry, transport etc can do to reduce the carbon footprint. That work needs to be done in any event. Irrespective of us having the NIEA or creating an independent environmental protection agency, we need to be working towards that, and that is work that my officials are engaging in.

**Mr McGuigan:** I want to make just a quick point, Chair. I welcome the ongoing work. That work is important, but so is tying it all together through a climate change Act. You made the point that there are only two years left in this Assembly term, but damage to our environment will not wait for the end of an Assembly term or for elections.

**Mr Poots:** No.

**Mr McGuigan:** That damage is continuing. Are you giving a commitment that there will be a climate change Act in the next two years?

**Mr Poots:** It is our intention to do that, yes, but what I am saying is that the environment is not waiting for the climate change Act either. We should be engaging in actions that reduce our carbon footprint. Irrespective of any legislation or oversight, that is work that needs to be continued, and we will be doing that.

**Mr Dallat:** I thank the Minister for his introduction. I was looking forward to the climate change debate, but it has been moved to next week. Unfortunately, it now coincides with a hospital appointment, so my absence will not be because of a lack of interest.

At the outset, I pay tribute to Dr Denis McMahon, the permanent secretary, who, in the absence of an Assembly, did amazing work on much of the material that we are discussing this morning.

The local government planning committees will have a critical role to play. Many of them are inundated with planning applications for what some people describe as "intensive factory farming units". In the past, such proposals have not been subject to environmental assessment, the habitats regulations and other statutory requirements. What steps does the Minister intend to take to ensure that the good work that he has outlined for his Department does not run contrary to what might be happening in local planning committees on the 11 councils, where we may well be cultivating the development of projects that are raising levels of ammonia and nitrates to well above those that are acceptable?

I say that not as someone who is anti-farm. I am pleased that the Minister has told us that he wants to work with the farming community, and I welcome recent announcements from the Ulster Farmers'

Union that it intends to work with him. To shorten my question: is the Minister concerned that there needs to be a link between his Department and local planners to establish what is best for everybody?

**Mr Poots:** Thank you for that. I wish you well with your ongoing treatment and care.

**Mr Dallat:** Thank you.

**Mr Poots:** I hope that you recover to full health.

One of your colleagues set up a group called the Shared Environmental Service (SES), which is the key point for consultation with local authorities and is independent of our Department. It provides considerable advice. The Department screens applications based on the zones of influence, which are agricultural developments that are within 7.5 km of designated sites — namely, special areas of conservation (SACs), special protection areas (SPAs), areas of special scientific interest (ASSIs) and Ramsar sites — and within 2 km of priority habitats. Where a proposed development has an estimated process contribution of less than 1% of the critical level at which damage occurs to sensitive sites, if it is adjacent to designated sites, it will be screened out as not being significant. However, where critical levels of ammonia at a protected site have been exceeded, additional ammonia emissions of up to 10% of the critical level for the site, from the proposed developments and within contributions, which are 1% or more of the critical level, are permitted.

Therefore, the additional cumulative loading is calculated from a pre-Going for Growth baseline on 1 January 2012, and the discretionary allowance of 10% is based solely on the critical level for the site and is in addition to the existing background exceedance. It should be noted that the current approach does not take account of the significant background exceedances. That is also something that we are reviewing, and we will come back to the Committee when we have completed that review.

Some applications, particularly in the pig sector, are for replacing older buildings. Sometimes the applications will be to increase the numbers on the unit, but they are often to get rid of older buildings. That is not necessarily a bad thing. A lot of the older buildings are not fit for purpose and not good for dealing with ammonia emissions. Where faeces and urine meet creates a lot of ammonia, so early separation of the two would be hugely beneficial in reducing ammonia levels. Storage in capped tanks is also hugely beneficial, and then, of course, the spreading of it with a trailing shoe or dribble bar, as opposed to using the older method, also results in about a 30% reduction. We have known for a number of years that ammonia is a problem, but the technology now exists that reduces the amount of it coming from farms. That is work that we need to encourage farmers to do.

**Mr Dallat:** Much of the effluent that is produced by the digester units is exported to a plant in Donegal, which, I believe, the Assembly partly funded. Given that we are just 24 hours away from leaving the EU, are we guaranteed that that practice will continue?

**Mr Poots:** That would be for chicken-litter waste. Chicken litter has very high ammonia levels. Quite a lot of that is being spread and immediately ploughed in, which needs to happen to reduce the impact of the ammonia.

Ultimately, we need to find a better way of dealing with chicken litter. There was a proposal to incinerate it at Crumlin, but that did not go ahead. There are issues with that. I personally think that there are opportunities for collaboration between other people in waste to work with the chicken industry to identify solutions, because chicken litter has high calorific value when burned to produce energy, and the scrubbers that can be put in chimneys and so on can take out an awful lot of emissions. Probably the most environmentally friendly way of dealing with chicken litter is to do so that way.

I know that it is being used in Donegal, but anaerobic digesters do not particularly like chicken litter. It is very sore on the equipment because of the ammonia. Parts of the equipment need to be replaced often, so it can be expensive.

**Mrs Barton:** Thank you, Minister, for your briefing this morning. You are also very welcome to Fermanagh and South Tyrone when you get the time.

**Mr Poots:** I was there yesterday.

**Mrs Barton:** I know that you were there yesterday. I understand that you were, but I invite you back to meet some farmers.

**Mr Poots:** Absolutely. We had a great day at Balcas.

**Mrs Barton:** Fermanagh and South Tyrone is a border constituency. To follow on from the previous question, given that acceptable levels for ammonia differ on both sides of the border, how much collaboration is there between the Department of Agriculture here and its equivalent in the South when setting up poultry units etc? Is there collaboration?

**Mr Poots:** I will pass that one to my officials.

**Dr Denis McMahon (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** There is collaboration at a range of levels. You will already have got a sense of that from Robert Huey, the Chief Veterinary Officer, who has been in front of the Committee. Robert works very closely with his colleagues in dealing with animal-disease issues and animal-welfare issues.

In the context of all the discussions around trade after Brexit and the various scenarios that have panned out over the past year, we have been working very closely with colleagues in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) to understand what will happen around matters such as the export health certificate (EHC), which at one stage was a big issue. We have a good working relationship, as you would expect, with DAFM on a whole range of issues, including some of the ones that you mentioned. We try to learn as much as we can from each other and from other Administrations, and that tends to be a very useful process, which the Minister is very happy to support, because it is about good practice.

**Mrs Barton:** I take it that they adhere to similar planning regulations when setting up poultry units.

**Dr McMahon:** I am happy to hand over to you, David, if there is anything that you want to add.

**Mr David Small (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** The planning systems are independent of each other, so every element of them will not be totally the same. There are slightly different policies, North and South. However, we have had good discussions and engagement with colleagues in the South, specifically around the ammonia challenges. The ammonia problems that we are facing here are also being addressed in the South. I know that colleagues there are doing what we are doing here, which is looking at solutions, such as those that the Minister has outlined, as to what could be put in place to help the industry reduce its ammonia emissions.

As I said, the two planning systems are independent, but, certainly in Northern Ireland, the planning committees act as competent authorities. When they make planning decisions on any kind of development, including agricultural and intensive agricultural development, they need to take account of all the relevant obligations that we have under EU law, such as EU directives and so on. We do have an advisory role to play as a statutory consultee, and we will offer our comments on whether we believe a development could have an adverse impact on the environment, but it is ultimately for the planning committee, as the competent authority, to make the final decision.

**Mrs Barton:** My main question is to do with the agricultural appeals process. At the moment, a farmer takes his case to appeal, where an independent panel makes a judgement. Very often, that judgement is overturned by the Department. The Department has the final say, and that is very disappointing for the farmer, particularly when a judgement has been given by an independent panel but is then overturned. In other words, what is the point in having an appeals process if its decision is going to be overturned to the original decision?

**Mr Poots:** I hear what you are saying, and it is something that I have been aggrieved about previously. I am happy to look at that. If a panel is given responsibility to look at an issue independently and its decision is then just ignored, that does not inspire much confidence or encourage people to engage in the process. It becomes somewhat meaningless at that point, both for the people who sit on the panel and for the applicant, so I will look at that.

**Mrs Barton:** Thank you.

**Ms Bailey:** Thank you, Minister, for being here. It is good to meet the permanent secretary as well. I know that your time is tight. Given the circumstances of the tragic loss of your son's friend, I thank you again for being here.

I am quite new to the Committee and to the Department's brief, which is huge, and far-reaching, as well as cross-cutting in how it impacts on other Departments. We are almost 24 hours from Brexit, with the, I am sure, huge workload that that will bring. Do you feel that you have the necessary resource available, and also buy-in at Executive level for cross-departmental working, to deal with the amount of change that Brexit will potentially cause for the Department?

**Mr Poots:** You never have enough resource, and I am sure that we could spend twice as much money as we currently do, to be honest.

**Ms Bailey:** Do you have enough human resource?

**Mr Poots:** I will let Denis be the judge of the level of human resource. We will be fighting our corner with other Departments to get what we can, but Health and Education will be the Departments that swallow up so much of the resource. That leaves relatively little for a small Department. We are not a small Department when it comes to responsibility but we are financially. We could do so much more had we considerably greater resource. The challenge will be this: how do we get the maximum from what we have available to spend?

Denis, do you want to talk about the resource in the Department and how satisfied you are with the level of personnel?

**Dr McMahon:** As you say, Minister, there is always room for more. We have 3,100 people in the Department, and we have a very wide range of roles, from high-level strategy through to detailed operational work on the ground. A percentage of that is paid for through direct Brexit funding. For example, last year, it was £12.5 million, with a further £1.4 million for associated expenses, and that figure will grow this year. We are looking at 405 people in specific Brexit posts. That is slightly misleading if we take that number just on its own. For example, those of us from the Department who are here today would not be counted in those numbers, yet I can assure the Committee that, over the past year, we have spent a lot of time on Brexit issues.

Another way of looking at it is that our sister Department in GB, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) — it is a different Department with different functions, so I do not want to take this too far — started out smaller than us, with 2,500 people, and is now moving up to 4,000. That gives you a sense of the scale. That having been said, DEFRA is involved in negotiations at a level that we are not and has other differences, but we inform a lot of those negotiations.

That gives you a sense of the scale of the challenge for us. I pay tribute to colleagues who have worked hard and gone above and beyond the call of duty over the past year, and will no doubt continue to do so. Over and above that, there are issues around making sure that we are getting replacement sources of funding from the UK Government on the back of Brexit.

**Ms Bailey:** The environment falls within the remit of this Department. Given the climate emergency and what we are facing there, what type of departmental budget is set aside to deal with the mitigation measures that we need to implement?

**Dr McMahon:** I will give you an example. The entire senior management team, consisting of 25 people, gets together once a month. We have had two full days on the issue of climate. We are looking at this right across the whole range of our work. For example, our estate transformation group is asking how we can implement good practice, and we have a division that is doing coordination work across Departments. Other people are involved, too. For example, Norman is working on the agri-food policy and how, through that, we make sure that we are mainstreaming environmental sustainability in line with the Minister's desires. All that work — the whole Department's work, in a sense — will be pulled in, because we and the Minister are looking at the climate issue from the point of view of sustainability. It is about using the issue to follow good business practice. It is a win-win situation, not an either/or situation.

**Ms Bailey:** If we get it right.

**Dr McMahon:** If we get it right. Absolutely. There is a huge challenge in that.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** I want to move on. I am conscious that we have only five minutes of your time left, Minister.

**Mr Harvey:** Thank you, Minister. I appreciate your attendance today. I have a question on bovine tuberculosis. What is the rate of infection in Northern Ireland compared with that in other jurisdictions? In my area, there are hotspots, and total wipeouts have occurred.

**Mr Poots:** It is just short of 8%. In Ireland and most of GB, it is around 4%. I think that in Scotland it is down to less than 3%. Our rate of infection is way above that of any other region. The research has been done, and the science exists. Northern Ireland has a higher population of badgers than any other parts. In a number of areas, unfortunately, that badger population has become heavily infected with tuberculosis. That is not the case for all badgers. Therefore, I am opposed to a wholesale cull of badgers across Northern Ireland. We will have to look at where the hotspots are and at where the veterinary science indicates that tuberculosis was derived from badgers. To spend hundreds of thousands of pounds clearing out a significant herd of cattle, keeping a farm dormant for a period and then moving the cattle back in without doing anything about where the tuberculosis arrived from in the first instance is a nonsense that we have been engaging in for a long time. Consequently, we will need to do something.

We have badgers at home, and I have no issues with them whatsoever, because I do not believe that my cattle have ever contracted tuberculosis from them. Focus must be placed on what is to be done. Culling the badger population where hotspots exist and then vaccinating on the perimeter of those hotspots will help us have a much healthier wildlife population and, indeed, a much healthier bovine population. Not to do anything is a huge waste of public money. It is causing mental stress for many people who run farms, because they have built up bloodlines, and they have bills to pay and business issues. It is all right them getting compensated for their cows, but if they are not earning money for six months and are maybe sitting with a six- or seven-figure debt to service, that is a desperately difficult place in which to be. It is causing incredible mental stress in the community, so we need to do better than is currently the case.

**Mr Harvey:** I am glad to hear that the issue is being addressed in what seems to be a sensible, calculated manner, because the big worry is the severe mental health issues and depression experienced by those involved. Thank you, Minister.

**Mr M Bradley:** I welcome the Minister and congratulate him on his appointment. Thanks for taking the time to be here. One of your pet projects is the forest expansion policy. Your briefing paper states that the aim is:

*"to increase afforestation from 8% to 12%"*

through a 30-year programme. Is that a high enough target?

**Mr Poots:** No. It is not. I am going to create a higher target. That was a Civil Service target. I have a higher target in mind.

**Mr M Bradley:** Good.

**Mr Poots:** Therefore, the answer is no. It is not enough.

**Mr M Bradley:** Is there any opportunity to work with other Departments to increase tree planting?

**Mr Poots:** Absolutely.

**Mr M Bradley:** I will give you an example. I drove up here this morning, as did others, on a motorway that is bereft of trees. In Germany, all the motorways are lined with broadleaved trees. Factories, schools and industrial areas are all screened with broadleaved trees. That does not happen here.

**Mr Poots:** We are writing to all the Departments asking them to contact their arm's-length bodies about the provision of land. DAERA and its landholdings form a very large estate, but to go out and

buy land on which to plant trees is excessively costly. The cost has been holding us back. We therefore need to utilise better the land that is currently available. There are health trusts with large volumes of land. Other groups in the public sector, such as local authorities and sectors in education, own land. We want to utilise that land for afforestation. We also want to encourage private landowners to plant trees.

I also want to look again at riparian borders. For example, farmers are not supposed to spread nutrient-rich slurry close to rivers. Why not take the opportunity of planting trees along part of it where you are going to be guaranteed that there are no nutrients getting into the rivers? So you can plant trees, which helps in two ways because, at that stage, you are also ensuring that you have a cleaner water system. Trees are huge absorbers of water as well, so riverside locations are very good for that.

**Mr M Bradley:** Thank you, Minister. I look forward to your new targets.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Do you have time, Minister, for a quick one from your colleague?

**Mr Poots:** I could not not answer Mr Irwin.

**Mr Irwin:** Thank you, Minister, for attending the Committee. We all realise that ammonia levels in Northern Ireland are high. We realise that, if that is not dealt with, it could be detrimental to the future expansion, and the future, of the industry. There are new technologies that can deal with this. I think those technologies are very important. Is the Minister looking at those technologies? I am sure he is, but it is also very important that support is given. Some of these technologies are quite expensive. It is important that support is given to the industry to deal with this. It is possible to deal with it, and it is important that no time is wasted in moving forward on the issue. I just want an assurance from the Minister that this will happen.

**Mr Poots:** Absolutely. We are looking at those technologies, and we know that we should be offering incentivisation. Obviously, again, that depends on how much money we have, but we should offer incentivisation so that we can hasten and accelerate the impact that we have. We can set up rules and so forth, but that will be a very slow process because anybody who has already got an existing facility will not be incentivised to do much; it will only be those who are building afresh. So we need to create incentives for that.

It has got criticism for obvious reasons, but the renewable heat initiative was actually good for ammonia. The chicken farms that were using the renewable heat initiative had much drier heat, and there was less ammonia in those facilities than where gas heat was used. Consequently, progress had been made on that. That has been rolled back because of the decision that was taken by DFE officials last year to reduce the payment from what had been set by the Assembly. It was less than the payment that is made in England or Ireland, but they reduced it further. As a consequence, many people have moved away from using wood boilers and reverted back to gas. That has been a detrimental step for the environment. We need to look at how we can ensure that, if we start to make progress on these things, we drive it forward and do not have to go backwards.

**Mr Irwin:** Without holding the Minister back, on TB — I declare an interest because we have an issue with TB in my son's herd at home — I am aware that, just recently, some new test has been identified in England that is seemingly very positive in taking out all the reactors. Minister, are you prepared to look at new technologies or new tests? The test that we have today is not perfect and, of course, takes out only something like 75% of reactors. The difficulty is that it has been the same test, or a similar test, for 50, 60, 70 years. One would have thought that, in this day and age, there should be new technology and new tests coming forward to deal with the issue. I was told just the other night that there is a new test.

**Mr Poots:** We will be very happy to look at that. There is latency in terms of TB residing in an animal that is not picked up in a test and is then picked up in future. I have had personal experience of buying animals from a farm that had TB and was cleared of TB, and consequently those animals presented with TB at a later point. It has nothing whatsoever to do with the wildlife population. There is no point in seeking to tackle this problem in one way. If we are going to tackle TB, we need to do it in a series of ways.

There are a very small number of farmers who are engaging in fraud when it comes to this. I believe that we need to be much tougher on these individuals, and I would prefer they were actually not farming, as what they are doing is grossly wrong. We will be looking at the area of fraud. The testing

regime is obviously something which has not changed much over the years. I want to know if there are better systems for identifying TB and if we can implement them. The answer to your question is yes.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** I thank the Minister for his contribution this morning, for his widespread briefing and for opening himself up to questions. I ask at this stage that we take a break for a few moments to deal with a technical issue with the microphones, but the officials should not leave the Building, as we want to discuss some other issues later.

**Mr Poots:** I want to express my appreciation for the opportunity to come before the Committee. As soon as you are ready, give us a shout and we will make ourselves available.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Thank you.

*The Committee suspended at 10.56 am and resumed at 11.04 am.*

*On resuming —*

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Following the briefing from the Minister, who has now headed on, we have the permanent secretary and officials from the Department with us. We appreciate the wide-ranging briefing the Minister has given to us today. No doubt there will be a number of issues which some of you may want to pick up on and drill down into a little bit more of the detail. Does anyone want to indicate interest in following up on issues or even raise new issues?

To get the ball rolling from my point of view, I want to pick up on the future agriculture policy again. Can you explain how we are going to proceed with this? Are we going to look at primary legislation, or are we going to look at the schedule within the Agriculture Bill at Westminster? Where does last year's comprehensive stakeholder engagement fit in with this new policy?

**Dr McMahon:** I will make a few general points, and then Norman can talk through the detail of it. One of the things I have learned in the last two years is how joined-up everything is. You will have seen that the paper that was put out for consultation had four key areas or themes running through it. If I forget any, Norman can remind me, but they are: productivity, environmental sustainability, supply chain integration and resilience.

The key point is that when you start to look at any one of those issues, it fits into one of the others. For example, we are looking at how to do an integrated environmental model to see what the impacts are in terms of carbon and ammonia, but also productivity. For example, TB is not just bad for business, although it is very bad for business; it is also a waste of resource and, therefore, increases carbon emissions. This is an example of how all-encompassing all of this is. Therefore, going back to your original question, this is going to read out through a piece of work that now needs to be done on the back of the very extensive consultation, and further legislation in the future. This is not something that will happen in one or two years: there is going to be a development approach over the next number of years.

Norman, if I have got anything wrong, please feel free to correct me and add to that.

**Mr Norman Fulton (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** The work we did with stakeholders was effectively a co-designed process around a future agricultural policy framework. It was a very high-level document, but it was well received. We had about 1,200 responses to the consultation. It is something we can now take to the Minister to show what stakeholders thought of the framework and how we will proceed from this point. Agriculture, like environment, fisheries etc, is now a fully devolved matters. The policy comes straight back from Brussels to here. We now have that responsibility and opportunity to set our own agenda for the future.

On how to proceed, the Agriculture Bill going through Westminster contains a Northern Ireland schedule and that will allow us do a little bit to roll forward what we have and simplify it a bit. We will certainly look at it, but anything more fundamental will mean looking at what sort of adjustment to primary legislation we will need to take through the Assembly. To inform that, we need to set the big direction — where are we heading and what are the big fundamental principles that we want to drive forward? That whole integration between productivity, resilience and environmental sustainability — what are the tools that we need to actually deliver that agenda? We will be doing work around all of that.

Stakeholder engagement will have to be a big part of this, because it is so fundamental to the future of the industry, but also the environment. Basically, we need to bring all the interested parties together to shape the agenda. Certainly, I think we can do that. We have achieved a good start with the framework document, but it is really about taking it on from there.

Of course, this is not a "once and done" exercise: this is a journey. It is an evolution, because we now have this policy. We can take it forward, refine it, develop it and evolve it. This is not just something for the next year or two. This is with us permanently, and, therefore, we have the opportunity to learn, to refine and to respond to changing circumstances and demands. That will be our responsibility and our opportunity to do that, because there is a fully devolved *[Inaudible.]*

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** I want to ask one more question, Norman. Obviously, regrettably, we are leaving the EU tomorrow. Whilst we are leaving the EU, we will remain aligned across a whole series of regulations as per the withdrawal agreement. What will happen in situations down the line when that might come into conflict with the Agriculture Bill?

**Mr Fulton:** I do not think that it will create any issues with the Agriculture Bill, because, effectively, it is really around the support framework. The Agriculture Bill is primarily an English Bill. We have taken a schedule in it to enable us, basically, to roll forward and simplify what we have, so it does not really create any conflict there. Of course, we are operating in a competitive environment with Ireland. We also sell into GB; it is our main market. Therefore, we sit at that point where we really have to understand where our industry sits in competitive terms against those other areas and ensure that what we do does not actually conflict or create distortions. That could happen. We need to be very alive to that to ensure that we place our industry in the best place it can be to actually compete on a level playing field. Part of that will be through the agricultural support framework that we put in place, but it will not be the only important element. Yes. I suppose it just increases the extent of the challenge that we have.

**Mr McGuigan:** I have just a couple of wee questions on two different issues. One is rural broadband. I understand that it is primarily the role of the Department for the Economy, but there are 97,000 rural dwellers who currently do not have adequate broadband. I often describe broadband now as an essential utility in the way that water, heating and electricity are, for a raft of reasons: children need broadband to do their homework; families need broadband to keep in contact with people; and rural dwellers, in particular, need good broadband for access to services, whether they be medical or agricultural services. The majority of forms in the agriculture sector are now filled in online. It is a major issue. I suppose my point is that the Department is putting additional funding towards that project. Are you able to use influence? When do you actually plan to see that work beginning and the 97,000 rural dwellers having the adequate broadband that they should have?

Then, just quickly, is there any update on the environmental farming scheme? Will the delay have any impact on funding for farmers with regard to time constraints or retrospective funding etc?

**Dr McMahon:** I will talk a little about Project Stratum, and then maybe David can come in on the environmental farming scheme.

Everything you have said is absolutely right. Rural broadband is absolutely essential. If you think about it, just as the Minister said earlier, of course it is central to the farming community. It is also central to the wider rural community. It is about connectivity and access. We are contributing £15 million to that at present. Do we have an influence? Of course we have an influence in that sense, but, at the minute, there is a procurement process going through, so there is a limit to what can be said about that. That just has to take its course.

What are we aiming for? We are aiming to get as much support for rural communities as we can in order to remove and reduce social isolation as far as possible. We have actually shown that in areas where people thought it was impossible. For example, 100% of applications for single farm payments were made online. That is an incredible change, which nobody thought would have been possible. It is not always easy, but it is an example of what can be done. Our performance in that is above other parts of the UK.

So, I suppose, basically just to finish off and reinforce your point, we are really keen to see this happen. There are great examples elsewhere of where this can actually be transformative. Skibbereen is doing this with a 1 gigabyte village, where they have really used that as an opportunity to develop a whole new approach to technology and business. We want to do that through it, so we want it to work.

I know that there is always a challenge about how you balance the need to get as many people connected as soon as possible with the fact that there are certain connections that will just be that bit harder. That is going to be a discussion to be had, but our aim is to get full coverage as far as we can.

**Mr Small:** On the environmental farm scheme, you know that we had paused the launch of tranche 3 and the issue of agreements. That was to ensure that the experience that we had seen through tranche 1 and tranche 2 in the uptake of the various options under the scheme was sufficient for us to ensure that we were spending money wisely, and that we were securing the value for money and benefits that we had originally intended to get from the scheme.

The work to review the scheme has been progressing well, and we have reached a point now where we will be putting a set of clear options to the Minister as to how we proceed with tranche 3. I do not really want to get into the detail of the nature of those options because we have not had the opportunity to discuss them yet with the Minister, but they are going to the Minister. I hope that we will be in a position to confirm how we proceed on tranche 3 very soon. I cannot give a timetable for that, but good progress has been made.

**Mr McGuigan:** Thank you.

**Mrs Barton:** My question is on the budget, looking forward to 2020-21. What will your main spending priorities be in the incoming budget?

**Dr McMahon:** I will start off, and my colleagues can come in on the back of it. The main thing that we spend money on is people. For our core resource, there is European funding and then there will be whatever UK funding comes along with that. Looking ahead, if you take a look at the sort of bids that we are making at the minute, some of that is to replace the CAP payments, so we are talking about £339 million there. I will just get the exact figures in front of me. Then, obviously, resources for people, including £18.8 million of Brexit staffing resources. Again, these are pressures, so they have not been met as yet. We are looking at strategic environmental programmes. We have some significant resource spending there, around £3 million, that we —.

**Mrs Barton:** Sorry, how much in environmental?

**Dr McMahon:** In strategic environmental programmes. These are additional environmental programmes. Again, David can talk about them in more detail, but the idea is to get more environmental improvements. Those are the main priorities.

Apart from people, a big pressure on our regular standing budget, as the Minister has said, is the £40 million for TB. A lot of that, about £25 million, is for compensation. That has actually reduced a bit this year. Our projections for this year have gone down a bit. We are wary about saying that that is all good news because, as you know, diseases operate in cycles. I am sure that Robert will have talked about that in more detail, but there is some indication that the stricter testing that they have been doing has made some impact, albeit it has not addressed the problem, but that has led to a small reduction. Well, in relative terms, £4 million is really important, but that has led to a reduction in some of the costs that were predicted this year.

**Mrs Barton:** In capital expenditure, what sort of main, headline projects will the Department be taking on?

**Dr McMahon:** Some of the stuff we talked about under LEADER; some of the capital work around that. There is around £16.8 million of bids there at this point. There is a waste recycling programme; about £8 million or £8.5 million for that. Digital transformation, as we were talking about earlier, is again a major element; about £14 million. I am sure that you have got these, but we can send up additional detail as you want. Estate development is important, and particularly we are looking at options around our estate because it is not just used by us. Obviously, the Minister will be looking at options around our Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute estate. Then you are into research and development, where you have big chunks of capital. Again, the aim there is improving productivity and environmental sustainability. We can pick up on any of those if you want more detail on them.

**Mrs Barton:** I presume that you will be coming to the Committee to present your budget at some stage?

**Dr McMahon:** Yes. Sorry, I am out of practice. We will be very happy to do that, certainly.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** I was going to suggest the same thing.

**Dr McMahon:** Sorry —.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** *[Inaudible]* waiting on a Budget Bill. Is that OK with you?

**Dr McMahon:** Absolutely, We will be very happy to come back and do that. Just give me a second and allow me to get back into the routine.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** OK.

**Mrs Barton:** Thanks.

**Mr Harvey:** On staff numbers and estates, with the EU exit, how many of your 2,900 staff are in new positions?

**Mr Fulton:** We would need to come back to you with the latest figures for those who are in post. It is 200-ish. Is it? It has been a challenge for us to achieve a net gain in the Department.

**Dr McMahon:** It is 289 staff for Brexit, but part of the problem is defining what Brexit means. We have had general pressures, so we have added —. I think that we have a net increase of about 140. To be honest with you, the challenge for us has not just been resources but in getting people in. I should say that, as a Department, we are not bad that way. If you take a look at the people survey — there is a new one due to come out — we have been improving significantly in engaging with our people. That is the right thing to do and important so that we prepare ourselves for all the changes that are coming up. We have put a lot of emphasis on that. It means that we have increased only by 150, in net terms, over our original headcount, but that reflects the fact that people are leaving. Ironically, that is a good thing in one way. We lose quite a few people in the professional roles because they are in great demand in the private sector, but it presents a challenge for us.

**Mr Harvey:** I am satisfied with that. Thank you.

**Mr Irwin:** In relation to the environmental farming scheme, I see that the Department has not yet fulfilled all the original conditions of the outline business case. I think that David said that you should have that completed by now. Is that —?

**Mr Small:** Yes. Quite a few obligations and commitments were written into the business case approval. We delivered on most of those, but there were one or two that we were slow to deliver. One of those was about how we monitored and evaluated what the scheme delivered, so we were required to develop a monitoring and evaluation framework and were slow to deliver that.

I suppose that if there was concern or a need to look carefully at what the scheme was doing, it was more around the option uptake that farmers were selecting in tranches 1 and 2. We found that one or two options appeared to be very, very popular, potentially at the expense of other options that would also deliver wider environmental benefits. We thought that it was right and appropriate to take time to look at that in more detail to see why that was happening and what the consequences were for the benefits that we were trying to get out of the scheme. That is what triggered the need to look a bit more carefully, William, at the tranche 3 applications.

We have since done all the work required around the monitoring and evaluation and have a strong framework in place. That will involve commissioning dedicated research to allow us, in four or five years' time, at the end of an agreement period, identify what has changed, what the benefits have been and the relative value for money. That was important work. We have done that, and that allows us to set down the options for proceeding with tranche 3, which, as I said, are going to the Minister now.

**Mr Irwin:** It is important. Several contractors contacted me, some months ago, about the fencing scheme and they were unsure about whether they should purchase posts, which, as you will be aware, were very difficult to get last year. It has left them at a loose end. Some people ordered a large

number of posts and are unsure whether they should go ahead with it, as they do not know what is happening with the scheme. It is important that, whatever decision is made, it is made very soon.

**Mr Small:** Yes. I agree.

**Mr Irwin:** I spoke to a scheme manager before Christmas and was assured that the Department would be in a position to make a decision by mid-January. We are now at the end of January.

**Mr Small:** We were always aiming for as soon as possible in the new year. It has possibly taken an extra week or two, but we are at a point now where we are clear on how we feel we ought to proceed, subject to the Minister agreeing to the options we have presented. I agree with your point: the sooner the decision is out, the better.

**Mr Irwin:** It is vital that that decision is clarified and made known.

**Mr Small:** Yes. I understand totally.

**Dr McMahon:** I could not agree more, and I totally accept that point. It is not exactly where we want to be. What I will say is that it has been a very helpful process in one sense, because we have really drilled down into how to assess environmental benefits. There is a huge challenge in the middle of that. We will need to think about that in our policy programme going forward. I will give you an example. We know that phosphate going into rivers is very damaging and that schemes that can help to reduce it will have a value. The challenge is converting that value into financial terms. Again, it is not something here. One of the things that really worries me about that is when people say things like, "Well, you know, you can look at the potential tourism benefits of a clean environment". Yes, that is absolutely the case, but it is only a fraction of it. How do you put a value on pollinators, for example? Potentially, we — I am talking generally about the economic cases that we make — need to find a better way of valuing those, and this has driven us to do that. I would not want to give the impression that people have been just sitting around thinking about it. There has actually been a really rigorous process here.

**Mr Irwin:** I understand that, although you could be improving the environment, making that case and proving the point financially is more difficult. I understand that, but I think —.

**Dr McMahon:** It needs to be done, and it needs to be done quickly. I accept that.

**Mr Irwin:** It is vital. It is just not acceptable that people are hanging on and do not know what is happening.

**Mr Small:** I think that the Minister will appreciate that as well, William.

**Mr Dallat:** Since the last time that I remember the Assembly having a discussion of this nature, things have certainly moved on in a big way. We have not mentioned flatulent cows at all. That created all sorts of laughs and giggles in the past. What I have heard this morning has been extremely encouraging. I think that a lot of it has been promoted and motivated by Denis in the time when we were not meeting.

Members are aware that there is an increasing demand for an independent environment agency. While I acknowledge that you have carefully kept the two issues very separate, I just wonder whether the current situation is adequate to deliver. I think that it was the American civil rights leader Martin Luther King who said that, if you are not in charge of production, well, then, you really do not influence anything. The Assembly, in the past, has been very poor at bringing forward legislation. Has Denis anything in mind that might feast this Committee on how to ensure that we actually deliver?

Previously, when I asked the Minister about the relationship between your Department and local councils, I believe that it was suggested that some committee might look at it. That is not adequate, and you know that it has not delivered. It has left our planning departments in a terrible state, because they do not really know what do. Sometimes, elected representatives are in a quandary, too, because there is an encouragement to promote the creation of jobs and so on but, at the same time, there is the issue about fundamentally destroying the environment. In the few minutes that we have, I just ask for your views on what I have said.

**Dr McMahon:** There is a lot in that. First, on the Office of Environmental Protection and the environment agency proposal as set out in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, there are two specific sets of functions. First, the Office of Environmental Protection will take over the EU functions. I know that you understand that, Mr Dallat, but I am just checking that colleagues do. The other piece, then, is the environment agency, which is part of David's group at the minute. All those functions need to be looked at, and we will need to give the Minister options around that. We are just working those up at the minute. That is the first thing.

The Minister touched on the ammonia issue earlier. David is doing a review of that, and the recommendations are due to come to the Minister but, before anything will happen on that front, we will need to go to consultation, we think. That is our thinking at the minute. Is that OK?

**Mr M Bradley:** I have a question on waste management. It is about plastic. I believe that 80% of our beach litter is plastic and, of all the plastic in the oceans and the seas, only 7% is at the top; the rest is all down through various layers. What are the Department's plans to reduce that, especially plastic packaging, which is the main culprit? What is the plan to reduce the use of plastic?

**Mr Small:** We have begun to think about that. We do not have a clear set of plans at the moment or a clear set of interventions to propose, but we are at the point of considering the issue in a bit more detail than we have done in the past. You are aware of the carrier bag levy that is already in place. We will continue to review the appropriateness of that, but that has had a big impact on taking plastic bags out of the environment. I think that over one billion plastic bags have been removed since we introduced the levy. However, there are other elements of plastic that we need to consider, and I take the point totally.

We have been working with other regions across the UK on a plastic bottle return scheme, where we have reserved options on that. We recognise that we need to look in more detail at what the other interventions and measures might be, but we are at the start of that process. It was mentioned in New Decade, New Approach as a specific area of attention, so we will be looking at that in more detail alongside a range of other issues, particularly around the climate change challenge. We will be looking at plastics and single-use plastics in more detail.

**Mr M Bradley:** How do we get rid of plastic? Do we send it to foreign countries that then dump it in lorries and tip it into the sea? Is there any tangible way that we can say, "That is how it is being dealt with" right across until it is actually dealt with, as opposed to sending it away somewhere for it to be dumped into the sea?

**Mr Small:** I cannot give you an exact answer on the absolute end point in that process, but we have been working very hard on recycling. Plastic is one of the elements that goes into your recycling bin, and we have achieved a pretty good level of household waste recycling at 50%, but I will need to come back to the Committee on how we track that plastic through the whole process to the end point.

**Dr McMahon:** It is a really good question, because I suspect that a lot of the recyclates go out of the country to be managed, as you have picked up on, and I would be interested to see that. I note, for example, with paper recycling, there are certain companies that use that locally, and that is great. I am not so sure about plastic, so it is probably worth us following up on that.

**Mr M Bradley:** You can maybe come back on that.

**Mr Small:** If the Chair is happy, I will come back in writing on that point.

**Ms Bailey:** It is great to hear that you are becoming a wee bit more aware of the cross-cutting nature and the fundamental integrated nature of all of this. While it is good to hear, it actually depresses me a wee bit as well that these conversations are just beginning, because it should be the heart of all future planning. I feel that the Environment Agency should have been leading on this. I have taken note of the level of new thinking that it is coming to the table and that we are starting to look at strategies through that type of lens.

I will go back and apply that to a few of the examples that the Minister gave while he was here, particularly when he said that we are doing well on our carbon reduction. While that is grand and true, UK-wide, it is not the same with our gas production. Our greenhouse gases, for example, are not on that level, and our ammonia levels are absolutely shocking on a UK level. There is a disparity in what

we are trying to put ourselves out to do. With the electric car model, the thinking, at that strategic level, is still predicated on individual ownership rather than a massive investment in public transport and how we manage to move around our spaces. We cannot rely on all those things.

Applying that to our agri-food and farming as well, the Minister is telling us, for example, that TB is making it hard for us to sell our beef to China, yet our farmers are suffering a 25% reduction and our supermarkets are importing from other countries while our own system is failing to flourish. There are all those levels that show how this is not working together, and we are only beginning to look at this now. I do have concerns about the Office for Environmental Protection, and I completely get what you are saying about its remit. Where is the thinking in the Department on seriously establishing an independent environment agency and on the level of strategic responsibility that you guys have on this centralised notion that at the heart of everything should be environmental protections and mitigations? From there, everything else flows.

**Dr McMahon:** There is a lot in that. We have been very open, and the first-day brief that you have is exactly the first-day brief that the Minister got, even including the remarks to the Minister. We deliberately did it that way, so you have in black and white where we are. That does not paint a great picture on all our environmental indicators, and we would be the first to be open about that; there is more that we can do. Some issues, such as independent environmental agencies, are big political issues that require political leadership and politicians to take decisions on them, notwithstanding that we can feed into that and that we, quite correctly, will do so. I very much take your point, and, obviously, we have not been able to take decisions like that.

One thing I will say that will hopefully give a bit of positivity to all of this is that what I think is different and where we are getting to is that we have had lot of talk about, for example, greenhouse gases, and a lot of the conversation around greenhouse gases almost feels like, "We know that there is something going really badly wrong. We know what it looks like at a high level but we do not know exactly how to fix it when it comes down to individual levels". We know some of the general statements. We can make general statements about combustion engines and about different types of energy production and so on, but we are now trying to really hone that down. For example, 27% of our greenhouse gas emissions are due to farming, so now we are starting to get to the point of saying, "It is not enough to say that there is a big problem and that we need to do something about it. We need to be able to have conversations with people to say what a hedge is worth in carbon and what it is worth in biodiversity through the wildlife corridor that you create". We need to be able to say how we can give that a value and how we can feed that into a new policy.

To be fair, things are changing, many of which are challenging in their own right, but they have spurred us into saying things. For example, a lot of the policy around CAP payments was fixed, and, as Norman said earlier, we are now going to be looking at that as part of how we move forward. As we do that, that gives us new levers to be able to take some of the things to the next level. I suppose it is about really narrowing it down to the day that we can have a conversation with a farmer to say, "Here is how much carbon is on your farm. We are getting there, and here is how we can help you to do something better, and, by the way, here is how we can make sure that the supermarkets recognise that". Even in the past three years, there has been a huge change, as you know, in the population's views about this. That level of awareness is fantastic.

We are not at all hiding the fact that we have very serious issues to deal with. To be fair, I remember working on recycling in 2009, in a previous life, and people saying that we would never get beyond 30% recycling, so we have made some progress, but we definitely have a lot more to do.

**Mr Fulton:** In all of this, we need a much more sophisticated analysis than we have, because sometimes you could move to try to solve a problem but find that you have not solved it but have shifted it somewhere else.

**Ms Bailey:** Plastic waste, for example.

**Mr Fulton:** That is a good example.

**Ms Bailey:** There is a conversation to be had about reducing and having less production.

**Mr Fulton:** Our carbon footprint as consumers is very different from our carbon footprint as producers, in terms of where that carbon actually emerges. Therefore, we need to have a much more sophisticated analysis and discussion and understanding and policy-making process to think our way

through all those issues. That is why we need to take a bit of time to understand the science and to invest in the science, so that what we do is the right thing rather than take the obvious step that may turn out to be the wrong step. We have to work our way through this very carefully.

**Mr Small:** Nevertheless, Clare, I do understand your frustration. The single-use plastic issue did become a much bigger issue last year. We may have been slow to respond on the plastics issue, but I can assure you that in the light of what has happened over the past year or two, we are responding.

I mentioned the deposit return scheme. We were part of the UK-wide consultation, ensuring that we kept our options open on that. We are part of the UK-wide consultation on producer responsibility, which is specifically around responsibility for packaging.

We have not made as much progress on greenhouse gas reductions as we would like — 18% reduction since the base year — as you know. The interventions put in place to achieve that, like the efforts around renewable energy, have delivered as much as they can, so we are now working closely with other Departments on the next steps and interventions that will take Northern Ireland where it needs to be in contributing to the UK net zero target by 2050 on carbon.

Look, we have not been resting on our laurels. We have done very well on household waste recycling as a result of a clear effort. I recognise the point you are making, and we need to keep working on a range of initiatives that will move us into a better place.

**Dr McMahon:** Just to show that we are not being defensive, there are issues around water quality as well, and we have been very open about that. We just need to do something about that. There is no question about it. The question is how.

**Ms Bailey:** And air quality. There is so much.

**Dr McMahon:** Yes. Again, we have been open about that in the first-day brief. That is where we are. It is great now that we have restoration. That gives us a real opportunity to make more progress.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** When is the Environment Bill expected to be introduced at Westminster?

**Mr Small:** It is being introduced at noon today, as I understand it, so just about to happen.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Will we have an LCM process here and the opportunity to scrutinise?

**Mr Small:** Yes. The timetable that DEFRA is placing around the Bill is going to create difficulties for us in the speed at which it is likely to move. I understand that the Bill will be introduced at noon today. The Minister mentioned the requirements for legislative consent motions, so there will be a requirement on the Environment Bill. If possible, I would like to come and brief the Committee within the next week or two — that time frame is dictated by the DEFRA timetable around the legislative consent motion — and get into a bit more detail on the provisions in the Bill where we have retained options for the Assembly and then talk the Committee through the likely next stages in the legislative consent motion, which will involve letters from the Minister to the Executive and debate in the Assembly.

The timetable for the Environment Bill is compressed, so all of this is going to happen probably within the next six to eight weeks.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Why is the timetable so compressed?

**Mr Small:** I do not know. We have been engaging with DEFRA for months as the Environment Bill and its provisions were drafted. We were ensuring, where we could, that we retained options for Northern Ireland and for the returning Assembly. After the general election, DEFRA articulated its intended deadlines for the Environment Bill, the Agriculture Bill and the Fisheries Bill. It is a very compressed timetable.

**Dr McMahon:** I suppose the main issue is that it has been going on for some time over the past year. What we have tried to do, as David said, at every step of the way —. We took a view early on that we could have —. This was one of those difficult decisions. In one sense, the safest option, as officials,

would be to say, "Well, actually, we can't even get involved", but we wanted to make sure that we had the options open for Ministers returning, and that is what we have tried to do.

Maybe in some people's minds, it might not go as far as we want, and for others, there are some things that we should have signed up to already. We have tried to strike an appropriate balance in governance, to say, "Let's make sure that Ministers and the Assembly coming back can exercise as many of the options as possible that they wish". That does not preclude further legislation coming forward if the Bill does not meet the Assembly's needs.

**Mr McGuigan:** I support David's suggestion that he comes back to brief us at the earliest possible stage with as much information as possible.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** The Committee Clerk will liaise with David.

Folks, this has been a wide-ranging discussion with the ministerial briefing and yourselves, Denis, David and Norman, to flesh it out and answer our questions. We are appreciative of that. A huge amount has been covered, and this will be followed up with specific individual briefings. Thank you very much for coming before the Committee, and no doubt we will be seeing you in the near future.