



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19
Response

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Ministerial Statement:
Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

7 April 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Christopher Stalford (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Ms Kellie Armstrong
Ms Clare Bailey
Mrs Rosemary Barton
Mr John Blair
Mr Keith Buchanan
Mr Robbie Butler
Mr Gerry Carroll
Mr Pat Catney
Mr Gordon Dunne
Mr Colm Gildernew
Mr Paul Givan
Mr Harry Harvey
Mr William Irwin
Mr Declan McAleer
Mr Philip McGuigan
Mr Mike Nesbitt
Mr John O'Dowd
Mr Matthew O'Toole
Mr Edwin Poots

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): The Speaker received notification on 6 April that the Minister wished to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee at today's meeting. A copy of the statement that the Minister intends to make is included in the tabled pack.

I welcome the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to this meeting of the Committee. I also welcome Mr Norman Fulton, an official from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, who is accompanying the Minister today. I invite them to make their statement from the lecterns. As this is a ministerial statement, the Minister should be heard without interruption. Following the statement, there will be an opportunity for members to ask questions.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thank you for the opportunity to provide members with an update on the arrangements that are being made in the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs as we support the people of Northern Ireland in these challenging and worrying times.

The coronavirus pandemic is one of the most significant challenges that many of us have experienced in our lifetime, not only in the impact on the health of our people but because we face unprecedented

economic and societal changes and challenges. If there is one message that I want to reinforce, it is that we are all in this together, working on the basis of the most up-to-date advice from the UK Government, our medical professionals and our scientists. If we have one lesson to learn from this crisis, it is that working together is not an option; it is a requirement.

When we face a crisis of this scale, it reminds us of our humanity and our frailty and of the generosity of people who sacrifice everything for their friends, their colleagues and even for people they have never met. We owe everything to those people and the hundreds of thousands of heroes who work tirelessly to put food on our tables, ensure that we have clean water, manage our waste and improve public health. We owe it to them to plan, deliver and learn together. I can only assure you that it is my aim, and that of my colleagues in the Northern Ireland Executive, even though we may not agree on every issue, that we support our front-line workers.

In particular, I want to pay tribute to our farming community, which is working day and night on dairy, beef, pig, poultry, sheep and arable farms, producing high-quality produce that ends up on our plates. They are dedicated, hard-working and resilient people and their contribution to the food chain has never been clearer. They, too, face the same worries and fears as the rest of us, and they have adjusted how they work in order to keep food moving during these extremely challenging times. They have our thanks and our full support.

DAERA is committed to ensuring that every effort is made to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic. Our priorities are to keep product moving, to ensure financial support to farmers, to protect the health and well-being of our staff, customers and the general public and to ensure that our essential services are carried out safely to help everyone through this difficult time. DAERA, its agencies and non-departmental public bodies continue to work through this challenging period. We support those who provide our food, remove our waste and support our rural communities. We are refining our emergency response plans and building resilience, both during the crisis and for the aftermath of the pandemic, as we navigate our way through a very different world. Despite all the challenges, we have provided this support in real time and in real collaboration with our stakeholders. For example, we have been teleconferencing with colleagues across industry two or three times a week, since the beginning of the crisis, and now meet with local government colleagues twice a week.

I have also attended regular emergency planning meetings of the UK Government and have had been in regular communication with other environment and agriculture Ministers, across the United Kingdom and in the Republic of Ireland. In particular, I have had several constructive conversations with the UK Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

We have always worked in an agile way, with more than 3,000 people located across 70 sites. At the end of 2019, we made some 1,500 video-conferencing calls, saving expenses and carbon. However, we have taken that to a new level in the pandemic, as we continue to find new and pragmatic ways of working and change how we interact with the public. Our priority is the safety of the people who work for the Department, work alongside the Department and who rely on the work of the Department. In so doing, we have had an opportunity to try out new technologies. We have learned a lot about how people can organise themselves rapidly, using those technologies. For the future, we will use those agile approaches to provide new and better services.

At this point, I take the opportunity to thank all the DAERA staff for their efforts in this challenging time, and commend them on their hard work and determination. I am proud of the part that my Department has played to date in working with others. For example, the technical capacity and expertise of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) is being used to scale up Northern Ireland's Covid-19 testing programme. AFBI, which is one of my Department's NDPBs, together with Queen's and Ulster University, will undertake testing at its laboratories. The programme of testing, which is scheduled to commence soon for an initial period of 12 weeks, has the capacity for 1,000 tests per day to be conducted.

Until a few weeks ago, "social distancing" was a term not widely used, but it is now. In our sphere of influence, the challenges range from food processing to fishing vessels, from poultry to pork, and from water quality to waste collection. I am pleased that officials have been working closely with industry, the Food Standards Agency, the Health and Safety Executive and other public-sector agencies, to find ways to make it work for everyone, employees, customers and employers. We can and will continue to protect our people by ensuring that they follow public health guidance.

Maintaining our food supply is central to everyone's well-being. We feed up to 10 million people through our local agri-food industry, so protecting the food supply chain is vital. DAERA is firmly

focused on doing everything that it can to protect this integrity and allow produce to move off-farm and through it. We have prioritised essential services and staff to ensure the continued flow of food and feed.

Veterinary teams are continuing to deliver essential food-safety official controls, providing veterinary certification for the export of meat and dairy products. I am particularly grateful to the dairy industry, which is working closely with our officials as we streamline our service provision. We have communicated with local companies and Dairy UK to ensure that all stakeholders are aware of the revised processes.

While essential controls will continue, I have taken steps to pause most inspections on-farm and off-farm. I have also decided that, in general, bovine tuberculosis testing should not take place. This is to protect the health of farm families and testing veterinarians. Exceptionally, visits to carry out TB tests and some inspections may take place, if they can be done safely, in accordance with the social distancing advice of the Public Health Agency.

We continue to prioritise the prevention and detection of epizootic diseases through surveillance and testing at ports, airports, on farms and in meat plants. Routine bovine brucellosis sampling has been paused on farms and in abattoirs; however, high-risk sampling will continue.

We owe an immense debt of gratitude to everyone involved in our food supply chain. Food is being produced day in, day out. Cancelled orders due to the loss of the food service and hospitality sectors, significantly higher levels of consumer demand and fears about staff shortages have put unprecedented pressure on primary producers and processors. We need to ensure that people are paid fairly for producing high-quality, local produce. That means supermarkets doing their bit by continuing to buy and sell the excellent local produce produced by our farmers and primary producers.

Commodity prices are extremely fragile, and we are already witnessing a softening in the market. As that continues, as I am sure that it will, the UK Government will need to step up and provide the necessary support. I am, therefore, monitoring the situation closely to see what needs to be done and how it can be done and, importantly, working with UK ministerial colleagues.

I have been meeting the main local banks to ensure that they are doing all that they can to assist farmers who are experiencing severe cash flow problems. It is vital that the banks step up to the plate at this time.

I have also chaired meetings of the main dairy processors to help establish how our critical dairy sector can navigate through the crisis. As part of my ongoing engagement with the agri-food sector, I will meet the red meat sector again later this week.

As I highlighted, markets are extremely fragile. We are already experiencing a significant fall in markets. Given the uncertainty, I have been proactive and, in the last 10 days, have had regular discussions with Ministers across the UK and, indeed, with Minister Creed in the Republic. The issues are not particular to Northern Ireland, the UK or the EU but globally; hence the need to realise the significance of the support that will be required. We have never witnessed a crisis like this before.

There are many reasons for a global decline in prices. One of the primary reasons has been the near collapse of the food service sector. While some of the supply has been redirected to retail with an uplift in sales, unfortunately, it has not been like for like. That is putting significant pressure on sales and reorientation of the types of products being sold. For example, retail has seen an unprecedented demand for mince but not for steak, which would have been a key product in restaurants. The high volumes of some products available in markets are also having an impact on prices. Export markets are also extremely sluggish, and that is a key area for Northern Ireland produce, especially in sectors like lamb and dairy product sales. In relation to the lamb sector, I am fully aware of the issues that are coming down the track when large numbers of spring lamb will be available on the market. I will be monitoring that extremely closely. Issues about carcass imbalance are impacting on the red meat sector, with lack of demand for fifth quarter products.

The horticulture sector is facing significant difficulties already, and I have asked officials to scope what support we can give.

Our priority is to keep product moving off farms and, where we cannot ensure that, to develop contingency plans and provide appropriate support to those farmers. In a meeting yesterday with retailers across the UK, I impressed on them the need for support to local farmers in their purchasing. I

also received a commitment that they would put in place promotions to help address issues about carcass imbalance, especially for the red meat sector.

Particularly difficult market conditions face the fishing industry, with a collapse in fish sales to the Far East, mainland Europe and, more recently, domestic markets. Government initiatives, such as the job retention scheme and assistance for the self-employed, will help the fish-processing sector and ancillary fishing businesses to keep their workers and to put them in a better position to respond when markets for fish recover.

My Department has been closely engaging with the fishing representatives, and the £1.5 million support package that I announced last week is aimed at helping the sea fish catching sector to weather the storm. That scheme is the most far-reaching in the UK and will help the fishing fleet to cover its fixed costs for three months. It is not an answer to everyone's problems, but it will certainly help the fleet to survive through one of its most difficult periods. My Department is also urgently gathering evidence from the aquaculture sector on the impact of COVID-19. A report on that is expected shortly, and the Department will make a decision on what measures may be needed in relation to support once it has fully considered the data.

The decision taken by Northern Ireland livestock marts to close for two weeks is a helpful intervention, and DAERA is working with the markets to ensure that livestock movements can continue to be facilitated through a combination of the animal and public health information system (APHIS) online and telephony services. Markets are working to establish protocols that would allow a restricted opening in the near future. However, I must caution that only through sensible action will we deliver sustainable solutions.

We are focused on keeping daily movements of food, feed and produce moving into and out of Northern Ireland. In that context, some of the ferry companies have recently highlighted significant operational difficulties. That is deeply concerning, and my Department is working with other Departments, led by the Department for Infrastructure, to address that. Haulage and logistics companies face immense difficulties, such as the lack of return loads, loss of large volumes of business and significant overheads.

Farmers are vital to the people in the country, and it is imperative that they also follow the Public Health Agency advice and take all appropriate steps to look after their health. Farming unions are rightly concerned about their members and the implications that falling ill with COVID-19 would have for them, the welfare of their livestock and their ability to keep their business running. In conjunction with the farmers' union, I have issued advice to farmers on how to deal with possible COVID-19 infection, and my Department will continue to work with them and with other Departments to explore options to mitigate the possible impacts and to safeguard animal welfare. For that reason, I have stopped all face-to-face services at DAERA Direct offices. For the time being, customers should conduct their business through DAERA online services, which are available 24 hours per day, by telephone or post.

The online single application and entitlement service is operating as normal, and an enhanced single application form (SAF) advisory service is available to provide farmers with advice and with digital assistance to help them to complete and submit their SAF. The closing date for SAF remains unchanged; however, I have extended the deadline by which farmers can amend their applications from 31 May to 9 June. Farmers are encouraged to submit their applications as soon as possible and ahead of the closing date of 15 May. In that way, we can ensure that our farmers receive accurate payments in October.

The face-to-face delivery of all College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) programmes has also ceased. Education programmes are being delivered remotely to ensure that the academic year is completed and that students achieve their qualifications. Although CAFRE open days have also been postponed, those interested in applying for CAFRE courses should apply online as normal. The delivery of existing outstanding projects under the farm business improvement scheme continues as far as is practicably possible. The processing of applications to tranche 5 of the business development group scheme and registration of farmers/growers continue remotely. CAFRE advisers are also available to assist farmers and food businesses with technical, business and environmental advice to support them at this challenging time. Arrangements are being progressed to facilitate the use of CAFRE's residential facilities at the Greenmount and Enniskillen campuses by the Department of Health as part of its contingency planning. CAFRE has also made available over 20,000 overalls and other personal protective equipment (PPE) to the health and social care trusts.

Despite Public Health Agency and government advice on social distancing, DAERA's country parks and forest parks saw members of the public continuing to gather and to visit sites in increased numbers, with many ignoring the advice. Therefore, at the end of last month, I shut down vehicle access as far as possible to those forests and country parks and to public fishing waters. I am disappointed that I had to make that decision, particularly at a time when children are out of school and others were using the facilities for physical and mental health reasons. However, I felt I had no alternative, and I did so to help save lives. Those arrangements will be kept under review. This Easter, I implore people to think about safety, to think about your friends, family and neighbours and to think about our health and care workers. Take your exercise locally and do not congregate in country and forest parks, beaches or other open spaces.

There is an increased risk of social isolation for rural communities, which may be heightened due to restricted access to much-needed services. My Department is collaborating with colleagues in the Department for Communities, the Public Health Agency and local government to support a coordinated approach to assist the community and voluntary sector in this time of crisis. DAERA officials have been assisting colleagues in DFC who are leading on the provision of food for vulnerable people, including delivery to the shielded group, which will be coordinated through local councils and starts on Wednesday 8 April, as well as the work under way to assist other vulnerable groups in society.

We have provided all community and voluntary sector funded partners with the much-needed flexibility to focus their resources on responding to the current challenge. The Rural Support networks support a network of over 1,500 rural community and voluntary sector organisations and are already involved in a number of initiatives such as engagement with food banks, drawing up lists of groups who can offer help and seeking to identify people who will need help. We expect them to be at the forefront as part of DAERA's response. Councils and other Departments are also making use of their local knowledge. It is anticipated that they will play an important role in delivering measures under the Executive's community fund and in ensuring penetration to rural areas. We are working with DFI and DFC to ensure that the DAERA assisted rural travel scheme can be utilised to assist in the delivery of much-needed food and services to isolated rural dwellers and with our health partners to ensure that vulnerable rural households are contacted on a regular basis and their needs met. The Rural Support charity stands ready to help rural individuals in stress and will support them with whatever is needed in these challenging times.

We have also provided emergency guidance and ongoing support to administrative partners delivering the LEADER and the tackling rural poverty and social isolation (TRPSI) programmes. That includes easements to support payment to project applicants and the reallocation of DAERA resource to process almost £2 million in payments to microbusinesses and community organisations in the last three weeks. That money has never been more important in supporting the survival of organisations, staff, their families and the communities they support.

DAERA continues to work with Northern Ireland Water, prioritising activities to help ensure that we continue to have access to safe drinking water. Essential staff continue to analyse water samples from key drinking water supplies. Responding to reports of water pollution remains a priority in order to help protect raw water supplies. The Drinking Water Inspectorate (DWI) has been working closely with NI Water, local councils and owners and users of private water supplies to ensure that all necessary measures are in place to protect public health.

A task and finish group with membership from across the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) has been established to identify issues that might arise due to an increase in burials. The group will produce advice and guidance on how best to mitigate those, and it links into the DOJ pandemic working group.

It is important to recognise that waste workers are one of our essential services, and that covers all those involved in managing waste, whether it is in collection, transportation, treatment or disposal. DAERA's priority is to maintain the fullest range of council waste services possible, including recycling, which supplies the waste industry and contributes to the packaging sector. Recycled material from much of the commercial sector is no longer available. At present, all 11 councils are maintaining kerbside collections, although the majority of council household waste-recycling centres are closed.

DAERA has established a COVID-19 waste group, and regular meetings are taking place with local councils and the private waste sector to capture their concerns and discuss contingency plans. The Strategic Investment Board is involved in attempting to match up capacity and resource pressures across the sector. We are working with delivery partners on key messaging, and the Waste Industry

Safety and Health (WISH) forum has issued guidance to maintain services and on observing social distancing.

A range of COVID-19 regulatory position statements has been prepared by NIEA to ensure pragmatism and flexibility in the waste sector, for example, on unauthorised waste facilities and the temporary variation of licence/permit conditions. With the reduction in legitimate waste services and the increase in waste arising, there is more risk of illegal dumping and fly-tipping. I urge people not to indulge in irresponsible behaviour that can have such a damaging effect on public health, and the Department is working closely with local councils on the matter.

All our advice is kept under review and, where necessary, updated. That is to ensure that public health is protected and the risks to drinking water quality and waste services are minimised.

Finally, the reduction in single-use carrier bags is hugely important, but there is a need to show flexibility in these unprecedented times. Carrier bags for home deliveries reduce the need for drivers to enter houses. The use of the bags also speeds up home deliveries. My Department has therefore made the Single Use Carrier Bags Charge (Coronavirus Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, which have the effect of meaning that, for six months, the requirement to charge for carrier bags does not apply to bags used for home delivery as part of a grocery delivery service. The regulations came into operation on 1 April 2020.

In closing, it is worth again reflecting on the huge efforts under way to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic. Today, I call on the public to support those efforts, to follow PHA advice and to take all the necessary precautions to mitigate the worst effects. We have had to deliver at pace, take rapid decisions and act quickly to protect our people, our economy and our environment. Not all of those decisions will be perfect — we need to acknowledge that now — but they have been made with the best intentions and a strong desire to play our part in meeting the challenges that we all face. We will continue to review and adapt our actions in line with government advice as more information becomes available.

The crisis has brought the interconnectedness of our economy, environment and people into sharp focus. DAERA will continue to play its full part in the Northern Ireland response effort to COVID-19, supporting our people and businesses and leading them through these difficult times. Through continued cooperation and collaboration and by supporting each other, we will get through this. While it is critical that we focus on the here and now, it is also important that we look ahead to the future with optimism and plan for recovery. I know that the Northern Ireland Executive and my Department will have an important role to play, and we have already started to develop proposals to support the recovery of our economy, environment and people. Those proposals will focus on the traditional values of hard work, thrift, using our resources to their best effect, self-reliance and valuing our local environment and economy. I look forward to sharing those proposals with people over the coming months.

Thank you. I ask that each of you and your families take care of yourselves, your neighbours and each other.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I thank the Minister for making his statement. I now invite members to ask the Minister questions. Again, I will allow a period of around one hour for that. It is my intention to allow all members who wish to ask a question to do so. However, that depends on members asking focused and succinct questions that are relevant to the statement that we have just heard. Please note that, because this is a Committee meeting and not a plenary session of the House, it is in order for the Minister to ask Mr Fulton to respond to questions where he considers it appropriate.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for his statement. I noted a headline in one of the farming papers at the weekend: "Not all heroes wear capes; some of them drive tractors". That is very true at the moment, if we look at what our farmers are doing for our community right now in the middle of this crisis.

The Minister will be acutely aware of the importance of a secure food supply in the midst of this crisis and, indeed, all the time. He will also be acutely aware of the importance of local marts for the trading of livestock. I commend the NI Livestock and Auctioneers Association (NILAA) for taking the decision to close the marts. It is a very responsible decision. It has put the public health of its staff and customers front and centre. However, the Minister will be aware that that causes difficulties with the movement of livestock in the wider production chain and food supply chain. I know that his

Department has been in contact and had negotiations with the NILAA and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). Can he give his assessment of how trading could continue in a non-contact way? I note, for example, that, across the water in Britain, the first online mart is taking place today. What is his assessment of how trading could continue in a non-contact way with safe social distance in the current climate?

Mr Poots: I know that marts are looking at how they might open again, and at how they can try other means of trading. I have heard it suggested that if the marts open again, it would be on the basis of the seller leaving his livestock off and leaving the mart. The mart would be restricted exclusively to buyers, social distancing would operate in the ring where the sale would take place and the animals would be sold, conditionally, for the farmer to accept the price or not accept the price when the mart rings through. That is a suggestion that has come forward. I think that the marts will probably move ahead and open once things scale down a bit. I do not think they are ready to do that yet, because their assessment is that the social distancing that has been observed is making a difference, and they do not want to take any risks with public health. I think that we may see marts open on a very restricted basis, not just yet, but later in April.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his detailed statement to the House and for his best endeavours to help the industry at this time. Given that the UK is still in the Brexit transition stage, what support, if any, has the EU provided to the agri-food sector?

Mr Poots: We are still subject to EU regulations up until October of this year. Therefore the way in which we support the farming community in Northern Ireland is still under EU regulation. Through Minister Eustice and Minister Creed, I have been stating the case for Northern Ireland and how they can assist us in ensuring that the appropriate measures are put in place. Last night, I had a long conversation with the dairy sector and the farmers' unions. We had a meeting by mobile communication, of course. The indication from them is that the EU has an awful habit of waiting until a crisis has happened. We can see the crisis in the dairy sector, for example, happening in front of our eyes. We can anticipate what is happening with the lamb sector, in particular. We can see the problems in the beef sector, and we know the problems that already exist in the fishing sector. We can see all of that already, and we need to be moving now. I implore the European Union officials to be on the ball and recognise that there is a world health crisis and a knock-on effect on agriculture. If we are to have an agriculture sector when this is over, and if we are going to avoid numerous bankruptcies and people being no longer able to conduct their business, we need to respond quickly. That is what needs to happen at this stage.

Mr Catney: I thank the Minister for his statement. At the end of his statement, he wished members protection and safety for their families. I have learned that one of his family members has been struck down. I wish a speedy recovery, as does I am sure most of the House. I pass on our best wishes to your family member, Minister.

I also thank the Minister for the advice that he has given to households on how to manage waste at this time. Will he be assisting the councils in dealing with increased household waste and amending licensing laws, when or where required, and look at any financial assistance, where or when needed?

Mr Poots: I thank the member for his question, and for his personal remarks. They are very much appreciated.

The member asked about managing waste. You see how critical people are when we have a crisis such as this. We take our waste collectors for granted. They were at our house this morning at about 6.30. The waste was taken away; we do not see any more of it. That is brilliant. If those people closed at this time, it would create another public health problem. You ask about the regulations. We will provide the maximum flexibility for all our sectors, and, as we have worked through this, that is what we have been doing. Nobody can accuse us of not being flexible at this stage. If there are areas where we still have things to do, I am very happy to deal with those as they are addressed to us.

I am aware of additional financial strains on councils, so we will work with them. We will identify where those strains lie and how those can be best accommodated. We will look at how, right across the board, we can provide the appropriate financial assistance to people who are related to our Department. Of course, we have to do that through the Department of Finance, but, nonetheless, we need to recognise that there is a wide scale of people out there who need our support and assistance to get to the other side of COVID-19.

We will all get to the other side of this, by the way. It is going to be a real challenge. Sadly, there will be those who lose their lives, and that is horrendous for all the families involved, but the vast majority of us will get to the other side of this. It will be a horrible memory that we have, but we will be able to move forward once that is done. We need to have some confidence that that is the case, but we need to work together with each other to overcome this at this time.

Mrs Barton: Minister, thank you for your statement. I also wish your family member a speedy and safe recovery.

Minister, in your statement, you gave some clarification around on-farm TB testing. Does this allow farmers who want to have their herds opened, following, perhaps, a breakdown or, indeed, any other reason, to have the test carried out if they can comply with social distancing?

Mr Poots: TB testing is normally carried out by private veterinary practices, and most of those private veterinary practices are actually the farmers' vets. In that instance, the vet can do it if the vet wishes to do it. The farmer needs to be able to assure the vet that that is the case. Before a test would take place, they would have to identify whether they were capable of doing this within the Public Health Agency's guidelines and recommendations. If they are not capable of doing it, the test will not happen. If they are capable of doing it, they can do the test, but that is an agreement between the vet and the farmer. We are not precluding that. We are saying that, normally, tests will not take place, but that, where it is very important to a herd to get reopened, where the private vet is happy to do it and where social distancing can be observed, that is permissible.

Mr Blair: Before I ask my question, I wish to take a moment to thank the Minister for his statement. I also thank him for his good wishes to those in this House, and I extend our good wishes from this Bench to him, his colleagues and his family for the times ahead. I would like to associate myself with the gratitude that the Minister has expressed to the various areas of public service that are providing for all of us at the moment and on whom we are so heavily dependent.

Further to the information contained on page 11 of the report in relation to the delivery of food for the vulnerable, the Minister may already be aware that I have corresponded with DAERA, the Department of Health and the Department for Communities regarding priority access for online food deliveries. This, of course, relates primarily to supermarkets and is of benefit to those who can register if they are self-isolating as a result of direct advice from the Government, usually for a period of 12 weeks. Some local supermarkets have indicated a willingness to take part in this scheme, which appears to require registration. It seems that it is led in GB by DEFRA. Is there a chance that DAERA, in conjunction with other Departments if necessary, can implement this scheme in Northern Ireland?

Mr Poots: I am aware of the scheme that the member refers to, and it seems to be operating successfully in Great Britain. I know that whilst supermarkets such as ASDA are willing to do it, they would find it difficult to implement this scheme in Northern Ireland and need help and support to do it. I understand that it falls within DFC, but, if we can assist and help in any way in taking the scheme that exists in GB and bringing it here, our Department will be happy to do that. In addition, the Department for Communities is going to contribute £200,000 to food banks, and DAERA will match fund that amount. We are going a little further in that it is being distributed through the Northern Ireland community fund, which does not fund religious groups. A number of food banks are run by faith-based groups, so we are putting in an additional £50,000 to fund those food banks that are organised by people from religious backgrounds.

Mr Harvey: I thank the Minister for his statement. What discussions has he had with the other devolved regions, and are they facing the same problems and difficulties that we are dealing with in Northern Ireland? I welcome his recently announced scheme for fishermen.

Mr Poots: We have been in discussions with our Scottish and Welsh counterparts on agriculture and fisheries matters. Scotland was the first to move on fisheries. We took a little longer, but we did something a bit more extensive than the Scottish were offering. We are working closely with them on how we can press to get support for the agriculture and food processing sectors to get out the other side of this crisis.

People need to realise how critical it is that we keep this thing going. We have a health crisis, and our first priority is to support the health service, the Health Minister and the team around him. The burden that is being imposed on them is incredible and we all need to respect and reflect that. However,

people are at home and there are virtually no hot food outlets open at all. No restaurants are open, and people are dependent on the food that is in the shops. We have to keep the food chain going.

Last week, there were problems in the food processing sector with some workers walking out and all of that. I respect that some workers had concerns about their health and I appreciate the response that there has been in many of those places to ensure that workers' environment was made considerably safer. The situation is still not 100% ideal, but it is absolutely critical for the well-being of the people of this country that the food processing sector is kept going. We need to ensure that the food chain exists. We are in discussions with the Scottish and the Welsh and we have had a series of discussions with my counterpart in the Republic of Ireland because a lot of our milk goes south of the border and a lot of pork and chicken comes north of the border. We are all in this together, and that goes beyond the Assembly, Northern Ireland, the UK, Ireland and these islands; it goes right across the world. We can stand together or fall together, and I would much prefer that we stand together.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Minister for his statement. I want to follow up on a point that was made by my Committee colleague, who touched on the support that the Minister announced recently for the fishing industry. How is that progressing, and how quickly will that support get to those who need it?

Mr Poots: The process will require the Assembly to pass some legislation. Is that correct, Norman?

Mr Norman Fulton (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): That is correct.

Mr Poots: Yes. With the best will in the world, the earliest that we can get payments out will be in early May, which will be ahead of some of the work that the Assembly does, but we will still be allowed to get payments out if we can get things moving at the appropriate pace. I will engage with you as quickly as possible on the delivery of that work. I should add that the aquaculture sector and the freshwater fishermen are not included in that, but we are looking at that. For example, I know that the Lough Neagh eel fishery is closed down. Their market in Holland, where they sold most of their product, is also closed, so we will be looking at how we can respond in those areas as well.

Mr K Buchanan: My question follows on from that of my colleague from Lagan Valley. In the statement, the Minister referred to the Department's communication with local councils and private waste companies. Obviously, the closure of waste facilities by local councils has caused an issue with fly-tipping. My questions are: how can you control the overuse of landfill at this time, and what message can you send to those who think it OK to fill their boots, or vans, with rubbish, travel into the countryside, open the door, throw it out and think that is acceptable?

At a time like this, we see the good in people and, ultimately, the bad. What can you do about the overuse of landfill, and those who think it OK to leave their washing machine on the side of my road?

Mr Poots: It is never OK to leave waste at the side of a road. We have always had good mechanisms for disposing of that kind of waste. Unfortunately, that is not available at the moment, but, even when it was available, some people tended to fly-tip.

With the reduction, we see an increased risk of fly-tipping. We are working closely with councils on the matter. The nidirect fly-tipping page has been updated accordingly for the reporting of waste crime. I encourage people to report it. I am prepared to work with councils on increasing the fines for fly-tipping, if only to get a message out to people that, if you are caught, you could be hit quite heavily.

DAERA and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency COVID-19 waste management contingency group has been established to coordinate and maintain the fullest possible range of waste management services. A weekly meeting with local councils has been established, the Government waste working group, and the strategic waste partnership group, which also includes the waste industry. There has been good uptake by people in the waste industry in dealing with the problems that exist, but it is something that we need to keep our eye on. It is critically important that we maintain public health and one of the means of doing that is by the appropriate disposal of waste.

We do not want to lose sight of recycling. We should not send material to landfill where it is unnecessary. That is work that we continue to engage in.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Minister for his answers. I declare an interest, as I come from a background in small farming. The Minister knows that, at present, farmers are under financial difficulties, given the increased cost of meal and fertiliser, and that the marts are closed. In light of the very welcome

scheme on fishing that you discussed a moment ago with my colleague, are there any plans to put in place crisis funding for farming?

Mr Poots: We have written to the Department of Finance and outlined our needs, which we identified at over £100 million, for dealing with areas in this Department that need assistance. That is, almost certainly, too significant for the Northern Ireland Budget or the Northern Ireland Government to deal with. Therefore, we look to the UK Government and Brussels to see what can be delivered. It is not a Northern Ireland problem, but a global one. Therefore, we need to work within the parameters that currently exist. Within those parameters, we need to deliver.

Another area I have been looking at is banking. For some people, this is not a business problem, but a cash flow problem. You mentioned being unable to sell livestock. The livestock is still there as an asset and it will be realised a number of weeks down the line, as opposed to now. Consequently, farmers will have problems meeting payments at the end of the month, or whenever.

We met the Bank of Ireland, Danske Bank and Ulster Bank last week. A number of the banks are showing very good proactivity, if they carry out what they say they will. For example, one of the banks is offering a freeze on loans, so that no payments are required over the next three months on either interest or paying down the loan. It will be pushed back to the end of the loan. A loan that may have been ready to mature in, say, October 2021 will mature in January 2022. One of the other banks was offering to have no interest repayments in the period. That is all helpful.

We need to ensure that cash flow continues to take place within our banking sector and that banks work and are flexible not just with farmers and food processors but in general with the business community. At the other side of this, we need a business community. At the other side of this, we need farmers. At the other side of this, we need food processors. We will hit another crisis if that is not the case. I expect that unemployment will rise significantly as a consequence of COVID-19. It is our task to ensure that we provide as much opportunity for people to maintain and retain their business so that they can pick it up when the crisis is over.

Mr O'Toole: I echo what the Minister said about people who work in our food industry and, particularly, in the waste sector. As with lots of people — front-line healthcare workers and lots of other people — the true value of what they do and how they serve us is becoming more apparent every day that we go through the crisis — how much we depend on them, their sacrifice, their hard work and the fact that they get up early to do things for us.

I also echo what the Minister said about the banking sector, but I say that we need the banking sector to really step up here. There are too many reports. Particularly given the fact that our big, four banks are dominated by banks that are controlled by the state in Dublin or the state in London, we need them to really step up for our farmers and our businesses generally.

In the past, the Minister teased me about being a Member for South Belfast. There are not too many big farms in south Belfast, but there are lots of people who rely on and buy food. Indeed, I am one of them. I am pleased to say that, in the last week, I got a great delivery of local seafood from Sea Source NI, which I give a shout out to. It is based in Kilkeel. Fishermen from County Down drop off their catch, and it is being delivered to houses during the current crisis.

I am interested in whether the Minister or the Department can offer guidance to consumers who want to be part of a solution in buying local. Clearly, farmers and fishermen are getting their produce to supermarkets, and that is great. People are going into supermarkets, social distancing and, hopefully, buying responsibly. In what ways can people support local producers? Can there be an online portal through which people can see where they can buy great, local produce? How can the Department help with that?

Mr Poots: I can speak for my local area. The local authority is doing excellent work in providing information, as are all the local shops that are doing home deliveries. I am seeing all the wee butchers and bakeries and so forth popping up, and they are offering home deliveries. It is tremendous. I am on a few community pages, where people are saying, "Do you know what? I just ordered so much from such-and-such a shop, and we had it round two days later, and it was a great service", and then others are buying into that.

I suppose, in any crisis, you want to see whether good things can come out of it. It really would be good if there was more support for local businesses, because, when the going gets tough, they are the

people who are always there. They are always there. I think that it would be tremendous to see a revival in our local butcheries, bakeries, greengrocers and all of those kinds of shops. It has been sad to lose them, over the years, and to see the big multiples come in and just take them all out. We will maybe learn to appreciate the small retailers a bit more, and we will maybe spend a pound or two more in local shops to sustain them and keep them going, as opposed to always looking for the cheapest option. Very often, the cheapest option is not in the big multinationals, but they are very good at marketing themselves.

Mr Butler: That was nicely teed up for me, Minister, because I want to talk about the small shops and agriproducts. I commend you, Minister, for your performance, and, along with the Executive team, there is no doubt that you were cut out for this role and for this Department. You are passionate about it, which was heard today when you spoke so passionately about the complexity of the services that underpin your Department and all those that serve.

I have just one point to make before I get to my question, if you will indulge me, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. You talked about the refuse collectors being out at 6.30 am waking you up. I have been living in the country for 20 years, and the only people who can beat those people in wakening you early are the farmers, who get up at 5.30 am with the 3-ton roller on the back of their tractor outside your house — God bless Will Greer.

Minister, you highlighted some of the issues about the sale of agriproducts, and you answered the last question brilliantly. I am a former butcher, and I am passionate about butchers' shops and buying locally. Would you consider recommending putting in place a minimum price guarantee on agriproducts in supermarkets to ensure a fair return for primary producers and for those shops that we want to support? As you rightly pointed out, a number of shops are benefiting at the moment because they are able to provide that local service quickly for people, but we also know that, on the other side of this, the pressure that will come on people will be to buy cheap. I remember that, when I was a butcher, Brazilian beef came in, and we were selling Irish beef but could not compete. We were seeing these wee skinny steaks, and the date on those pieces of beef when they came in was for four or five months, and you were saying, "How on earth does that stuff last in a pre-packed packet?". There is just something not right about it. Will you consider putting such a recommendation in place, Minister?

Mr Poots: We have lived in a generation that has witnessed globalisation, and we are perhaps now suffering because of that globalisation. The fact that people travel so much around the world has led to this virus travelling so easily around the world as well. If, 200 years ago, a virus had struck in China it probably would have just stayed in China. A reality of globalisation is that people are travelling and doing things all over the world, and, consequently, everything is global.

I think that it is time to pause and reflect. I am not sure how, legitimately, we can actually have minimum food prices, and I am not sure that that is somewhere that our national Government probably want to go. Ultimately, there are 65 million people in the United Kingdom, and there are a few hundred thousand farmers, so politically it is probably not the wisest thing for any Government to drive the food costs up for the 65 million to assist the 200,000 or 300,000. Nonetheless, there are ways of helping and supporting the hundreds of thousands of farmers and food processors and of ensuring that the public get good-quality food.

One thing that has really come to the fore in this is food security. We live on an island, and I know that there have been issues and that we are dealing with those, such as ferries, and Minister Mallon is leading on that and is doing a good job. But there are issues with ferries, and we need to retain the ferry service between not just Northern Ireland but Ireland and Great Britain. Ten per cent of our goods come in from Dublin, and 98% of our oxygen comes in from Dublin, so those connections have to exist. The fragile connection that really exists is between Great Britain and Europe; if there any issues at all at Calais, problems are caused. If capacity at Calais goes down, Britain very quickly does not have enough food for itself.

There are very smart people who advise in Number 10 and in other places, and Mr Toogood was one of those people and would not have given this advice; I know that he would have known better than to give such advice. In the last six weeks I heard a couple of advisers say, "We do not really need British farmers any more, and we do not need to produce food in Britain any more". What stupid advice that was. The most ordinary person in Britain, without any degrees or qualifications, can see that we need food that is produced locally. It is better produced locally, it is fresher produced locally, we have more traceability locally, so we need to support those local businesses. Perhaps we can engage on that with our business sector and local government after this and on how we can build up our local shops again. How do we fill our high streets with local shops again, and how do we take back control of our life from

maybe the global superpowers, the multinationals and all that? Mr Carroll will think I have had a real conversion, [Laughter] but I genuinely have a passion for local business. I do not like all of these big guys coming in and dictating what we should be doing and how we should be living our lives. I accept the reality, maybe a little bit more than Mr Carroll on occasions, but I do see an opportunity for us to revive that side of things again, beyond this.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for what was a very comprehensive statement, which recognises the breadth of the Department, and also the way in which the Minister is across that detail. He did serve in multiple Departments and has considerable experience, and I know that has been of great value to the wider Executive as well, and so we encourage him in the work that he is doing on that front.

He has highlighted a number of innovative ways in which he is adapting the Department's laboratories to be used for increasing testing. The wider public really need to see much more testing, and the utilisation of AFBI to do that will be very important going forward. Can he elaborate on any more innovation that can take place?

He said in his statement that:

"we are all in this together",

and we have talked at length about supporting those local businesses that often contribute greatly to their local community in a way that the big multinational global corporations cannot always do. Often, they are more interested in paying out a dividend to shareholders than in their community reach in the localities in which they operate.

Over the past week, a number of farmers have contacted me, and they are hugely frustrated at the import of cheap beef from outside the locality. At a time when they need support, they do not feel that they are getting that from the large supermarkets. What steps is the Minister taking to deal with the supermarkets' supply chain to encourage them to support local farmers, and also to deal with some of the evidence that is coming through that those large supermarkets are increasing prices on some of the core basic materials that go into people's baskets? I have heard from constituents that items that are fundamental to the home have become more expensive in the past two weeks, and this is at a time when people's money in their pocket is not going as far as it used to.

Mr Poots: Some of the competition rules that exist for supermarkets have been slackened because of the circumstances that exist, and necessarily so. I do not consider that to be something that should be seen as an opportunity by people to make more money. Retail trade was up 22% in March. Everybody can see how our supermarket shelves were emptying, and they were benefiting greatly from the buying that people were engaging in. There is anecdotal evidence that prices are slipping upwards, and I have to say that that is not appropriate unless there is a particular reason that goods have to be raised in price because they are costing considerably more and there is no choice but to pass that on. There needs to be very good reason why the public at home are paying more for goods and services without there being a very significant justification for it.

When it comes to the importation of beef, I raised that with the two supermarkets involved. I called them out on it very clearly and said that it was not acceptable. Interestingly enough, they said that it was not going to happen again, but they said it was necessary the last time. I do not accept that it was necessary and I do not believe that it should have happened. We are all in this together. At a time when there are pressures on beef prices, where farmers' incomes over the past two years have reduced by 24% and 25% respectively, it was entirely inappropriate to be importing product at this time to the UK supermarkets.

I urge the supermarkets to support local people and to support local businesses because it is local people who support them. They are not getting business from all over the world; they are getting the business from local people. Therefore, they need to support local people and they need to support them by buying locally and by selling at prices that are not inflated in a period of crisis, because it would be entirely inappropriate for consumers to have to pay more to gross up the profits of large corporations.

Ms Anderson: I thank the Minister for his statement. I listened to you quite carefully when you were talking about the risk of social isolation due to restricted access to much-needed services, and I was conscious of what you said around the collaborative work that is taking place between you and the Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey, particularly around feeding the most vulnerable in our

society through food banks. It struck me, and maybe it just was not in your statement, but it would be helpful for us to understand the kind of collaborative work that is going on between you and the Minister for the Economy in the context of broadband.

I do not live in a rural community, but I have lots of friends who do, and it is very difficult to communicate. We are telling people to stay at home, yet we know the difficulties with broadband. There are lots of apps now, such as Zoom, Discord and even Houseparty. Those are apps that I had never heard of before this pandemic, but they are allowing us to communicate with our families, friends and loved ones, yet people from rural communities who do not have access to broadband are finding that most difficult. Thousands of people have been sent home to work and cannot because they do not have access to broadband. If you cannot elaborate today, it would be good if you could come back to us at some stage to give us an understanding of the work that is being done between you and the Economy Minister to intensify broadband during this time, which would encourage people to stay at home.

Mr Poots: We have recognised for some time that rural broadband is a weakness and, consequently, our party secured £150 million for rural broadband in particular. A lot of that spend will be in Fermanagh and Tyrone, and I welcome that. It is good that those areas that have not benefited as well as others will have that opportunity. It is critical that that is rolled out as quickly as possible, and the Department of Finance is a key player in the delivery of that. Thus far, there has been a considerable degree of cooperation throughout the Executive on that issue. Unfortunately, we will not have it delivered for the end of this crisis or for the middle of it.

One of the added complications is that the providers are not allowed to go into people's homes now. So they can bring your broadband to your front door and fix you up with a plug, which you will plug in, but that is just a further complication. We are totally committed to ensuring that the broadband that is enjoyed by most can be enjoyed by that greater number throughout rural communities. It will be very difficult to achieve 100%, but I believe that we can get up to 98% or 99%, which would be a good asset.

The Member rightly points out that people really need it now just for ordering food from the shops and for the simple things in life. One of the things that we will do, and, again, it is with the Department for Infrastructure — it is great to see how Departments are working with each other; we have been working closely with the Department for Communities, the Department for Infrastructure, the Department for the Economy and so forth — is that, instead of taking isolated people to the services, we will see how we can deliver and take the services to the people using rural transport services. It is crucial that those buses are not sitting there doing nothing and that they are used to deliver services to the rural community.

Ms Armstrong: Minister, I wish your family member well. It is a very tough time for all of us, but it hits very close to home when it affects us individually.

I will start off by saying thank you to you and your Department for keeping things going. I also convey thanks on behalf of the fishing industry for the support package that has been put in place. I have been communicating backwards and forwards with the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation (NIFPO), which is based in Portavogie. They have said that it is a very, very welcome support to the boats, but they have a concern that it does not cover the needs of the crew — the concern that you mentioned. Many of our fishing crew are self-employed share fishermen. Most of them live below the poverty line. As self-employed, they will be reliant on the Government's self-employed income support stream, but we know that it is going to take some time for that to come through, unfortunately. You talked earlier about support for agriculture and farmers. I ask you to consider those crew as well.

NIFPO has concerns about some of their foreign crew in particular. There are 60 nationals working for NIFPO members. They are self-employed, but they are in the country under a transit visa. That visa is based on a reciprocal arrangement between countries and does not require that they pay tax in the UK. Those 60 men have no tax history and, since the collapse of our markets, have had no income and no recourse to government help. Boats are getting some money, but consideration of those vulnerable crewmen is missing from that package. Therefore there is not enough money to pay the boats' bills and crews. I ask you, probably with the Minister for the Economy, if you have any sway, to seek help from HMRC and the UK Government to consider a scheme similar to the hardship scheme, for instance, that is being brought forward for students by the Minister for Communities. Perhaps, we could have something like that for those fishing crews in the interim, until they can claim that money.

I wish you and your family a very happy Easter.

Mr Poots: Thank you. The member, rightly, raises a significant issue and problem. Our fishing industry has been supported greatly by crews from other countries. They were eastern European, primarily, but, in latter years, more of the crews have been from the Philippines and Ghana. They are excellent fishermen — brilliant at repairing the nets. They are skilled people. That is an argument that we have been having with the UK Department for a number of years. These people are not labourers; they are skilled fishermen and need to be recognised as such, coming in.

At this time, one section of those people does not qualify for the 80%, and that is causing problems and hardships. We are aware of it, we have raised it and we are trying to seek solutions to it. I am not sure that that is going to be simple. I am aware that a lot of the boats were out fishing again. There is an intention to go out later this week, because the weather is not suitable for them at this time, but they intend to go out later this week, which may help them to some extent. The problem is that the price that they are getting for their product is significantly down. One good thing is that the fuel costs are also significantly down, but it does not compensate for the amount that the fish is down. However, added to what we have offered, it may help to see them over the next number of months, but I do not see what is offered as a magic bullet for the fishing industry. There are other issues, problems and complications that we need to try to assist them with, and I recognise that.

Mr Dunne: I, too, thank the Minister for his statement. I put on record my appreciation for all your efforts in supporting the agriculture and fishery industry at this difficult time, and for all of your work in ensuring that there is fresh food on the shelves of our shops and supermarkets. I know that you have done a lot of work on that.

Minister, is there an indication of a reduction in the farm-gate price for milk for farmers at this difficult time, in light of the drop in demand that you would assume there is for milk as processors are unable to carry out their work, businesses and schools are shut and a lot of tourist venues are closed?

Mr Poots: The dairy sector is having huge problems; there is no secret about that. The spot price of milk has fallen dramatically. We are probably looking at a spot price for milk of about 15p a litre. That will probably be reflected in what is paid to farmers next month, albeit it will not be as low as 15p, thankfully. We are looking at schemes through which we could support the farming community in that.

There were 12 million litres of surplus milk in the UK last week. A lot of that is down to the restaurant trade disappearing. For example, Lakeland Dairies supplied all of the milk products to many of the aeroplane companies, so, when you opened that wee sachet of milk, it was milk that was produced here. It supplied companies across the world and was very successful, and that has gone. It has had to readapt and try to change its processing lines and find other markets and so forth. It is a desperately challenging time for the food-processing sector. Nobody is buying to use at home those wee sachets of butter that you would use in a restaurant or a hotel.

Such companies are facing real, critical difficulties, and the one sector in agriculture that has large debts is the dairy sector. It has traditionally been more profitable, and, as a consequence of that, the banks have been more willing to lend. Having seven-figure debts exists within the dairy farm sector. It is not super common, but it is not irregular either for dairy farmers to have debts of over a million pounds and several million pounds. That is going to cause real problems if the milk price drops off the cliff. It is important that we are nimble and agile with our response, and that is why I will be encouraging the European Union to be quick in its response. That is why I will be encouraging the UK Government to be quick in their response, and that is why, over the course of the past week in particular and in the previous week, I have been driving home the importance of responding quickly to this crisis and not allowing it to develop into a micro-crisis in the midst of the current health crisis.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for a very comprehensive statement and, indeed, a very engaging question-and-answer session. Poots and Lenin just rolls off the tongue. If we add Mr Allister to it — he is away — I thought we might have a revolution on our hands.

I want to return to the issue of rural broadband and acknowledge the investment that his Department has made and the confidence-and-supply money, which, hopefully, will be honoured, if it has not been honoured to date. For many farmers, the deadline for single farm payments is coming on 15 May, and, considering that many will be isolated and rural, obviously, is there an opportunity to extend that deadline beyond 15 May?

Before I end, I also want to offer my support to the Minister's relative who is unwell. I wish them a speedy and full recovery.

Mr Poots: Thus far, as Norman told me earlier, 6,500 people have their single farm applications in, so that is very good. That is out of how many, Norman?

Mr Fulton: About 23,000.

Mr Poots: Twenty-three thousand, so we are sitting now with about 25% in. I encourage people to continue to do that. We have already offered some degree of flexibility at the end. If they put something in and they are not happy about it, they can come back and amend it for a further nearly four weeks up to 9 June. We want to encourage people to do this because we are the only part of the UK that will be paying out in the middle of October, and we do not want to lose that. We want to ensure that that goes to the farming community at that time.

It is very important that farmers do receive their payments in October because, traditionally, the conacre land is paid for in October or November. Therefore, it is important to get that money into the farmers' accounts to allow their cash flow to work at that time of the year. We do not really want to extend the deadline. We will monitor it, and, if it is becoming glaringly obvious that we are nowhere near getting the numbers in that we need, we can reappraise that situation later. At this stage, we want to encourage people to keep working and keep getting the applications in. If they respond to us and get their applications in for 15 May, we will respond to them and get the payments out for 16 October.

Mr Nesbitt: Perhaps I should start by declaring an interest as a former binman as I echo the words of praise that the Minister offered our refuse collectors. If anybody is having difficulty, I will certainly try to get the old crew together and pop round to your house.

I want to thank the Minister and acknowledge the efforts that he is making to ensure that we have a fishing fleet on the far side of this crisis. It is not just about the £1.5 million in cash but the work with the agriculture research and the data gathering. I wonder whether he can expand on the sort of data that is being gathered and whether there is a range of potential conclusions that he has in mind.

Mr Poots: When it comes to being a binman, I will declare something in common. When I was at school, my first job was lifting bins. It was quite well paid at that time. I was very pleased with what we got paid. It was real work, because you had to lift the old grey bins.

Mr Nesbitt: Over your shoulder.

Mr Poots: Very often, they were filled with ash and you had to lift them over your shoulder. It was tough going for a 16-year-old —

Mr Nesbitt: Thirty-six quid a week.

Mr Poots: — and the older binmen used to have a good laugh at you struggling to lift a heavy bin while they lifted the lighter ones that they had spotted first. Those were the days.

I will turn to the work that we are doing in AFBI and in other places on research and on work that we are providing. We have offered testing services and we did that quite early. We have the capacity to test up to 1,000 cases a day, as I indicated in my statement. That will assist in getting those figures up, because once social distancing works, we will start to see figures coming down.

This is how social distancing is working, folks. Before social distancing was put in place, every person who had coronavirus was spreading it to 2.8 others. If you started off with 100,000 people, you would have 280,000 in two weeks' time and, in four weeks' time, that figure would be well over 700,000. That is where coronavirus was going. As a result of social distancing, we are on minus 1, so that number is coming down all the time. We are going to have to get out of social distancing, and the means of doing that is to have appropriate testing. Having adequate testing allows us to determine that someone has had coronavirus and is not going to get it again, so that they can be allowed back into the workforce. If we are going to get out of this, we need to have appropriate testing and research done.

One of the other things that my Department and the agri-sector can offer, if this crisis is bad enough, is the assistance of our veterinarians in hospitals. You might ask: what does someone who treats animals know about treating humans? They are experts in ventilation, and if there is pressure on ventilation, our veterinarians can help. I am just letting you know that if there are additional pressures

in that regard, and we have the ventilation equipment and there are staffing problems in the hospitals, that that assistance can be provided.

I am not sure that that is the right answer to Mr Nesbitt's question. I am not sure whether the Deputy Chairperson will allow him to repeat it if I have missed something.

Mr Nesbitt: I am happy enough, but I wonder whether, if fleets are not fishing, that has a positive impact on fish stocks?

Mr Poots: I knew there was something that I had not quite picked up right. When it comes to fish stock, we have a rich supply of nephrops in the Irish Sea — better known as prawns to people who like a nice prawn cocktail. I know that Sinn Féin are into their prawn sandwiches. *[Interruption.] [Laughter.]* Anyway, for people who like their prawns and so forth, we have a rich supply of nephrops, which are exported around the world. They do very well in the mud in the Irish Sea. That stock is quite good. Our fishermen are catching haddock, of which there is a plentitude at the moment. It is better to finish the haddock stock before it goes into a new egg-laying season so that more haddock can be created. In all of that, then, we have ample supplies of certain fish. Other stocks have been challenged over the years; there has always been a bit of a struggle with the cod supply and the cod recovery programme has never really worked as well as it should have.

The problem that we have in fishing is that 70% of our product is exported and 70% of the fish that we eat is imported. We are importing cod that is processed in China and brought here and we are exporting our nephrops and crabs, which are very popular in the Far East and in China in particular. We are back to this global thing. We do not eat the fish that is produced locally. However, all the indications are that there is still a very rich harvest of particular fish varieties to be taken responsibly. The people who know best about that are those on the boats. They notice changes very quickly and identify them. It is in their interests to ensure that the harvest that exists in the Irish Sea and beyond will be there for them, and future generations, in years to come.

Ms Bailey: I thank the Minister and Department for the statement. I add my voice to the thanks given for the vital role that the waste workers, binmen, vets and farmers have played. A whole host of essential producers, who come under the remit of your Department, have contributed. That is evident from your words.

I note the successful intervention that the Minister made when Belfast City Council announced that most of its household bin collections were to be suspended. Today, the council tweeted to ask people to please stop fly-tipping on the streets. There might be a wee bit more work to be done, but it was a good intervention, and thank you for that.

Most of my questions have been answered. I was looking at access to recycling centres, trying to predict the huge volume of waste, including a lot of hazardous medical waste, that will appear on the other side of this lockdown and pandemic.

We could maybe look at agricultural waste: what is being done and what has been highlighted. The Minister mentioned the dairy industry in particular and a lot of the surplus that has been left. Today, you spoke about "carcass imbalance" and sales dropping. We are coming into the lambing season. What is being done to ensure that this surplus produce will not be, for want of a better phrase, fly-tipped into our rivers? We already see that happen from time to time in Northern Ireland, causing people further harm.

Mr Poots: At the moment, this is a business problem, as opposed to an environmental one. A surplus of goods has already been processed, and that will be cold stored until there is an appropriate time to sell some of them. That will have a significant value, at some point, and, therefore, it will not be wasted or dumped.

However, you touched upon an area wherein we could have an environmental problem. If our chicken and pork processors were to hit problems, there would be series of consequences. The first is that that material would not be available on the shelves of supermarkets, which would cause very significant problems. Chicken and pork, in particular, are very good value proteins, and they are bought by many people for their families. The second problem is that, if they are not slaughtered in the factories, they would have to be slaughtered and got rid of on-farm. How that is done creates environmental and public health problems. We cannot have farms with slaughtered animals that have not been disposed of. Those are the issues.

I mentioned, in particular, that should we hit a problem with processors, we must have contingency plans. We are developing those contingencies and working on ensuring that we have contingency plans in place. However, it is never a contingency that we want to use, because it would be devastating for the farmers. It has the potential to cause public health issues and it is something we need to avoid at all costs. Maintaining the processing units that seek to ensure the welfare of their workers is critical. We have been having conversations with them. Our veterinarians, in particular, have been working very closely with them. We have veterinary inspectors in the factories to assist and develop social distancing. They developed the PPE that is now in many of the factories. Therefore, you have hit upon an issue that we want to avoid. If milk is not collected from farms, it will more than likely be spread on land. That is probably OK. Certainly, it is not OK for it to be dumped into drains, because it is very damaging if it gets into the waterways.

Essentially, we need to identify solutions to ensure that we keep taking the product off-farm. If we do not take the product off-farm, we create a public health and environmental problem. In particular, if one of the milk processors was to stop, that would create massive problems. If one of the pork processors was to stop, again, it would create massive problems. That is why, over the last number of weeks, I have been impressing and stressing the importance of maintaining our food-processing sector and, actually, expressing public gratitude to the people who maintain it, because, number one, they are keeping food on our shelves; number two, they are avoiding a financial catastrophe for a farmer; and, number three, they are avoiding an environmental, public health crisis for all of us to have to pick up.

Mr Carroll: The World Health Organization and the World Trade Organization have warned:

"Uncertainty about food availability can spark a wave of export restrictions, creating a shortage on the global market."

Obviously, global food production will be severely affected, if it has not been already, by this crisis. A major issue will be ensuring that we have adequate food supplies, as countries and workers are forced to go into lockdown. The idea, to be frank, that it is a problem of panic-buying, I think, is wrong.

The Minister referred at the start to the need for flexibility, and he shared some criticisms of corporations, maybe, if you can say that. Does he share the view that relying on the old ways of food production and distribution may not even be possible at the end of the crisis? Does he believe that we need to have a different approach to see a greater role for the state and, especially, his Department in ensuring that we have proper planning and adequate provision put in place so that people do not suffer from food shortages?

Mr Poots: Northern Ireland plays its role way beyond its own shores. There is a population of two billion in Africa, where, a few years ago, it was one billion. One of the means of that population having increased so dramatically is good inoculation; another one has been clean water. Obviously, a population like that also needs to be fed. One of the areas where we have extensive markets for our powdered milk is the continent of Africa. We are very good at producing milk. We can have it dried to a high specification. That is a good, safe food that can go to Africa that they could never produce enough of themselves, given the harsh climate conditions. A lot of it goes to China. That is one of the reasons why our sector is being hit so badly.

In the rest of the United Kingdom — in Great Britain — a lot of the milk that is produced goes immediately, in its form as pasteurised milk, onto the supermarket shelves. They are less sophisticated in what they produce. It comes off the farm as milk, pasteurised, bottled and on to the supermarkets. That is the majority of their sales. The majority of our sales is powdered milk, butters and cheeses, and that is largely exported. We are much more vulnerable in Northern Ireland to the export market and the global market as a consequence. Therein lies the problem when it comes to the dairy sector.

It is important that we continue to provide quality food, because there are people in Africa and China who really benefit from it, and it is good that Northern Ireland plays its part.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stafford): Thank you, Minister, and thank you for answering all the questions.

Agenda item 4 is the time, date and place of our next meeting. We have received confirmation from the Education and Communities Ministers that they each want to make a statement to the Ad Hoc

Committee at a meeting to be held on Thursday 9 April in the Assembly Chamber. The Speaker's Office will write formally to all members to confirm that.

That concludes this meeting. Stay safe. God bless.