



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

COVID-19 Issues: Mr Edwin Poots MLA,
Minister of Agriculture, Environment and
Rural Affairs

6 May 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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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 John Blair
Mr Maurice Bradley
Mr Pat Catney
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
Mr David Small	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): I welcome Minister Poots and Norman Fulton. Although we expressed our condolences to you, Minister, in the Chamber recently, this is your first time before the Committee since the passing of your father. On behalf of the Committee, I express our condolences to you and your family at this very difficult time.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thank you. May I record my condolences to the Dallat family? John was a member of the Committee until recently. We are sad to hear of his untimely passing. He still had a lot to give. Unfortunately, he will not have the opportunity to do so.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Thank you, Minister Poots.

David Small from the Department is also here. Minister, I invite you to commence the briefing. Committee members will then have the opportunity to ask some questions.

Mr Poots: Thank you. I am looking around at the unusual seating positions. I thought that Mr Irwin was joining the Clerks.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): He is in the naughty corner.

Mr Poots: That is a good place for him.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee on the Department's recent work in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. When you invited me to speak to you, you flagged up some issues in particular. I will go through them, one by one. The situation has changed since you asked about those issues, so the Committee may have new priorities now. If that is the case, that is fine, and I will deal with them.

I addressed some of your questions in the statement that I made last Thursday to the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response. I do not want to go over old ground, but, with your permission, Chair, I will start with the issues that you raised and answer any questions that you may have.

I will begin with waste management. During the COVID-19 pandemic period, it has been critically important that councils maintain their kerbside collections. Recycling services are vital in order to safeguard human health, protect the environment and sustain the recycle business and market. At the beginning of the pandemic, all 101 household recycling centres in Northern Ireland were closed. On 28 April, I published five key principles to help councils decide if and when it is safe to reopen their centres: the protection of human health and the environment; social equity; waste hierarchy; resilience; and the preservation of material flows. I provided guidance on how to reopen recycling centres safely, and, this week, an increasing number of councils are reopening their centres. Mid and East Antrim Borough Council has reopened its remaining centres. Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council has reopened all of its 11 centres. Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council has reopened two. I have no doubt that other councils will be making their decisions over the coming days.

My officials have worked with the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) and the councils on developing a new municipal waste tracker. That has proven to be a valuable tool to monitor the provision of councils' waste management services and the broader capacity in the waste sector, ensuring that relevant issues are flagged and managed through daily updates. The tool has also been used to monitor fly-tipping, an activity that most councils have seen an increase in during this period. My Department has also published temporary regulatory position statements that put in place pragmatic arrangements, with defined conditions, that operators may rely on to operate outside the normal regulatory conditions of their waste management licence during the COVID-19 period. My officials have engaged with the Chief Planner to promote a consistent approach through the position statements, where waste management licence conditions are common to, or derived from, planning permissions.

I will move on to the closure of parks and the public angling estate. As the coronavirus pandemic developed during March, I introduced a number of closure measures across DAERA's forest parks, country parks and angling estates that have supported social distancing and non-essential travel restrictions. Pedestrian access points to those assets are now open to provide local people with a spacious environment in which to exercise in a manner consistent with public health advice on social distancing. However, at present, facilities within the Department's parks and angling estates remain closed, and the car parks are closed where possible. Overall, I am pleased to report a high level of compliance with guidance and adherence to COVID-19 regulations in the parks. I am of the view that it is not the appropriate time just yet to reopen them to vehicular access, but it is something that we are continuing to look at. However, the Department will engage with other outdoor recreation providers and key stakeholders to help us inform future recovery options. I will keep that under review and pay close attention to public health and travel advice and guidance.

It is important to remind people to access those assets only by themselves or with members of their household, and not to meet up in groups with members of their wider family circle or with friends at those locations. I also remind the public that they can access the sites on foot only, in particular to avoid any unnecessary travel.

I will now move on to food security. DAERA has been nominated as the lead Department for food security. That will give the Committee a bit more work, as you will have to monitor what we are doing on it. The Department was given the responsibility on the clear understanding that other Departments have strategic and tactical roles to undertake to support food security. Food security is about management of risk along the entire food chain, from farm to fork, including the import of raw materials such as animal feedstuffs, food processing, distribution and consumption, which are every bit as important as primary production considerations. It is a topic that encompasses food availability, access, affordability, safety, nutrition, quality, resilience and confidence. If we have learnt one thing from the current crisis, it is that we should not take the supply of food for granted. As was seen at the

outset of the COVID-19 crisis, consumer behaviour can result in shortages on the shelves as people stockpile at home. That is not an indication of any fragility in the supply of products but a temporary disruption to buying and storage norms, where actual consumption does not change. Although earlier periods of panic buying were purely down to a perception of supply chain risk, were genuine supply issues to arise, that could result in a heightened level of public reaction. Financial pressures on ferry operators and hauliers have the potential to impact significantly on supply lines entering Northern Ireland. As well as the shipment of processed food to external markets, the local supply base is dependent on imports of grains and other materials to feed livestock, grow crops etc. Logistics and connectivity are therefore essential. It is also clear that we need to have a coordinated approach across the Northern Ireland Executive.

I will move on to produce moving off farms, including milk. At the onset of the pandemic, there was a risk that absenteeism in the input supply, downstream transporting and processing sectors might disrupt the movement of inputs and outputs to and from farms. Those concerns have not materialised beyond the problems that are being experienced by the non-edible horticulture sector. The risk of produce not moving off-farm in the rest of the sectors appears to have reduced, particularly as we now seem to have reached the peak of COVID-19 infections. However, it remains a possibility, and my officials are continuing to monitor the situation closely. Although the earlier risks are subsiding, other risks are now escalating, owing to downstream market disruptions feeding back up the supply chain to primary producers through price movements. Consequently, we are reassessing which response might be needed, taking on board the measures announced by the UK Government, such as the self-employment income support scheme and the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme.

I will now talk about the strain on the food-processing industries. Although supply chains are working effectively, there remain significant concerns among all stakeholders that staff availability for work could decline quickly, as fear of contracting the virus remains in the workforce. Calls have been made by the industry for COVID-19 tests to be made available for key workers in the agri-food sector to help ensure that adequate numbers of staff are available to maintain the food supply chain. My Department has been working with agri-food stakeholders to identify the types and number of key workers who could be tested. Following commencement of that testing programme, it is reported that staff in the food-processing sector are now availing themselves of it and that it is working well. Results are being made available within 24 hours, which has provided reassurance to the workforce. My Department has worked with the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association (NIFDA), the Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association (NIMEA) and the Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland (HSENI) on developing protocols for social distancing on production lines, and businesses are each putting their own measures in place, in line with current guidance, to protect and reassure staff. NIFDA estimates that the food-processing sector is currently producing to 100% of retail customer demand but not necessarily to 100% of previous production levels, as a result of the severe impact of COVID-19 on the food-service and hospitality sector. It also reports that absenteeism in the sector reduced to below 7% on average on 29 April from a high of 14% on 3 April.

Livestock marts closed voluntarily on 23 March 2020 in response to COVID-19 health and safety concerns. Since then, officials have maintained regular contact with livestock mart operators and have been reassured that robust operational protocols developed by marts in conjunction with other stakeholders, including the Health and Safety Executive, will enable them to conduct business in a manner that is safe for staff, farmers and buyers and that adheres to social-distancing requirements. Livestock marts play a crucial role in the essential supply of food to our citizens, and I welcome the decision by the Livestock Auctioneers' Association (LAA) to reopen livestock marts gradually. Sixteen markets recommenced sales last week, after implementing the new protocols. A further six markets, I believe, have recommenced sales this week. Video technology has been used at a number of mart venues over past weeks and will continue to be used. Industry feedback on the use of technology has been positive. Farmers, like people in all businesses, are facing financial difficulties as a result of COVID-19, and being able to trade again at marts will provide much-needed cash flow.

To date, as a result of initial panic buying in retail, COVID-19 has impacted on agricultural markets in Northern Ireland. There was a sharp shift in consumer demand away from food service to retail owing to the closure of the hospitality sector, market restrictions, food-service products being stored and uncertainty in the wider economy. Those effects are now beginning to manifest themselves in falling prices for farm produce. In particular, the main milk processors have indicated that the price that they pay to farmers for marts' raw milk intake will drop by between 1p and 1.5p a litre from the previous month. It is also expected that, with the dramatic impact of COVID-19 on international dairy markets, further sharp reductions will apply to prices in the months ahead.

Beef prices have also started to fall, with quotes currently at around 17p a kilo, which is 5% less than in March, and further reductions are also widely expected. To support markets, the EU Commission announced private storage aid for skimmed milk powder, butter, cheese, beef and veal, and sheep meat. Although that will provide some assistance to markets, I remain concerned about the market situation, particularly in the dairy and beef sector, where farmers could be facing further price reductions over coming months. Such price falls will lead to severe reduction in farm incomes and increase borrowing. Furthermore, although I appreciate that the COVID-19 self-employment income support scheme and the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme might be of benefit to agriculture businesses, they are not sufficient on their own. They have not been designed with agriculture businesses in mind, which have to keep running as before and are thus incurring full costs, with lower market returns.

I will move on to issues around ferry transport and export of goods. The ability of food processors to operate in a crisis is hugely important, but it is more about maintaining the flow of produce off-farm than about securing the supply of food for local customers. The majority of processed food supplies from our factories are destined for markets beyond Northern Ireland. There are emerging financial pressures on local primary producers, especially in the milk and beef sectors and in ornamental horticulture, and those could impact for longer on the Northern Ireland supply line. It is also vital to ensure that there are sufficient and ongoing supplies to farms of essentials, including animal feeds, seeds and chemicals for this year's growing seasons; that there is sufficient available labour; and that produce can reach the market. In most respects, that is in hand, but we need to look closely at an emerging problem. As a result of the disruption of shipping and international supply chains, the Executive are already aware of the problems for ferries and hauliers and of the work in hand with the Department for Transport and Her Majesty's Treasury to secure support. By way of an example, the Executive have agreed to contribute to a DfT package of support for ferry operators. The support package is for the three main ferry companies and facilitates the five major Irish sea routes. However, the ferries solve only part of the supply chain problem. The supply chain is critically reliant on hauliers for goods importing and exporting to and from Northern Ireland. Officials from the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) and my Department, which is driving the issue, are urgently working on an evidence base to understand the Northern Ireland-specific situation.

Finally, I will talk about assistance for horticulture. The ornamental horticulture production sector in Northern Ireland has around 210 growers and is worth around £24 million per annum. There is a narrow window for sales of plants, such as bedding and cut flowers, with 60% of annual sales occurring between March and June. Most plants have a shelf life in the nursery of between two and five weeks and cut flowers a number of days. Thereafter, they are unfit for market. Normal routes to market include garden centres, multiple retailers and other retail stores in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, but they are either closed or have focused their attention on selling other products that are deemed to be more essential. Owing to those unique circumstances, ornamental horticulture businesses are now facing huge financial losses. I have therefore asked whether the opportunity to reopen businesses, such as garden centres, whilst still observing the necessary health and safety requirements could be given serious consideration. That would provide the sector with a route to market for its produce and also enable people to recommence gardening, which assists physical and mental health and well-being. Should that proposal be given support, I would be happy to offer support from my officials to help businesses operate safely and within the Government's guidance on safeguarding.

Chair, I have addressed the nine points that you wanted me to cover. I can continue to update you on a range of priority issues, or, if you prefer, Committee members can ask questions at this point. I am happy with whichever.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Thank you, Minister. We will take the opportunity to ask questions at this point.

Minister, I will start with a couple of points that I want to mention. First, I note that, in situations in which they have to self-isolate, or someone in their house is self-isolating, front-line workers in the food-supply and food-processing sector can get tested through the national testing programme. However, the three testing centres are in Derry rugby club, the SSE Arena in Belfast and the Craigavon MOT centre. If you live in, for example, south-west Fermanagh, it is probably the best part of a 200-mile round trip to get to any of the three centres. I am not certain that rural-proofing has been done. Do you agree with me that that places agri-food workers at a disadvantage to other workers in the North, as they have to travel such distances to access the testing centres, albeit it is very welcome that we have finally moved to a position in which there is testing?

Mr Poots: I understand where you are coming from on the distances involved. I suppose that the testing centres are reaching as many people as possible without overexposing the running of their establishment and their response times for tests. It was not our role. We were not involved in setting up the centres, but I suppose that that was the perspective of those who did.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Is it possible to draw to the attention of the Public Health Agency (PHA) that that places agri-food workers in those parts at a slight disadvantage?

Mr Poots: It is not just agri-food workers.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Yes.

Mr Poots: I know that we are an agri-food Committee as such, but if you take the people in, for example, care homes, the numbers multiply substantially.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Secondly, you said that the various schemes were not designed with agribusinesses in mind. I am aware that representations have been made for a wider EU/Westminster support package for the industry here.

Mr Poots: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Although it is welcome that it is available to agri-food businesses here, I am not sure how relevant the self-employment support scheme is to farmers or how eligible they would be for it. Take, for example, cattle and sheep farmers, both less-favoured area (LFA) and lowland. Their average farm income for last year was, say, £12,000, and it was even lower this year. That is £1,000 a month. If you then take away 20%, that makes it £800. Minus tax, that translates to probably just over £600 a month for cattle and sheep farmers, LFA and lowland, from the self-employment income support scheme. The scheme would have negligible impact on those farmers.

The point is that certain farmers in other sectors whose income is slightly higher will be able to avail themselves of the self-employment support scheme, and for them it will have an impact, albeit perhaps not enough to sustain their businesses. The scheme will have no impact at all on farmers in the cattle and sheep sector, and there is no safety net for them. Do you agree with me that it is important to look at some sort of small-business scheme for the sector, which is particularly vulnerable at this time?

Mr Poots: I agree with you that the self-employment support scheme will not benefit some of those who need it most. In fact, it will not benefit most of those who need it most. I have been saying for a number of weeks now that we need something that is bespoke and that can be delivered to those who need it most and will benefit most from any funding that comes forward. We can apply to the EU scheme, but it is an €80 million scheme for all of the EU, so the EU did not exactly break the bank. It did something, but it was not very much. Nonetheless, our meat plants and dairy processors can apply for aid for private storage, and I encourage them to do that where they find that they have surplus material that they have trouble offloading.

I have pressed the UK Government quite consistently on getting a package, and I have raised the issue at the Executive on a number of occasions. I will raise it again at the Executive meeting tomorrow under "any other business". At this stage, we cannot really afford to wait about much longer to see whether the UK Government come forward with a package. That is for us in the Northern Ireland Executive to divvy up.

I have been hugely supportive of the hospitality, transport and all the other sectors that have benefited thus far from some type of support, on the basis that that is what is required to get people to the other side of COVID-19 and resuming their businesses and jobs, and for us to have an economy after this is all over. The principle that has been applied to everybody else should not be applied any differently to the farming community, who are the primary producers. They also need some support to get them to the other side of COVID-19. We are seeing a number of areas where they are taking a hit, but there are other areas where it is not so bad, so we need to focus on the areas where they are taking a hit.

I am keen to have the support of the Committee as I keep banging the drum for farmers at the Executive to get some sort of support package for them. I will just say that if the Executive are willing to do something, I am willing to search about in the Department and see what we can do to assist as

well. I am therefore not going to the Executive with a begging bowl, asking them to do it all. If the Department can assist, we will be more than willing to do so.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Thank you, Minister. I will take the opportunity to bring in Committee members, as a number have indicated that they wish to speak.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for coming along today and for his tireless efforts in supporting the industry through this important and trying time.

The industry has to be commended, from the farmer right through to the processor. Thousands of people are working tirelessly in the processing sector daily to make sure that there is food in the supermarkets and stores and that there is food on the table for everyone. They all need to be commended for that.

As the Minister said, a number of sectors are probably feeling the pain the most. They need some sort of a package to try to help them through this. Is the Minister aware of any discussions between the Department of Finance and the Treasury about acquiring more money for farmers?

Mr Poots: I am not. You would need to ask the Department of Finance that. We have pressed the issue at the Executive and have corresponded with the Department of Finance. We are keen to establish that support. We have also been corresponding directly with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and it is through DEFRA that the issue went to the Chancellor. That has not been delivered on as yet, however. Although you do not give up hope while there is still potential, it has proven quite challenging to get money out of the Chancellor for farming, and, I should say, for haulage as well. I am convinced that the haulage sector needs support, and I would like to see it getting support, because if we do not have the haulage sector, we will not have a food industry for very long here.

Mr McGuigan: Following on from the last two questions, I think that it would be great to see a package come from the British Exchequer or the Executive to help and support the agriculture sector.

As you were finishing, you said that you would also look about in the Department's budget. I would expect that work to have been happening in the Department. We are in the middle of a crisis, but certain work streams will have reduced budgetary pressures, so I would expect that work to be ongoing. I make that point in addition to my questions.

I want to ask about Brexit. All businesses across the North are focusing on the COVID-19 crisis. To a greater or lesser degree, that has had major impacts on the business community, particularly on agri-food and our farming sector. People are lobbying me about the impact of that and the potential double whammy of Brexit. The Minister is aware that the sector is asking for a pause on Brexit proposals until we come out the other side of the current crisis. Is he lobbying the Westminster Government for a pause on Brexit until this crisis is dealt with?

In briefings over the last number of weeks, the issue of environmental NGOs has been included. Every week, the briefing is similar: that meetings are happening. If anything positive has come out of this, it is the positive effect on the environment. It is important that environmental NGOs see their way through the crisis. They will have a big part to play in "the new normal", as we call it, on the far side of this crisis. Maybe we could have a further update on that as well.

Mr Poots: You asked about three issues. The Department is looking at its budget. That course of work is being done. However, this is a small Department, in its day-to-day administration costs. When you remove the single farm payment element, the Department is not one that runs about with many hundreds of millions of pounds. What we are able to produce will help, but it will not resolve issues. We will do our best to augment anything that is brought forward.

Secondly, you asked about Brexit. I am aware of the agri-food industry's concern that it is struggling to cope with the challenges of COVID-19, and the UK Government have taken a clear stance that the EU exit will continue as planned, with no extension to its implementation periods. That has been repeated over and over in various meetings that I have been at. The industry is concerned that it does not have the bandwidth to deal with the implications of COVID-19 and provide the necessary engagement on the Ireland/Northern Ireland protocol, future UK/EU trade negotiations and UK/rest of the world trade issues. I recognise those concerns. At this point, the Executive have not taken a position on whether they should ask for an extension to the implementation period, and, when this issue is considered, we

will, of course, reflect industry concerns. I highlight the fact that the UK Government have given no hint whatsoever that they are prepared to reconsider their position. The position has been raised at a number of meetings that I have been at. The Scots and Welsh, in particular, have pressed very hard on it, but no give whatsoever has been shown at this point.

Mr McGuigan: Environmental NGOs?

Mr Poots: We got £22 million extra for charities, and they fall into that field. DOF is leading on this, and DFC has a very significant role to play. We will request that those NGOs that are registered charities in our remit are not forgotten when that money is distributed.

Mrs Barton: Thank you, Minister, for coming this afternoon and giving us the latest update.

Mr Poots: You are welcome.

Mrs Barton: Some of the questions that I was going to ask have been answered, but I have two others.

I have spoken to some councillors about recycling centres. I understand the need to reopen them. I live in the west, where there is a lot of fly-tipping. Kerbside waste — bins — can be lifted and got rid of, but some councils are concerned that, once the skips are full, other stuff brought into recycling centres — old white goods and things like that — cannot be. Has that been brought to your attention? Are you aware of that?

Mr Poots: I am picking up the reverse. The industry tells me that it needs materials and is not getting them. For example, when we had a Zoom conference meeting last week, a company that uses waste to generate energy said that it was finding it more difficult to get materials. This is not just a Northern Ireland problem; it is happening across the UK and Ireland. That is proving to be an issue. A facility up in Londonderry that burns a lot of wood to generate heat and electricity has the same problem. It still has enough material but is very concerned about the amount coming in. Many recycling companies are keen to get more material at this stage. Sometimes, I wonder whether council officers are playing a line to some councillors. I have been hearing from the recycling companies that the demand for much of that material is strong.

Mrs Barton: Is it possible for you to feed that back to councillors and chief executives? That seems to be the thinking in the west, anyway.

Mr Poots: I am very happy to do that.

Mrs Barton: My other question is about car parks being closed where necessary. This has been the bane of my life, as you know. I have communicated with you about it. I understand the need for car parks to be closed, but, at the same time, cars are parking along the roadside, bumper to bumper. What is the difference between cars sitting parked along the roadside, bumper to bumper, with families having to push in and out between them, and cars being parked in a car park?

Mr Poots: Our problems were highlighted — it seems ages ago now — on a particularly nice weekend, which was the first good weekend of the year. Some of our facilities were bursting at the seams, and cars were parked outside them as well on those days. Tollymore Forest Park, Castlewellan and Hillsborough are the ones that I know offhand because they are more local to me. It was probably the same everywhere else. We moved to lockdown the next day, so we could not live with the message that it was OK to go out and do that. There were just too many people on the sites at that point.

At this stage, people are being good about observing social distancing. Might it be possible to open car parks? I think that it might. I would like to get a wee bit more space, in that, if the message is to stay at home, it is not really appropriate. However, if the message moves from "stay at home" to "stay safe", with social distancing and all of that, allowing a bit more flexibility on travel, I am certainly very happy to look at that. While the message remains to "stay at home", "stay safe", and people are not supposed to travel, it would be contradictory to do that. At the same time, Rosemary, I can see the sense in what you are saying. I get it, but I find myself in a tricky situation, which is not uncommon.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): On the same topic, Minister, I sent you an email before the meeting, which you will not have had a chance to look at. I wanted to draw to your attention that one of our councillors in South Down highlighted an incident at Castlewellan Forest Park at the weekend when an ambulance could not access the park because there are bollards at the entrance. That probably applies to all parks. Perhaps you could look at that to see whether protocols could be agreed with the Ambulance Service for when ambulances need access to the parks in an emergency.

Mr Poots: It is a reasonable point, and we need to take that into consideration. I know that at Hillsborough, for example, the gates are closed, so it would be no different. You could not get an ambulance closer to where someone was having a heart attack, for example, or had become ill in another way.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): I dropped you an email just before the meeting. I appreciate that you will not have had time to read it, but it is in your inbox.

Mr Poots: OK. We will take it into consideration. I had not considered it.

Ms Bailey: Thank you, Minister, Norman and David, for being here today. I have two questions, if that is OK, one of which relates to the update that you just provided to us. The other concerns the update that you gave to the Ad Hoc Committee on Thursday.

I want to ask about the ornamental horticulture sector and your appeal to open garden centres. While that is a welcome move for garden centres and will, as you say, alleviate some of the pressures on the sector by allowing a route to market, it comes too late for many growers. Without a compensation package in place, those businesses are still set to go under. You are, no doubt, aware of the exclusion of wholesale horticultural nurseries, for example, from the small business rate relief grant scheme. That is due to the fact that they do not have a rateable value. Perhaps it would be straightforward to use an alternative, for example, a VAT return, to generate an interim payment.

Growers told me that they were informed by DAERA that its officials have been in contact with the Department for the Economy about getting businesses included in the grant scheme. The response to an FOI request to the Department stated that there had been no communication for the period stipulated. Maybe that FOI was poorly worded or asked for the wrong information. So, can you give us information on what plan has been put together, and can we get concrete information on what the plan for that sector looks like? I have been informed that, unless something is done as urgently as this week, we could lose between a third and half of our seasonal growing sector.

Mr Poots: I feel immense sympathy for people in horticulture because I get a sense that they are like farmers who have their wheat and barley ready to cut, and the sun is shining, but they are not allowed to put a combine harvester into the field. They have spent all winter propagating plants, looking after them and carrying out all the work that is needed to bring them to market. At the very point when they should be selling that product, which has a limited shelf life, they are being told, "No, you cannot do that".

My number one priority is to get garden centres opened safely, and I believe that the capacity to do so is there. It is not an issue. I know that GB has developed an extensive paper to support the argument. There is logic to this. People will go into a space that is the size of this Building, and there might be 50 people in it at one stage. At the same time, people are queuing to get into off-licences that are the size of this room. I think that it was the right decision to keep them open because their closure would have impacted upon the supermarkets. Off-licences have the same throughput of people as garden centres, so I do not think that it is a defensible position for the Executive not to open garden centres. I hope that that will be addressed very quickly.

However, garden centres may still need to get some form of national support, and they have been part of our argument to the Department of Finance and to the Executive. It has not been just about farmers; it has also been about the horticultural sector. If the centres are allowed to open, we can better assess their need. If they are not allowed to open, the need will be much greater and the cost to the public purse much greater. If they are allowed to open, the compensation that may be required will reduce significantly because they will get many more sales and much more income through that method. However, we should recognise that March to June is their key period, and we are now in May, so they have already lost two months.

Ms Bailey: It is my understanding that some in that sector have been told that the Department is working to put in place a financial package, but nobody knows what that is. Will you give us some concrete information on what is going on? They have tried sending an FOI to the Department and are still not getting any information back.

Mr Poots: We have made the request, Clare, to the Executive for financial support, and that is for both the horticulture sector and the dairy and meat sector, in the main. We have already supported fishing, and we are looking at agriculture as well, but, for this particular sector, we have asked for that support. The Department of Finance says that we need more information, so that is the work that is being done. The final decision on this cannot be made until we know whether they will be open or closed. If they are to remain closed for another month or six weeks, their entire sales for this period will be wiped out. I know that some are doing collections and home deliveries, but that will not cut it. It is not the same as people going into a garden centre, walking through it, identifying what they want and taking it home. We recognise that, if they can open, the cost to the public purse will be considerably reduced. If they are forced to stay closed, which I do not believe will achieve anything with regard to public health, many businesses will be put into dire straits. The consequence of that is that they will have an expectation that we will help them in some way because we forced them to close their business for the busiest period. To do that without any offer of compensation is something that we, as the Government, cannot stand over.

Ms Bailey: I want to follow up on an interesting statement that you made during your update to the Ad Hoc Committee last week. You said that agriculture is not the environmental problem that some suggest. It is. I can go back to facts from your Department. Your Department states that agriculture accounts for 27% of greenhouse gas emissions in Northern Ireland, for example, and that deforestation has led to Northern Ireland being a net emitter rather than a carbon sink. There is also mention of the excess use of fertilisers and other harmful farming practices that result in the loss of biodiversity, and harmful ammonia emissions. The list goes on. That is information from your Department. Who are the "some people" you referred to in your statement on Thursday? Where is the evidence for what you said on Thursday?

Mr Poots: We have seen agriculture carry on, as it has been across the world, and we have the same population, but we are seeing massive improvements in the environment. It is, therefore, fairly evident that the places that are not working to the extent that they were previously are causing the most damage to the environment. That is very clear.

People are very good at talking about how much gas a cow produces. There is a logic to all of this, which does not seem to be applied by people who should be more logical. A cow produces so much gas because she eats carbon-enriched grass, and grass is carbon-enriched because it draws carbon out of the atmosphere in the first instance. Many people have not got their head around this, but they need to: grass is a capturer of carbon and a form of carbon sequestration. The older that grass gets — as its roots develop each year — the more it sequesters carbon. People seem to want to talk about the emissions, but they do not want to talk about the carbon sink. Every field that contains grass, hedges and trees is a carbon sink. That is how we need to be looking at our fields and farms. We need to recognise the carbon capture that is taking place. As a consequence of that, the cow that gets blamed for doing so much damage to the environment is in fact utilising the grass that captures the carbon in the first instance. The grass captures the carbon, which the cow eats and emits, which creates a circle. Furthermore, in the slightly wetter times of the year, which is most of the year in Northern Ireland, Ireland and GB, the cow tramps grass into the soil, which is a further capture of carbon. People really need to get their head around that and start to do some scientific work on the carbon that is captured by grass, how animal production utilises grass and, indeed, how animals tramp grass back into the soil. I learned about that many, many years ago. However, the big lobby groups and large NGOs want to ignore it entirely. It is easy to go after farming. It is easy to identify the emissions from cows. None of them wants to try to make any effort whatsoever to consider the benefits of carbon sequestration by grass. I have had good conversations with Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) representatives who specialise in grass management. They are absolutely certain that there is substantial carbon sequestration by grass. Maybe you will not pass any fields on your way home tonight, Clare, but, if you do, remember that they are carbon sinks. Peat bogs and forests are even better carbon sinks, but every field of grass is a carbon sink.

Mr Harvey: It is good to see everybody in the flesh today for a wee change.

Mr Poots: Nice tan, Harry.

Mr Harvey: Thank you. I welcome you, Minister, and thank you very much for your report today. There is some great news in it. I must admit that I think that the reopening of livestock marts was a major necessity. I really welcome that.

One issue that concerns me is the price of milk. I do not know what we can or cannot do about that, but I see it as being a worry in the future for an awful lot of farmers in this country.

Mr Poots: Yes. I was going to look at my phone, but I have left it upstairs. Yesterday, there were new world market prices for various milk commodities. The price of butter was down by 5.5%. The price of dried milk was also down. Those are two commodities that we sell quite heavily. However, the price of cheese was up by 7%. That is another one that we sell very well. One particular company specialises in that. Overall, however, prices have not come down as badly as one might have anticipated. We are now seeing some orders opening up in the Far East. It appears that there is some movement in the Chinese market again. The African market, which is mainly for dried milk, has stayed as it was. We need to watch that very closely over the next number of weeks and months. Primary producers have already seen a reduction of 6%, or 1.5p, from 25p to 23.5p per litre. That was before anything had fed through. I will just mark the cards of the middlemen and retailers. Perhaps they have already taken the hit, and, given what the world market prices seem to indicate at present, maybe no further price reductions will be necessary.

A number of areas have been hit quite badly. The service sector is one of them. The food-service sector is where you see the likes of coffee shops closing down. That is where there was huge demand for milk to make those nice big lattes and so forth. You do not tend to make them at home. You normally make a black coffee with a dash of milk. People tend not to make the same coffee at home as they have when they are out. The retail trade picked up some of the demand, but not all of it. We are very keen to see some of those facilities — even the drive-through facilities, or whatever — open up again. I have engaged in a number of meetings in that regard. McDonald's, for example, was taking 12% of Northern Ireland's beef. Coffee shops were taking huge quantities of milk. Kentucky Fried Chicken was using 500,000 chickens a week. When you take big players like that out of the system, it has an impact, and all the restaurants and so on are on top of that. Those facilities are reluctant to open unless they get a lot of assurances, and I can understand that. When you, as a customer, enter one of those premises and see two people working in a relatively small area, you ask yourself, "Where is the social distancing for the workers?". Those facilities are very concerned that they do not open until they get that right, but their opening, certainly for the users, can be done safely.

Again, it goes back to this issue of whether you will be allowed to travel. If you are to be allowed to travel, it strikes me as being entirely reasonable. People buy chips mostly at the weekend; sometimes during the week as well. Facilities such as Chinese restaurants and Indian restaurants are open, so it strikes me that McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Costa Coffee, or whatever it happens to be, should be in a position where, if it is safe for their employees, they can do the same.

Mr Harvey: I appreciate your comments.

Mr Blair: I add my thanks to the Minister for being here today to take our questions. I will return to the established format of two permissible questions, and I will try to be brief in doing so. I hope that the Minister will accept that. My first is based on the general and ongoing issue of the implications of the Agriculture Bill for Northern Ireland. Many of us here, and others, have spoken about the unique agriculture and agri-food circumstances of so many areas of Northern Ireland. Has this Committee's expressed preference in response to the Agriculture Bill legislative consent motion (LCM) for a sunset clause for Northern Ireland been progressed by the Department? In general, what preparations are being made? Are those being linked to any amendments being tabled at Westminster?

My second question is on the environment. If anything good has come out of COVID-19 at all, it is, perhaps, the acceptance that there have been some environmental benefits. We all know that pollution has reduced as a direct consequence of less traffic on the roads. I think that we accept that wild flowers are growing where the grass is usually cut more regularly, and, across the board, there is an acceptance that that is a good thing. Is the Department trying to harness information on that, take it forward and build policies around it into the future? Does it intend to link with others in doing so?

Mr Poots: I will ask Norman to take the first one, and I will deal with the environmental one. This morning, I took part in three meetings, with around 40 people. Most people were at home, and they were perfectly good meetings. I cannot see, going forward, how we go back to how it was. Do not get me wrong: an Assembly Chamber is a debating chamber, and, by and large, you need to be there.

Also, if you want to close a deal with someone, you probably want to be sitting across the table from them and looking them in the eye. However, loads and loads and loads of meetings out there are quite technical in nature, and you can go through them.

I was talking to a guy who has an engineering company, and he was able to buy additional software that allows participants in a meeting to turn to a particular page of a document, bring up a drawing and mark in red exactly what they are talking about. He said that his engineering company was doing business in London, working on the drawing and design and all of that. Using that format, his staff were able to do everything that they did previously. That will take cars off the road. That will reduce pressure on our roads, which has always been an issue for all of us. We keep building more roads, and we keep getting more cars. There is a real chance. There is a benefit to people who have childcare responsibilities and all of that. They can take a few minutes to drop their kid off to school, and they are straight back to work again. They can also lift their children from school. There are so many benefits from it. It is keeping families together as well. People have toyed with the idea of homeworking, but they have never actually embraced it. Now that we have been forced to embrace it, there are great opportunities for that.

The same applies when it comes to flying. Many meetings have involved people going over to join with each other in London or Manchester, which involves flights, or people have been flying back and forth to America and all around the world. It will hit the airline industry, but I do not see that there will be a need for all the flights that there were in the past. To me, that is a good thing. That is a positive thing. It will be good for the environment and good for people. There will be less flying and a far better use of the technology that has existed, but has never been fully embraced in the way that we have been forced to embrace it now.

Norman, do you want to take the question about the Bill?

Mr Norman Fulton (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): The Agriculture Bill is now effectively paused. I think that it is at Second Reading stage. The LCM was passed a number of weeks ago. That debate happened. That was fed through, so consent has now been given for the elements in the Bill that relate to Northern Ireland. Our expectation is that that will now proceed over there. That is the next stage in the process.

Mr Blair: Sorry, we cannot hear you totally well in here today, but the wishes of the Committee in relation to the sunset clause are that the Department starts preparing policy with a view to a legislative process further down the line, with an indicative timing of 2024. I am aware that there may be other timings out there and amendments in other places, but I am trying to ascertain if that is being looked at also.

Mr Fulton: The LCM was passed. I do not recall anything in the LCM that asked for a sunset clause to be inserted in the Northern Ireland annex of the Bill.

Mr Blair: Cheers.

Mr Catney: Thank you, Minister and officials, for coming. From your response to COVID-19 in the Chamber, it is clear that there is a lot of work being done from home, and it is showing. Looking at the world markets, you might have a better insight into that. I know that Harry brought up the issue of milk. I believe that they may well be opening up again or trying to open up to buy that dry powdered milk, which is probably one of our key markets, along with what you already said about the increase on cheeses.

Just indulge me a little bit more. I have to agree with you. I believe that the world and how we do business has changed. The opportunities for that will also change. From those opportunities, they will grow out. Yes, the deaths that we have had have been regrettable, but all farms, as you stated last week, are businesses. They will be looking at opportunities, and there will be opportunities when we try to come out of this. I am thinking of small rural farms, people not travelling abroad as much, trying to grow our hospitality and tourism industry with those farms, and the opportunities that will come out of that. It will have to be cross-cutting and we will have to look at our planning, but, no doubt, your Department is planning for that at the moment, and I am sure that you see those opportunities.

Before I finish, my reason for thinking that you might not have come today was because of the passing of your father, and I know how much he meant to all your family. Last night, I got a call from you to

pass on your concerns to John Dallat's wife, Anne. I know that you have a busy schedule, but it shows that you still have time for those common touches that mean so much, and I thank you for that.

Mr Poots: Thank you for those comments, Pat. There is, perhaps, one other observation that we can make. No one here is starving as a result of COVID-19. They may be in other parts of the world, but I have not been made aware of it over and above what would normally be the case, but less food is required. My suspicion is that less food gets being thrown out at home than in the food service sector, which now accounts for 40% of our food. When it comes to the issue of feeding the world and its burgeoning population, and the pressure that that puts on primary production and on the environment as a consequence of trying to produce more food to feed more people, we should not lose sight of the issue of food waste and seeking to reduce it. That is something that needs to be borne in mind. It does not necessarily help the farmer, in a way, but, at the same time, as we go forward, we should not be wasting food. You mentioned my father: food was certainly not wasted in their house because there were 10 youngsters, and a lot of families would be the same.

Mr Catney: It shows, Minister. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Poots: They were brought up in a scenario where they always had food, but there was not a surplus of it. There was not a fridge full of it, and you were not too worried about use-by dates or sell-by dates when they were growing up. I was always taught as a child to finish my dinner, which proved to be a problem as I became an adult, because I still finish my dinner whether I need it or not.

I appreciate what you say, Pat. I recognise that we cannot keep going on in the way that we have been. It is crazy that you can fly from Belfast to London cheaper than you can get a train from Birmingham or Manchester to London. That does not strike me as being logical, but we are capable of doing that. There is an impact on the environment, and we need to recognise that and try to reduce all of it. I want people to be as free as possible to travel where they want to, but, at the same time, we need to recognise that there has been an awful lot of travel that was not required, and we really need to reduce it.

I should say that I warmly welcome the announcement that Kilroot is changing from coal-fired to gas-fired. That is going to be a major benefit with regard to Northern Ireland's greenhouse gas production. It is very significant that that announcement was made in the last 24 hours. It is not my Department, but we have responsibility for the environment, and I think that is very good, given that we are producing over 40% of our electricity from renewable sources. It is good that we are moving away from coal in those circumstances as well.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Before I move on, are you still online, Maurice?

Mr M Bradley: I am indeed, sir.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Do you want to ask a question? You are very quiet there.

Mr M Bradley: Yes, please, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Go for it.

Mr M Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answers. We have had a lot of information passed out to us this afternoon. I wanted to pick up a point on the issue of horticulture and the reasons why it is vital that the industry is reopened. Big stores such as B&Q and Homebase, which sell horticultural products, are open and will soon opening their own garden centres, because they are open in other ways.

I want to ask the Minister to look again at angling, particularly river and sea angling. It is a largely solitary activity, and it is easy to maintain social distancing, especially in river angling. It is therapeutic, and it generates income through the purchase of licences, tackle, baits and rods etc. Angling should be looked at as one of the options that we have to get people out and about and return some sort of normality to Northern Ireland.

Mr Poots: Thank you, Maurice. I have a lot of sympathy for what you are saying. Lockdown has been very hard on people and, whilst many of us have enjoyed spending more time with our families, in some instances, where domestic violence is prevalent, it is certainly not an enjoyable experience; it

has made matters worse. Where people have mental health and stress issues, things like gardening, angling and walking relieve stress and can help with mental health. I know, particularly, that many people with PTSD just enjoy getting out to the riverside. They are out there on their own for a few hours, it is solitary, they have peace and quiet, they engage in what they are doing and they are not doing harm to anybody else while engaging in that.

Consequently, I believe that we should be moving to reopen angling. I phoned the Health Minister yesterday on the issue. I have asked him to come back to me on it. It is something that I think we should be seriously moving on. Again, we are caught in this business that we should not really be travelling. So, if we do open it up, is it just for people within walking or cycling distance of a local river or reservoir? However, angling is pretty much a solitary pursuit where people go out, generally in ones or twos. If you do go out with somebody else to angle, you do not tend to stand close together, because you will get your lines caught and so forth. Social distancing is really not a problem for anglers. Aside from the issue of travelling, there is not much ground against having angling brought back again.

Mr M Bradley: Thank you very much for that answer, Minister.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): All right, Maurice. William, you were looking in there.

Mr Irwin: Yes, I had anglers on with me yesterday about the very same issue. It is good to hear that question being asked.

I welcome the fact that the Minister has raised the age of young calves that need to be tested for TB. When does the Minister see TB testing being restored to some sort of normality?

Mr Poots: While we are not enforcing TB testing on farmers, farmers and vets can TB test where they are confident that they can socially isolate from each other. TB testing has actually continued and is happening at around 50% of the rate that it was previously happening at. There is a clearly a demand, and I can understand why many farmers, particularly at this time of the year, before — well, cattle are going out now, and have been out — large numbers of cattle are put away to out-farms and so forth when it is much more difficult to gather them up, will want to do the testing. The handling facilities are, perhaps, better on the main farms as well.

An element of TB testing has taken place, and we have created certain flexibilities. So if someone required a test, and within seven days of that requirement were not able to sell, they can leave a space for 35 days and so forth. The age when the first test is required has been upped to 180 days. We have taken a whole series of steps to facilitate TB testing for the farming community. I am actually heartened by the amount of testing that has taken place by agreement between farmers and vets, because it means that we are not going to be hit with the same huge backlog that could have built up, and it will be much easier for us to handle when we get a bit more space. I do not expect it to be done in weeks, but we will keep a watching brief on COVID-19, and, when we feel comfortable that it is safe to do so, we will move on it.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): I will let Rosemary in very briefly, because we have to be out of here soon.

Mr Poots: I am not in any hurry.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): We will be locked out.

Mrs Barton: Minister, this is hot off the press. I have just had an email to say that the UK Government have just announced a new fund that will enable dairy farmers in England to access up to £10,000 each to help them overcome the impact of the coronavirus outbreak.

Mr Poots: I am aware of that one, and it is not particularly helpful to us.

Mrs Barton: It is not helpful to here?

Mr Poots: That scheme is for just over 500 farmers in England who dump milk. It is up to £10,000 to cover up to 50% of the loss that they took in dumping milk. Whilst it is better than a poke in the eye, they are still facing considerable losses. Remarkably, in most of the times when there has been

pressure on milk prices, the liquid milk market has been stronger. England is 80% liquid milk and 20% processing. We are basically the reverse, with 80% processing and 20% liquid. It is because England has a huge market for liquid milk, and it is on their doorstep. Milk does not travel well. It travels better as cheese, butter or other products. On this occasion, remarkably, liquid milk has taken the hit more than the cheeses, butters and so forth. That was done because a number of the milk companies lost big orders with some of those companies that were using big quantities of liquid milk, and they just could not take the milk. Subsequently, farmers had to dump the milk until they found other markets for it, so that is what it is aimed at. Unfortunately, it is not what I have been pushing George Eustice for.

Mrs Barton: No, OK.

Mr Poots: All right?

Mrs Barton: No, I just saw it.

Mr Poots: Yes. Thank you, Rosemary.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Thank you, Rosemary. We are going to have to move on, folks. I thank Minister Poots, Norman and David for attending the Committee meeting. No doubt we will be in contact and you will be with us again, hopefully in a post-COVID-19 future where as many of us as possible can survive this experience as far as possible. Thanks very much.

Mr Poots: Well, good health to all of you.

Some Members: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Take care now. Safe home.