



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment  
and Rural Affairs

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Draft Business Plan:  
Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

24 June 2020

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Draft Business Plan: Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

24 June 2020

**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 Harry Harvey  
Mr William Irwin

**Witnesses:**

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

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** From DAERA, I welcome Dr Denis McMahon, the permanent secretary; Norman Fulton, the deputy secretary of the food and farming group; David Small, the deputy secretary of the environment, marine and fisheries group; and Roger Downey, the grade 5 finance director. I ask you to brief the Committee.

**Dr Denis McMahon (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you for the opportunity to present the DAERA business plan. I will say a few words, if that is OK, just to introduce it.

The plan is quite different to previous plans, for a number of reasons. First, we are coming through a once-in-a-generation pandemic, when rapid and discontinuous change has happened and is happening. While change is inevitable, progress is not, so we need to secure that. Secondly, we are approaching the end of the transition period following the UK's exit from the EU, although we have not seen many actual changes — there have been some — resulting from that as yet. As we said at our previous evidence session, changes will happen over the coming months. Thirdly, it is clear that, even prior to the pandemic, there was a huge growth in public awareness on the environment. That awareness has increased significantly for a range of reasons, not least the clear response of nature to what is being termed, I see, by the BBC, the "anthropause". That is a new word for me, but it is a good way to describe what has happened.

Our business plan reflects those major environmental, economic and societal changes. Importantly, it also reflects the Minister's wish to have sustainability at the centre of our plans, actions and outcomes, as framed in our purpose:

*"Sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape valued by everyone."*

In respect of 2020-21, work has been undertaken to develop business plan targets for the Department that recognise, one, the need to address the challenges of today, as well as, two, looking to the future to renew the Department, the economy and the environment. That is against the backdrop of COVID-19 and our exit from the EU. A fresh and more strategic approach has been adopted for this business plan to reflect the way in which we need to align the Department in a much more joined-up way. In short, we want to be one team moving in one direction.

The business planning process commenced in December 2019, when officials were asked to perform clean-sheet thinking and to go right back to basics and ask, "What is it we want to do?" We then set about getting some key strategic priorities. Common themes included climate change, sustainable agriculture, fisheries and food, waste management, thriving rural communities, and health and well-being. Those were used as a basis for determining the Department's key priorities for the year ahead. Then, of course, COVID-19 happened, and we had to focus on what must be done. Strategic objectives have been designed to align with the purpose of the Department and the relevant Programme for Government outcomes. They also cover the Department's regulatory, governance and resource management responsibilities. The objectives are:

*"Natural Environment*

*To protect and enhance our natural environment now and for future generations ...*

*Economic Growth*

*To enhance our food, forestry, fishery and farming sectors using efficient and environmentally sustainable models which support economic growth.*

*Rural Communities*

*To champion thriving rural communities that contribute to prosperity and wellbeing.*

*Exemplar Organisation".*

On that last point of being an exemplar organisation, it is worth focusing for a moment on the Department. In the past two years, our employee engagement index has increased by eight percentage points. For people who are not familiar with that, it is a way of measuring how focused people are in the Department. That is against a trend of very little growth over the Northern Ireland Civil Service. We have 2,500 staff equipped with laptops and working remotely. Even prior to the pandemic, DAERA led the way in the use of distributed technologies: for example, at the end of 2019, we had 1,500 videoconferencing calls in one month.

A number of key themes have come out through this, one of which is this point about connection and how we use technology. We have, for example, staff events every two weeks, where between 700 and 900 people log on. The Minister has spoken at a number of those events, and there is real interaction. It is about working as a team. I say that to assure you that you can have confidence that the Department is working hard to improve its performance and to keep it at a high level, which it has done.

As I said, the priorities are closely aligned to the Programme for Government. Our focus has not just been on the main outcome to which we contribute, which is outcome 2:

*"We live and work sustainably — protecting the environment".*

We have also tried to work in partnership with other areas of government.

We are committed to the sustainable production of quality, safe, wholesome food, underpinned by high standards of animal, fish and plant health and welfare; robust traceability; strong environmental standards; the protection of our natural capital; a skilled workforce; internationally recognised science; and a vibrant rural community. In this context, I want to mention food security. We need secure supply lines for the food that we bring into Northern Ireland from the UK, the EU and the rest of the world. While we grow a lot of food here, we rely on grain imports and we have a network of supply into and out of our food chain that stretches across the world. That is why we are developing the idea of a food observatory to keep an eye on all those different aspects to make sure that they are working, and we will work with DEFRA on that. It is also worth noting that the Northern Ireland food sector accounts for

32% of Northern Ireland manufacturing sales, but our food strategy goes way beyond that. Food will not be taken for granted for at least a generation, and we must cherish it for the asset that it is, both for society and in a wider international sense.

It is also vital not to overlook the importance of this opportunity to help address many of the long-term environmental and climate change challenges that we face. This can be done by ensuring that we put ourselves on a trajectory for green growth, where sustainability is at the heart of our economic recovery and the optimum outcomes are achieved. It is worth mentioning that the Minister made a very welcome key announcement on that yesterday. To give you an example, our Department has saved 55,000 commuter miles per day as a result of people working from home. It is a big cost saving, and it is a saving for the environment. It equates to approximately two million miles saved over the first 35 days of lockdown, with a reduction of 445 tonnes of CO2 not being added to the atmosphere. It would take 500 trees 40 years to absorb this level of CO2. It gives you a sense of what is possible. By embracing and supporting changes to working more broadly across society, we will be able to deliver many benefits, not just for our staff and the citizens that they serve but for the environment as well. A number of people have come back from London or other parts, and are now living here but working in London. There is a lesson here about what we can do to take advantage of Northern Ireland's assets.

Green growth will aim to develop Northern Ireland as a strategic food zone, a strategic environment zone, a strategic energy zone and an agile working zone. That is a way of saying that we have important assets here that we need to recognise and use and find a way to grow. Those are themes that the Minister covered. Partnership working will be required to do that, and we have a strong history of working with people from other Departments, arm's-length bodies, local councils, business organisations and sectors. We will continue with our engaging, collaborative approach. We also need to build our global networks and engagement platforms across key policy areas such as the environment, trade, education, science and rural affairs. We must look outwards and learn from good practice. Norman and I were in a call recently with some American contacts to see how we can improve our research programme in partnership with them. That is something that we have a long history of doing. Now, with the technology, we can do much more of that.

We will be happy to talk through the 16 targets with you. Those targets have been identified as being key for the Department in this financial year. That just recognises that, with COVID, we had to be realistic about what must happen, not just what we think should happen. There are other targets that are held within group business plans that are still there. It is not that we are stopping anything. What we are saying is that we need to focus on these areas and really try to make progress on them as we come out of COVID.

As I say, we will be happy to talk through the 16 targets with you. It is worth noting that they broadly cover the priorities that I described earlier. It is not possible to apply a simple categorisation to targets like this, because a lot of them are joined up, but I suppose it is worth saying that almost half of them have an environmental focus, while the other half address issues on food, agriculture and fisheries. There is a major focused objective on rural affairs that links and works with all of them. All the objectives have an important role in supporting and developing rural communities. Importantly, rural communities will be central to delivering the other objectives.

All of this is happening as we transition to new arrangements following the UK's exit from the EU, and you can see that a number of the targets relate to that. While this is a focused plan, it contains within it a huge agenda for change. For each objective, a great deal of work is under way or about to begin, and there is more work going on underneath all of that.

Thank you for listening to those opening remarks. I just wanted to give you a flavour of why we got to where we got to with the plan. We are happy to talk through the objectives within the plan, if that works for you.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Thank you, Denis. That was a helpful overview of the business plan. This almost touches on the briefing that we received earlier. The fulfilment of a number of your targets, particularly numbers 1 to 5, will be predicated on the outcome of the Brexit negotiations and the transition phase. I think that, at your most recent briefing here, you indicated that preparations were at an amber/red stage. Can you give us an assessment of the impact? One of the challenges, as our researchers said earlier, is knowing what we are preparing for. We are not sure if there is going to be a comprehensive trade deal or no deal. How can you plan to fulfil your targets in the absence of that definitive knowledge of where we will be in six months' time?

**Dr McMahon:** Norman can talk in a bit more detail, and David can touch on some of the environmental issues. From the beginning, we have taken the view that we will work on a realistic worse-case scenario. We therefore work on the basis of what would happen if there were not a trade deal and the sort of measures that we would then need to put in place. That is something that we talked about when we were doing the no-deal planning as well, where we needed to make sure that we were ready for everything. One of the challenges with that is that trying to be ready for every outcome is exhausting, because you have a lot of alternatives to think about, and there is also the recognition that some of the work that we do will, hopefully, be unnecessary. I know that it sounds odd, but you need to do it anyway. At the minute, our scenario planning is based on the question, "What do we need to do if we do not end up with a deal?" Again, hopefully, we will not need to do that.

A huge amount of work has been going on. Last time, we touched on some of the operational arrangements. Apart from that, there is a huge amount of work around making sure that we have a working rule book and legislation in place. That might be a good place to start, Norman, if you want to say a little about where we are on that.

**Mr Norman Fulton (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** There is a big programme of legislation. The Committee may well have had an indication of the scale of the task that lies ahead. Some of that legislation will be partly predicated on the outcome of some of the ongoing discussions on the application of the protocol. Some of those issues still have to be effectively negotiated within the joint committee. We are feeding into those processes. Hopefully, we will make significant progress over the summer.

Whilst some of the detailed aspects of the protocol will be influenced by whether there is a free trade agreement, the broad shape of the protocol and what we will need to do are pretty well set. We need to make progress to be ready to implement and live with that. Also, you will see mention of contingency planning in target 1. We do need to think about what could happen if we do not have a free trade agreement with Europe. That has to come into our thinking as we look at what possible disruptions there might be, to ensure that we have plans to deal with those, if necessary. That is part of our work plan over the coming six months.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** What level of engagement or preparation have you had with the sector in preparing it for this? I raised it at the most recent meeting: there is the possibility — hopefully not — of exit declarations, for example. It would be challenging to cover the cost of that, for example. What level of preparation and engagement have you had with the sector for the different scenarios?

**Mr Fulton:** It is significant, and it is ramping up as we get into some of the more detailed aspects of all this. Our trade and agriculture committee is a key stakeholder group where the main food, agriculture and environmental interests get around the table. We can discuss in detail some of the issues that need to be resolved over the coming months. For example, what is a qualifying good or what is unfettered access? In that context, it is about what the industry wants it to be. We then feed that into Whitehall, because these are the types of things that need to be addressed over the coming months.

Moreover, communication from ourselves and Whitehall will ramp up significantly as we head towards the latter part of the summer and into the autumn to prepare the industry for what it will have to do come 1 January. Therefore, plans are being advanced to make sure that there is good communication. Part of it will be managing expectations, and there will be some issues on which we will not get a definitive answer until quite late in the day, whereas, with others, we will know sooner. It will be a rolling programme, and, as and when we understand exactly what the implications are, we will make sure that the industry knows about them. We will also give the industry clear opportunities to seek to influence the agenda and to make sure that this works for it as best it can.

**Mr David Small (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** Chairman, we are working with the fisheries industry in the same way as Norman described with wider agri-food, because it is important that we maintain close engagement with the fisheries industry, which obviously has expectations around Brexit. In the same way as Norman suggests with the agri-food industry, fisheries will need to be prepared to deal with whatever we face in 2021, so we have been engaging with the fisheries industry and we will continue to do that.

**Mr Blair:** I thank Denis, Norman and David for their report. It is good to see such a positive and forward-looking report in the difficult circumstances that we know surround all the teams that are working across the issues in DAERA, so thank you to all of them, as well.

In addition to the 16 targets in the report, would it be possible to build in further targets, sub-targets or additional detail to the targets? I am particularly thinking of green growth and the positive announcements that were made yesterday, and the attention that is being paid to staycations. I am very mindful that the package that DAERA can offer with regard to the inland fisheries infrastructure and the forest parks is an attractive part of the overall NI tourist package and could be linked very easily to other tourist packages on these islands, such as waterways. Will that be examined as part of economic growth, particularly rural economic growth?

**Dr McMahon:** That is a really good point. The Economy Minister is working closely with the tourism industry on that. Fiona McCandless, our deputy secretary, has responsibility for a number of areas, including the Forest Service, and is working very closely on that, as is David, from the country parks side. People on the angling side are also working on it.

It is early days, but you are absolutely right: it is a really important opportunity, because the chances are that, over the coming months, even if you think about it from a personal point of view, everybody will want to try something different, as, hopefully, the relaxation of restrictions continues, depending, of course, on what happens with public health. They will not be travelling abroad as much, so there is a real opportunity for people to rediscover some of the fantastic assets on their doorstep. In the forest parks, we already have five million visitors per annum, but there is a real opportunity to do more. So I totally agree, and we would be very happy to bring back more information on that as it is developed.

**Mr Harvey:** Thank you, Denis, Norman and David. It is an excellent business plan. Of your 16 targets, which do you think will be the easiest to meet and which will be the most difficult? *[Laughter.]*

**Dr McMahon:** You asked that question so nicely. One of the things that characterises all the targets is the fact that every one of them relies on a number of factors that are not entirely within our control. That makes all of them very challenging. If we can get green growth to work well, it will make a lot of other things work well. It is important to say that, when we use that term, there are two aspects to it: green and growth. It is about how we get businesses to work sustainably in a more profitable way and, at the same time, have positive effects on the environment. It is a real challenge to get everybody to see that. There is a lot of work that we need to do to bring people with us. For too long now, we have had people seeing it as one or the other, but it is about how we bring that together.

I am happy to take votes from my colleagues on which target will be the easiest, but I suspect that neither of them —.

**Mr Small:** I am not sure that I can identify an easy one; they are all pretty tough and challenging. Look at the range of our targets, from all the challenges around Brexit to something like climate change. Those are enormous challenges not just for the Department but for Northern Ireland. I would struggle, Harry, to identify an easy one. They are all pretty challenging.

**Mr Harvey:** A lot of it, including green growth, is weather-related, too.

**Dr McMahon:** Absolutely.

**Mr Harvey:** Your traffic-light system is a good way of monitoring it. It is easy to see how you are getting on.

**Mrs Barton:** Thank you again, gentlemen, for your presentation. When it comes to your targets on environment and waste etc, what sort of cooperation, discussions and talks do you have with local councils? How are you working with them for your mutual benefit?

**Dr McMahon:** David can talk in more detail, but we have had a very close relationship over the years with councils. It has not always been an easy relationship; they challenge us and we challenge them. However, we all work together in partnership, which has been very successful over the years. In recent times, with COVID-19, it has been just like the business community more generally. For example, we have a meeting later at which, basically, everybody from farm to fork is represented. We have that every Wednesday. We also have the strategic waste partnership, which involves councils. David, do you want to say something about that work?

**Mr Small:** Yes, I was going to mention that we have engagement with councils at different levels, Rosemary. We have engagement at working level on a whole range of subjects, but, then, as Denis

said, we have engagement at strategic level through the Northern Ireland strategic waste partnership. That has really been strengthened through the COVID-19 experience, because we have had to work and build strong relationships with councils around waste, recycling, refuse collection and so on. That has allowed us to build a strong relationship. At the moment, the relationship is probably stronger than it has ever been, and we would like to keep it like that.

On wider issues, beyond recycling — green growth, for example — there will be great opportunities if we continue to build that partnership with councils and work collaboratively on some of the green growth aspirations. I agree that it is very important that we maintain those relationships, and we want to make them stronger.

**Mrs Barton:** I am looking again at your rural policy framework and rural businesses and sustainability. What sort of partnership do you have with the Education Authority in relation to encouraging young people to move into agriculture and getting them back to farming? If anybody looks at a mart, they will see the age profile of a lot of our farmers. What are you doing to get more young people back to the land?

**Dr McMahon:** It is worth talking about some of the opportunities, because they are on our minds, around how, in the future, funding will be structured. We have a lot of work going on through the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE). There is a lot of work with young people through rural development. You have asked a really good question. I just need to check on the relationship with the Education Authority and how that works. I know that the relationships are there. They are definitely happening, but I need to check what the formal relationship is.

More generally, on the question of how we encourage people into farming at a young age, maybe Norman might want to say a few words.

**Mr Fulton:** CAFRE takes a lot of students, from 16 to 18, coming out of schools, so it has a good relationship with schools. Through our knowledge framework, we have been developing policy linkages with the Department for the Economy and the Department of Education to ensure that, at a policy level, we have that good interaction in how our education offering links with the broader policy agenda in the education system.

We are trying to build those links. CAFRE has good linkages with the universities and further education colleges. We are creating those links at multiple levels with the wider education system. CAFRE is involved in schools' career days, doing a lot of promotion of what is available and what it has to offer. It also promotes the careers available in agri-food, and there are some good careers. CAFRE has very good results, with people entering employment within six months of graduating. Those are positive stories that CAFRE can use to promote the industry and the opportunities in the industry.

**Dr McMahon:** On the rural development side, there have been a lot of consultations involving various groups, including educational organisations. There is scope for more of that. That is going to be absolutely crucial. It is crucial generally. In even the Programme for Government, there is quite a bit about improving young people's confidence at an early age. There is a crucial piece there about getting people involved, particularly people from rural communities, where they may not have the same access to the educational and other opportunities that people in the cities do. Technology gives us huge scope there.

**Mr Irwin:** Thank you very much for coming along. Green growth will be a positive strategy, no doubt.

We have high ammonia levels in Northern Ireland. I have constituents coming to me. One wanted to replace a couple of 50-year-old farm buildings, and one of his proposed buildings has been with the Planning Service for months. Even though the existing tank was there and it was just a change in roofing, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency is looking for reports. He has to go through every hoop in the book, even though he is just replacing an existing building. That is not growth. That is only sustaining what he has, and he is finding difficulty. We need to deal in a simpler way with issues like that. We especially need a strategy, we all know that, on ammonia levels. It is stymieing not only growth but people trying to stay in business. It is an issue.

**Dr McMahon:** I could not argue with that. It is a huge issue. The Minister is well aware of it and is keen to take an appropriate approach. David and Norman have been working on that.

**Mr Small:** You are right, William: ammonia is a massive challenge for the agriculture sector and for Northern Ireland generally. To be honest, it is something that I wish we had been working on years ago.

We now recognise the full extent of the challenge. We have been working for some time on trying to find a balanced approach so that we can set out a clear road map on how agriculture can continue to grow and sustain itself but, at the same time, find ways of managing the impact that ammonia has on habitats.

Ammonia levels are very high in Northern Ireland. Some of our sites massively exceed their critical load. We need to do the work to find a strategy that takes us forward so that, over time, we can reduce ammonia levels, but, at the same time and if we can, we need to find a way of permitting what you have described so that agriculture is not completely stifled, people can maintain their infrastructure and farmers can, in the right circumstances, continue to grow and develop. That is a difficult task, and finding that balance has been difficult. We are at a pretty advanced stage with our internal considerations, and will be sitting down with the Minister to discuss options for how we take all that forward. I will not say that it will be easy; it will be difficult, but, hopefully, we will be able to set out proposals about that quite soon.

**Mr Irwin:** Especially when there is clearly no other impact, that is common sense. I can understand the need to look more closely at new builds or big expansions but not when that is not the case.

A pragmatic approach needs to be taken to encourage farmers to plant trees. In the past, I think that farmers were unable to claim single farm payments on land on which trees had been planted.

**Mr Fulton:** No. If it was planted under a rural development scheme, it remained eligible for the basic payment for the duration of the pillar 2 scheme. If it was a 15-year scheme, it would remain eligible for 15 years.

**Mr Irwin:** If you are going to encourage tree planting, you have to encourage it and not discourage it, if you understand me. OK.

**Mr McGuigan:** Thanks for the presentation. I will ask you the same question that I asked the Minister yesterday about the green growth strategy. The statement was very welcome and the aspirations are very good. There are targets and time frames and a coordination role for the Committee in that process. Will you give us a wee bit more detail on that and the Committee's involvement in the process?

**Dr McMahon:** I am very happy to talk about that. From our point of view, this can only work if there is the broadest possible involvement. We will use all the networks that we have, and we talked about some of them already when we spoke about the business community and the environmental networks.

We want to do two things. The first is that we want to develop a strategy. The environment strategy for the Executive, which we had done a lot of work on and consulted on previously, will become the green growth strategy. We are very keen to get your input at every stage. You will be in contact with many different stakeholders, and we are open to any thoughts that you might have. It might be something that we can talk to the Committee Clerk about as well. We would be keen to come back at key points to say where we have got to with the drafting of that.

In addition, we are at the very early stages of looking at a series of foundation programmes, and the Minister will have spoken about those. We call that "strategy by doing", and the idea is that we will do some real things as we develop the strategy. There are some great examples of work that has been done already, such as the work on recycling, and we can do much more on that. There is scope with renewable energy and how we use it, particularly out of hours. Coming back to the point that was made earlier about the councils, there are other things that we want to work with them on, including how we can use smart technology to develop new ways of working in local areas. Some of the councils — a lot of them — are into that already, so we want to see what sort of work can come out of that.

We then come to the more traditional piece about habitat development and land use. A good example of how we can have green growth is in how we map soil quality across Northern Ireland. If we know that soil is good and farmers are using nutrients appropriately, it is far more profitable and it has huge benefits in dealing with some of the problems that we have talked about, such as ammonia.

There is a massive amount there. It is almost a case of being careful what you wish for. We are keen to work with the Committee and take your views at every stage of the process. I do not know if that was helpful.

**Mr McGuigan:** Thank you.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Clare or Maurice, are you still tuned in? Do you want to come in on anything?

**Ms Bailey:** Hello.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Clare, do you want to come in on anything?

**Ms Bailey:** Yes.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Go for it.

**Ms Bailey:** Can everybody hear me OK?

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

**Ms Bailey:** Thanks very much for the plan and the presentation. This is, potentially, a really exciting time. There are two things that I want to look at. You are right to point out the environmental benefit of people working from home, but, of course, that then brings other issues into play. Have any discussions happened with staff about any financial assistance that they might need to enable them to set up home offices? Giving them a laptop is one thing, but working from home has other unintended consequences. Given that we are looking at doing this in the long term, have there been discussions in the Department itself and with the staff to see whether there are any legal implications, under mortgage or rental agreements, for people working from home? Will that type of shift put an onus on staff to provide a home office environment in order to continue to secure their job?

**Dr McMahon:** I did not quite pick up all of that, but I think that I got the gist of it. There are a couple of things that I can say.

The first thing is that — this comes back to that point that I made at the start about the engagement score — before all this happened, we put a lot of emphasis on engagement. My colleagues round me will know that we look at that. It is analysed, and we look at it at every level. Part of that is about how we communicate with and listen to people in the Department. That is why the engagement score has gone up. We have meetings every two weeks. The purpose of those — this has never happened before — is to open it up to the whole Department. Again, it is amazing what you can do in an emergency situation.

We realised that people were suffering in different ways. We have a mixture of people. We have some people whose work just disappeared overnight, and we had to try to find other things that they could do. We have people who are isolated and do not have family members with them. We also have people who have exactly the opposite problem because they have caring responsibilities and, possibly, people have come home from England or elsewhere to them. So, there is a full range of personal issues that impact on people's ability to work.

As I say, we have a meeting every two weeks. In fact, it is happening this afternoon. One of my colleagues is doing that because I am here, but normally I am at it myself. The format is very simple: staff raise any questions or queries that they have.

The second thing is that you are absolutely right about what we have done. So far, we have worked on the basis of an emergency and how to keep things going in an emergency. Thank you for giving me this opportunity. I meant to say this at the start: I want to pay a huge tribute to all of my team, including my colleagues who are here today, because the work that they have done to keep things going has been unbelievable. People have worked huge hours, under hugely challenging circumstances.

We have not got all the answers yet to all the questions that you asked. We certainly are supplying equipment. A number of people took it upon themselves to come in and get some of their office equipment when they were moving, and they took out chairs and desks from some of the offices,

though not in large numbers. Again, we have tried to use a flexible approach and to treat people as adults. I will say this, and it is a really important point: if you treat people as adults, they respond as adults. We have not been directly managing people in the way in which we could in a normal situation, because we are not necessarily seeing people. It never fails to amaze me how much gets done. I see submissions coming up, day in, day out. I am probably one of the last 22 people in Dundonald House, and I see the work coming in every day.

Your point is really well made. We are working very closely with our colleagues in the Department of Finance. We will not be able to bring people back, even when we get to stage 5. We do not have the space to socially space and move everybody back into the offices that they were in. We will have to do this very carefully, and we will have to accept that part of working now will be homeworking. That will have challenges, but it will also have huge benefits, if we get it right. I hope that that is helpful.

**Ms Bailey:** Yes, thank you very much. That is going to be a huge factor for everybody across all Departments.

I will move on now to the green growth strategy. The question and complicated nature of how you can be green, and grow at the same time, has been pointed out. I have been looking into that. I am keen to hear your evidence that we can continue with that economic growth. That cannot be separated from the scale of environmental pressures and changes that are required to tackle environmental breakdown. What discussions have taken place on increasing efficiency, which is one thing, and on strategies to increase sufficiency, which is another important issue?

Have discussions taken place on the downsizing of production in many sectors, agriculture being the most obvious? I ask that because your figures show that agriculture is operating beyond capacity. That is to meet export markets. I think that they are sitting at about 80%. We continue to talk about growth, but we need to start looking at "degrowth" and sufficiency. What conversations have been held or measures taken, if any, at that level?

**Dr McMahon:** We are trying to tease that out a bit. I will answer your question a step at a time. Have there been discussions? I assure you that there have been really good discussions. We have had a year of family therapy within the Department. We have tried to bring the different aspects of the Department together, for the first time, as opposed to operating as separate business units. My colleagues can correct me on any of this, but that is the perception that I got when I came in two years ago. We have tried to work and get to the heart of the matter and ask, "Is it always either/or?". In a lot of cases, it is not. Think about the industry. What does the industry want? It wants profit and profitability. That is not always the same as numbers of animals. In some cases, you can get better profits by using a slightly different model. I am not saying that that is always the case, and I am not trying to sugar-coat it and say that there are not tensions or trade-offs on occasion.

A big part of this is looking at sectors where this has worked. There are sectors in which the market has driven us in the direction of greater efficiency. Renewable energy is a great example of where it makes sense; it is good business sense. You have to stimulate it and find ways to support it, but we have seen how that can happen, albeit there is still more to do.

When you start to look at the big picture in agriculture, you see that there are bigger questions to be asked about what we are doing globally. A lot of rainforests have been cut down for agriculture, for instance. I am not saying that we have got it right; there is a huge amount of work to be done. However, if we can get it right here, and it makes sense and farmers see themselves as stewards of the environment, which they are — many of them, proudly — and they feel rewarded for that role and see it as part of their business model, this will take off. Again, tourism is a good example of that.

It is not that we will not need regulation or that there will not be people who will do the wrong things at times and whom we will need to work with. It is about finding ways to align markets. Frankly, carbon is waste. If we are emitting carbon, it is a sign of waste, and waste is not good for business, however you cut it.

It is not a simple answer. I accept that there are challenges and tensions in the middle of it all, but we are being open about it, and we are trying to find ways of navigating our way through it to get the best of all worlds, as best we can. To answer your simple question, we have not had discussions about reducing overall levels of production. The question is this: how do we talk to stakeholders about getting more profitability into the system and, at the same time, achieve environmental outcomes? Norman has some great examples of that.

**Mr Fulton:** Green and growth do not have to be mutually exclusive. You have new green industries, which grow up to tap into the opportunities from looking after the environment. In agriculture, we talk about productivity, and productivity is effectively about resource efficiency. It is about using the inputs more efficiently, and, in using them more efficiently, you have a much lower environmental footprint, so these things are not mutually exclusive. It is just maybe a slightly different language. Using your waste better in a circular economy is equally applicable to agriculture as to any other sector. On resource efficiency, if you do not pump something into the system that you do not need, you will not have to deal with the waste that comes out the other end. Therefore, those are things that agriculture can and will do.

To come back to the issue that was raised about the level of our agricultural exports, that takes you into a much bigger question. We should not be seeking to protect our environment by imposing a cost on somebody else's environment. If we can produce quality food at a lower environmental footprint than somebody else, surely that is something that we should seriously consider doing, because, at the end of the day, it is one world, and we cannot simply just shift the problems around. We have to tackle the problems and to solve them. I think that that is very important. There is that geographical aspect, but there is also the intergenerational aspect. If we do something to damage the environment, it could be the next generation that picks up the consequences.

So, we are into some very complex issues in all of this. Also, it creates some exciting opportunities, and I think that, like in all things, if we put our minds to it, invest in the science and technology and change what we do, these are solvable problems.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** I will draw back to an issue that John raised and which I had planned to mention as a question. COVID-19 has presented an opportunity for local tourism, and I fully endorse that. However, I also think that it is important that we work very robustly to encourage people beyond the signature projects and the centres of population into the very localised areas to experience them. In my constituency — I am sure that this is shared everywhere — there are a lot of people who are offering self-catering accommodation, Airbnbs and little cottages that they have transformed, and those people are sole traders. They have suffered huge losses in the last three and a half months: they did not get any turnover in the Easter break, their weekend trade has not been there, and they did not get any real benefit from COVID-19 funding because they are sole traders. I think that there is an opportunity there, for a whole host of reasons, to have a strategy that really encourages people into the corners of the country into which they might not have been before, and to try to give support to those small businesses and the associated services that benefit from people being in the area.

I note from the report, Denis, that the Department has established a tourism recovery advisory group, which feeds into the tourism recovery steering and working group —

**Dr McMahon:** Yes.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** — which is located in DFE. Who is on that group, Denis, and is there a strategy to look at actually encouraging people? I think that there is a wonderful opportunity, as people will be staying at home this year, maybe more than other years, so if we can encourage people to do it this year, you might set the trajectory for future years. This could become a long-term thing, where they say, "Gosh, I did not realise that the Sperrins, the Mourne or the lakes were so good. We'll go back there". What sort of plans are there around that?

**Dr McMahon:** Fiona McCandless chairs that group — unless something has changed, but that is my latest information. She has people from across the Department on it, from all the key areas, including, for example, people who are involved in the country parks, and, obviously, Forest Service is on her side. They are working on that to see what can be done. There is no plan yet, but they are working on it, and I am sure that Fiona would be happy to talk the Committee through that at some point, whenever there is a plan in place, if that is helpful. In the meantime, we can take your comments back and make sure that they are fed into the process.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** That would be very helpful.

**Mr Fulton:** All parts of the Department feed into that group: food, rural, environment and forests. We all have something to contribute to the tourism product. I absolutely agree that there is an opportunity here, although it has to mesh with what Economy is doing so that there is an overall coordinated package. I agree that there is a great opportunity to expose what we have to our own population.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Expose the corners that people might not have been in before. This could be the chance. Picking up on what Rosemary said, it could feed into the plans of local councils as well, because they have plans and strategies for what is on offer in their districts.

**Mrs Barton:** And the rural development plans.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Absolutely. This is a really good opportunity.

**Mr Fulton:** I totally agree.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** We should strike while the iron is hot. It could be the one small silver lining in the very dark cloud that we have had for the last number of months.

**Dr McMahon:** Absolutely.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** I thank you all very much for attending. Your presentation was very detailed and informative, and questions were answered thoroughly, as always. No doubt we will be in contact again in the near future. Thank you very much, folks.