



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and
Rural Affairs

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Ministerial Priorities for 2021-22: Department
of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

11 March 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Ministerial Priorities for 2021-22: Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

11 March 2021

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 Harry Harvey
Mr William Irwin
Mr Patsy McGlone

Witnesses:

Mr Poots	Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr Brian Doherty	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr Norman Fulton	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr Robert Huey	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr David Small	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): I welcome, by StarLeaf, Minister Poots; Denis McMahon, the permanent secretary; David Small, the deputy permanent secretary; Robert Huey, the head of veterinary service and animal health; Norman Fulton, head of food and farming branch; and Brian Doherty, head of central services and contingency planning. I invite Minister Poots and his officials to brief the Committee.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thank you. Can you hear me, Mr Chairman?

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Yes, Minister Poots. It is great to see you back in post. I am glad that you feel in well enough form to be with us today.

Mr Poots: Yes. I am doing well. I am close to being back to my old self. I still have a wee bit to go, but I am well on the way now. I thank you and the Committee members and, indeed, everyone who contacted me over the period. I appreciate your good wishes, and I appreciate the invitation today to share with you the key priorities for the year ahead. They will be reflected in the DAERA 2021-22 business plan, which we will finalise close to the start of the new reporting year.

Clearly, there are many challenges facing the Department, not least all those resulting from the UK's exit from the EU. However, such challenges also present opportunities for Northern Ireland to play its role on the national and international stage in protecting the environment and growing a vibrant and sustainable Northern Ireland economy. We are committed to working collaboratively with others in order to ensure that we take full advantage of those opportunities for the benefit of current and future generations.

I am also acutely aware of the adverse impacts that COVID-19 has had in Northern Ireland and across the world, and some of my key priorities for the year ahead will focus on helping the people of Northern Ireland to recover from the pandemic. We all have to play our part in shaping what that recovery will look like. Northern Ireland is at the heart of a very complex food supply chain that relies on the open and free movement of goods with the rest of the UK, and any disruption in that supply chain has the potential to cause a much more pronounced effect on Northern Ireland's food supply system.

In recognising the importance of food supply, my Department has developed, in agreement with other relevant Departments and the Northern Ireland Executive, an escalation policy and an overall Northern Ireland food supply contingency plan, and we continue to refine current actions to ensure that we are best prepared to respond to future food supply security issues.

My ambition is for Northern Ireland to be a world-class food region that is recognised for its sustainability, quality, safety, authenticity and knowledge-based approach. DAERA is in the early stages of exploring with other Northern Ireland Departments and interested parties the merits, scope and content of a possible future food strategy framework for Northern Ireland, and that will continue in the year ahead.

Departmental officials continue to work with DEFRA in order to inform the UK's trade negotiations. Negotiations with other countries that have a free trade agreement with the EU have made good progress, and, for a large majority of those countries, a continuity agreement has been put in place from 1 January 2021. Putting in place continuity agreements will enable Northern Ireland to trade directly with those countries on similar terms to now despite being excluded from EU trade deals.

Over the past 12 months, not only have we had to deal with the pandemic, but we have had to navigate a new path as a result of Brexit. Following on from that period of change and transition, now is an opportune time for us all to look to the future and identify opportunities to strengthen and grow our agri-food industry in a sustainable way. One of those is the opportunity to develop an agriculture supply framework that is better suited to local needs and one that will provide for and secure long-term sustainability in our industry.

I will take a few minutes to say more on future farming support. My vision for the future of agriculture in Northern Ireland is defined around four outcomes. First, it will be an industry that pursues increased productivity as a measure of sustained profitability in international terms, closing the productivity gap that has been opened up with other major suppliers. Secondly, it will be an industry that is environmentally sustainable in its impact on and guardianship of air quality, soil health, carbon footprint and biodiversity. Thirdly, it will be an industry that displays improved resilience to external shocks such as market and currency volatility and extreme weather events, which are ever more frequent and to which the industry has now become very exposed. Fourthly, it will be an industry that operates with an integrated, efficient, sustainable, competitive and responsive supply chain with clear market signals and an overriding focus on high-quality food and the end consumer. I have tasked officials to begin a conversation with industry as soon as possible on all areas of future farming support that will deliver against those outcomes.

Looking to the future, in delivering better productivity, environmental performance, resilience and functioning supply chains, I see a role for simplified area-based income support, with the safety net set at a level that does not blunt innovation or productivity. I see a role for coupled support that targets, for example, suckler cow and breeding ewe producers. That would not mean a return to the old coupled payments of the past. We need to explore how coupled support can be designed to drive better economic and environmental performance without being just another means of allocating payments to farmers.

I see a strong central role for agrienvironment that will deliver clear outcomes, as we have many issues to address, including air quality, water quality, biodiversity, soil health and our landscape. Those are all heavily influenced by farming, and we have to accept that that influence has not always

been positive. However, the important point is that it can be positive going forward, and we will address our environmental challenges only if agriculture and farmers are part of the solution.

Moving forward, we must join up our environmental ambitions with farm economic activity. We need to invest time, money and effort in creating and refining our support schemes and tools. Young farmers are the new generation, and what you learn and adopt sets the tone for future careers in farming and in the performance of the industry as a whole. That is why I see continuing professional development as vital in farming as we move forward in this new world, post-EU exit.

Finally, it is important to say that I also see a role for succession planning, which has been the age-old problem in agriculture. Moving forward, we have an opportunity to develop an approach to succession that respects the farmer who is stepping back and assists the younger farmer who is moving forward. My ultimate aim is to ensure that we take full advantage of the opportunities that are presented to us, now that we have exited the EU, to develop a sustainable agriculture industry in which all farmers are supported on an equitable basis. Proper consultation is vital, and as such, new schemes take time to develop and implement. DAERA has now had confirmation of replacement pillar 1, pillar 2 and Common Market organisation funding of £315.6 million, which provides significant certainty, particularly for direct payments.

As you would expect, another major priority for DAERA is continuing to undertake mitigating actions to deal with climate change and ensure that we protect and enhance the environment for future generations. Although my Department has specific responsibilities under the draft Programme for Government (PFG) for 2021, namely outcome 2, which states:

"We live and work sustainably — protecting the environment",

our focus will not solely rest there, as our collaborative work will continue to contribute to most of our other PFG outcomes. For example, we want to ensure that our economy is globally competitive, regionally balanced and carbon-neutral and that we all enjoy long, healthy, active and fulfilled lives.

The Executive's 'New Decade, New Approach' document includes a coordinated and strategic approach to the challenge of climate change, with actions to address its immediate and long-term impacts in a fair and just way. We will also progress the green growth strategy and the environment strategy next year, and that will play a significant role in that approach. The green growth strategy, which you have previously been briefed on, will be our pathway to achieving our environmental and climate change goals in a way that delivers wider economic and social benefits to the people of Northern Ireland.

DAERA is leading the development of the Executive's multi-decade green growth strategy in partnership with other Departments, local government and stakeholders from across the business and voluntary sectors. We will use the green growth pathway to transform and grow the Northern Ireland economy whilst protecting our natural assets and reducing our carbon emissions. Through tackling climate change together, we can deliver outcomes that will contribute to a resilient recovery through a greener, low-carbon and circular economy in Northern Ireland. I have agreed a process for the development of the green growth strategy, which includes a three-phased approach, and an initial draft strategy framework will be issued by 31 March 2021. Following further stakeholder engagement, a draft strategy will be published in the autumn to align with the UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties, COP26, which is to be held in Glasgow in November 2021.

Following a public consultation exercise, I expect the Executive's green growth strategy to be put in place from March 2022. The strategy framework document will enable us to engage collaboratively with our key stakeholders in a way that reflects the scale and scope of green growth and climate action. Inextricably linked to that is our commitment to the continued protection and improvement of the environment, and we will have not only the freedom but the responsibility to develop new approaches to replace EU policy. We will have to decide how we report, monitor and set targets. We will also have to look at how we work with other UK nations, and, if nothing else, that will place demands on resources as we move to new ways of working. An environment strategy will set the context in which we do that by establishing an overarching framework for the environment for many years to come. It is anticipated that the Environment Bill will receive Royal assent in autumn 2021, and the implementation of the Bill, along with the work on a clean air strategy, an ammonia strategy and the proposed plastic reduction action plan, will be progressed by my officials throughout 2021.

As I mentioned at the outset, a key challenge for us all is our recovery pathway from the pandemic. Whilst the current roll-out of vaccinations will provide some light at the end of the tunnel, we are not

quite out of the woods yet, so, building on the COVID support of £44 million that has already been provided by my Department, I will seek additional support, as necessary, to support the recovery of rural communities and the agri-food and fishing industries. Whilst officials are actively looking for avenues to help rural communities recover from COVID-19 restrictions, work will also progress on developing the rural policy framework, which will shape rural priorities in the future. The framework is planned for public consultation later this spring and will cover five key areas: flourishing innovation and entrepreneurship; rural tourism; health and well-being; increased employment opportunities; and improved connectivity. Work will also continue on our business-as-usual work on regulation and enforcement.

I hope that that has given you a quick overview of the key departmental priorities for the year ahead. DAERA has a diverse portfolio, and the challenges for the year ahead are significant. I assure the Committee that the departmental officials and I remain committed to delivering the best we can for the people we serve. As I highlighted in my opening statement, DAERA's business plan for 2021-22 is nearing completion, and I will ensure that the views of the Committee are sought prior to publication. It will set out my Department's key targets for the year ahead, provide more details on budget and monitor progress against targets.

Again, thanks for the invitation today, and we are happy to take questions.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Thank you, Minister Poots. That was a very wide-ranging overview of your key ministerial priorities, and members are keen to ask some questions on it.

I will kick off. I have been contacted by a number of farmers who are unsure about what will happen with farming support in the incoming year and in the time ahead. I am getting feedback that some farmers are holding off entering into conacre agreements and things like that because of that uncertainty. What is your advice for the year ahead to farmers who are in that situation?

Mr Poots: My advice to farmers and landowners is that they should proceed and do what is right for them in 2021 and that they should not try to second-guess things for future years. I encourage people to engage, and if they want to continue letting land, they should do that and not try to second-guess what might or might not be done and what impact 2021 might have. It is not our intention to use things from this particular year in a way that will lock people into circumstances for many years to come.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Are you saying, Minister Poots, that this year will not be treated as an historical reference year, as was the case when the single farm payment came in at the beginning of 2005?

Mr Poots: That is not the current intention.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): You said that the rural policy framework will be out for public consultation in the spring. Is that right?

Mr Poots: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Has the £34 million that has been netted off the rural funding and that cannot be carried over from the EU time had any impact on the decision by your Department to reallocate funding from the environmental farming scheme (EFS)?

Mr Poots: I will bring Norman in on the funding and finance side of things. There have been a few swings and roundabouts in all this, and, financially, we will not be any worse off, or considerably worse off, than we are now. I will bring Norman in at this stage to clarify some of the changes and switches that there have been in the finances and in how things are working out.

Mr Norman Fulton (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thank you, Minister. Chairman, coming back to your question about the impact of netting off the £34 million, that does not impact on the current rural development programme (RDP), which will run to completion in 2023. The environmental farming scheme is part of that programme, so we are continuing to actively manage the resources and funding in the RDP in order to ensure that we fully spend out and secure maximum advantage from it. So, that money being netting off is not having an effect on the EFS and the RDP. It puts a bit more of a limit on what we would otherwise have in new measures and programmes, but, again, we will manage our way through that so that there is no impact on the RDP.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Has there been a decision to allocate funding away from the EFS?

Mr Fulton: No, we plan to launch another EFS tranche in April. That will be the last one in the current RDP, and we will probably have at least another one after that as we transit from the current agrienvironment programme into our replacement for EFS. We always look to that transition to make sure that it will be as smooth as possible. So, within the RDP there will always be moneys moving around as we ensure that everything is fully funded and that the demands in it are met.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): There is one last point that I want to raise before I move to other members for questions. I recently wrote to Minister Lyons — your predecessor, Mr Poots — about some comments that I saw reported recently from DAERA officials on the possibility of any farmer who takes on a new business after 2025 being required to have a third-level qualification. Does "third-level qualification" mean a degree, a diploma or a level 3 qualification?

I also saw the reference to agri-insurers being resurrected. That was mentioned in a 2018 discussion document, and I hoped that it had disappeared from the public discourse, but it seems to be resurrected. Are those two factors being considered in future agricultural policy? If we went down the line of requiring people to have a third-level qualification, there would be a negative implication for succession planning. In many families, one of the older daughters or sons learn their trade on the farm, and ownership moves down the generations in that way. Is that being seriously considered as a future agricultural policy?

Mr Poots: It is certainly not something that I have agreed to, and it has not been brought to me during my period as Minister. I imagine that it means level 3 as opposed to —

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Third level.

Mr Poots: — third level, which is considerably different. Even at that, it would still pose particular challenges for some people. I know of a recent case where a young person sought to get into agricultural college but had problems with dyslexia at school and did not get onto the course that they wished to. I do not see why someone like that, who is quite capable of developing all the agricultural and practical skills that are required, should be discriminated against in that way. So, we need to be very careful with those things so that we do not end up in a position that becomes discriminatory. Whilst we want to encourage people to participate in agricultural courses because we want to close the gaps in efficiency that were referred to, they are not the be-all and end-all, and we need to ensure that equality and fairness are at the heart of things.

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

Mr McGlone: First of all, on a personal note, Edwin, I am delighted to see you back at the helm. It is good to see that your health is well on the mend, and I am sure that that is a great relief to your family.

I want to focus first of all on the rural policy while it is at the development stages. Will you give me an insight, Minister, on how the development and roll-out of that policy will be done in a cross-departmental way? You touched on a number of issues, including levels of education, literacy levels and a multiplicity of other things, such as local development plans and how they work into planning policy and infrastructure. Indeed, some of the infrastructure and connectivity, which you referred to, is being addressed through Project Stratum, and Fibrus is out and about at the moment. I want some indication of how it is anticipated that that will be done in a cross-departmental way to make sure that everyone is buying into it. Health too, obviously, will be a major factor. I want to find out how it is anticipated that it will be done in a joined-up way so that nobody is left out of the loop and we get proper rural development policies rolled out.

Then —.

Mr Poots: I will respond to that question before you ask your next one, because I might forget one of them. Our Department prides itself on working with other Departments. For example, with the Department for the Economy, Project Stratum is being rolled out and the installation of rural broadband is taking place. Throughout the pandemic, we have worked very closely with the Department for Infrastructure on community transport infrastructure in order to ensure that isolated people, particularly the vulnerable, receive medicines and foods. We have always worked extensively with local government in the distribution of funding, and we worked closely with the Department for

Communities, for example, in pulling together a scheme to support businesses that made sure that it was not just urban businesses but rural businesses that received benefits. We are continuing to work with the Department for the Economy on a series of food tourism initiatives, given that that Department has a significant role in food companies. Our role is less significant in that, but we have a role in primary production.

Our practice has been that, where we identify that another Department has a role — that role may be less or more significant — we will work closely with it to seek to get delivery. That is what the Executive should be about. It is about working with each other in order to deliver for all the people of Northern Ireland, and I certainly remain totally committed to doing that.

Mr McGlone: Thanks very much for that, Edwin. I have two other issues to raise that follow on from that. The policy is grand, but it needs to be backed up with resources. EU moneys have been removed from rural development programmes, and it is anticipated that — I think that Mr Fulton told us this previously — those moneys will potentially amount to upwards of £34 million less over the next three years. How will those moneys be substituted? The likes of those rural development programmes were very effective in supporting communities.

Last but not least, you will not be surprised to hear my support for the Lough Neagh fishermen. It has almost reached the stage of embarrassment now that that support has not got out. I would be glad to hear from you on both those issues, please.

Mr Poots: OK. The £34 million had never been spent year-on-year. Therefore, it is not money that people would notice was missing. It had been planned to spend that money over the next three years, but we will not have it to spend. However, other additional funding has come in, so we will be able to meet needs in a fairly positive way, commensurate with what has happened heretofore and, hopefully, meet them a bit more.

I believe that there is a paper for me about the Lough Neagh eel fishermen. I have not received it since I came back. One of the first questions that I asked was whether compensation or support for the Lough Neagh eel fishermen had been signed off. That has not come about, so I will seek to get that done in the not-too-distant future. I know that I have been saying that for a while, but I want to get that out of the way.

Mr McGlone: OK. Have you any idea when that will happen?

Mr Poots: As soon as I get the paper on it, I will not be hanging around.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Minister Poots, Patsy mentioned Project Stratum, and I am looking for your support on that as well. You will know that Project Stratum covers 76,000 homes or premises in mostly rural areas. However, there are still around 20,000 that were in the original intervention area. Additional support will be needed to expand that intervention area. I know that your colleague the Economy Minister has been engaging with DCMS in Westminster. Could your Department add weight to that as well and work with DCMS to try to extend the intervention area so that we can get as much broadband coverage as possible as part of Project Stratum?

Mr Poots: Yes, absolutely. That is an area that we can look at with the new connectivity office that the Prime Minister wants to set up. Connectivity does not just mean roads, tolls and bridges; it is about the means that we are using to communicate with each other today. That may be a possibility as well, but my Department is contributing £15 million to Project Stratum, and we are totally committed to ensuring that rural communities can engage effectively in the virtual world. It creates great opportunities for people who live in rural communities, reduces our environmental footprint and increases productivity, so we are all on for that.

Mr Irwin: I welcome back the Minister after his surgery. He has a great love for the industry. Minister, I broadly welcome your key ministerial priorities and also the fact that you are looking into having some sort of coupled support for the suckler industry. It is a very important sector in Northern Ireland. Is it your intention to bring in something in for the 2020-21 scheme year, or is that for further ahead?

Mr Poots: No, we will not get it done for this year. To consult properly with the sector to get its feedback, we will need this year to work things through, because some legislative amendments and so

on may be involved. People will hopefully know where they stand at the end of this year, as they seek to make decisions for the 2021-22 financial year.

Mr Irwin: Edwin, am I right in saying that direct farm payments for 2020-21 will be made at the same level as those for 2019-20? Is that the case?

Mr Poots: Yes.

Mr Irwin: Had we remained in the EU, we would probably have been getting less. I think that there is a cut in EU funding. I do not want to burden you with this, but, on the subject of the protocol, Robert Huey said last week that, during the grace period, something like 2,000 to 3,000 checks have been carried out. If the grace period were to end, would there then be something like 20,000 or 30,000 checks? Would that not put an intolerable burden on the UK internal market?

Mr Poots: We are looking, for example, at staffing. At this stage, we potentially need 400 staff. A very high number of vets will be required, and I am not sure from where we are going to get them, because there is already a shortage of vets in the UK. I do not know how we will divert them from other services, and I do not know what impact that will have on food safety and other things. We cannot allow there to be an impact on food safety. Our food provenance is widely recognised across the world, and that is because we have all those checks taking place. We would be taking vets out of meat plants, chicken factories and pork factories to check products that have already been checked by vets and that have produced to the same standards as here and the rest of the European Union. Doing that would be an entirely illogical thing to do and a complete waste of time and resource. It would cause a significant addition to the cost of bringing food into Northern Ireland and, consequently, an additional cost to the consumer.

We need a reality check on all of this. I welcome the extension of the grace period, but, to some extent, it just kicks the can down the road. We need people to be realistic. You were told last week that Northern Ireland has as many checks as the rest of the EU put together. How can that be a sensible or rational thing? I say this to those who called for rigorous implementation of the protocol: that is precisely what this is. Consequences of the rigorous implementation of the protocol are a massive number of people involved in checks; additional cost to industry; additional cost to the consumer; damage to existing trading relationships; and significant consequences for business and the consumer in Northern Ireland. Perhaps those who called for the rigorous implementation of the protocol would like to apologise to the Northern Ireland public and send a message to the European Union that they no longer want rigorous implementation because they have seen what it is like. Rigorous implementation is going to wreck our economy if we do not address that issue.

Mr Irwin: Thank you.

Mr Blair: I offer a sincere welcome-back to the Minister. It is good to see him.

Mr Poots: Thanks, John.

Mr Blair: I wish him a full and speedy recovery.

The Minister and other members of the Committee will be well aware that some people in my party and other parties were warning of the consequences of a harder Brexit for some years. We were initially accused of scaremongering when we predicted what the outcome would be.

I am going to try to move on to solutions and positive moves. Staff numbers are very relevant, as is the number of vets, as they are a finite resource. We know about the recent publicity around decisions taken about ports. Enquiries were subsequently made and legal advice sought on those decisions, and we await the outcome. The Department gave us an assurance last week that decisions taken will be within the law. What progress, if any, has been made on a UK-EU veterinary agreement, which would ease considerably some of the problems that have been highlighted? How is DAERA feeding into the discussions?

Chair, after this, I have a question on the environment.

Mr Poots: I will bring Robert in on that question, because he is the man with expertise in that area.

Mr Robert Huey (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): As I said last week, there has been no formal discussion at all yet. The discussions on a EU-UK veterinary agreement will be led by Christine Middlemiss, the Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO) for the UK, but I will be closely involved with Christine in those.

We have weekly meetings with the Commission to look at problems with the Northern Ireland protocol and problems with GB trading with the EU. Those are very productive meetings, but, in the current environment, they have not moved on yet to discussions about a veterinary agreement. A veterinary agreement is normal in a trade negotiation and usually happens after there has been a trade agreement, which is the case here, as we get into the details. My hope is that that is where a lot of the issues that are causing concern to traders — issues to do with cattle and sheep movements and all the other conditions— can be dealt with: through a negotiated outcome.

The animal health certificates (AHCs) that we are talking about are laid out in detail in European law. The best way in which to deal with those is to talk to the EU at a UK level to get those issues sorted out as quickly as we can.

Mr Blair: A couple of weeks ago, there seemed to be some indication that the Commission was prepared to look at that. Are we having it clarified that the UK Government have not raised that in the formal discussions?

Mr Huey: I can speak for only the meetings that I am in, which are the formal meetings between officials, and it has not been discussed there. Whether it has been discussed at Cabinet Office level, and between that and the EU Commission Cabinet, I am unsighted.

Mr Blair: Of course. That is one for all of us to work together on and continue to pursue.

I have a question for the Minister about the green growth strategy and the environment in general. I have welcomed the Department's strategies. I also welcome the Minister's comments on how the environment can link to a sustainable economy. On that theme, what efforts have been made, or can be made at this stage, to ensure a green new deal and a green recovery strategy that will target green jobs, biodiversity recovery and climate change issues? Is an effort being made to have an interdepartmental strategy to tackle the issue and achieve a green new deal?

Mr Poots: DAERA has been pressing at all times for the green economy to be reflected in the Programme for Government and elsewhere, and that has happened in many respects. In Northern Ireland, around 45% of our electricity is produced by renewable means, and DAERA is looking at that issue. Renewable heat is an issue that has caused all sorts of problems that we will not get into today. If the current renewable heat incentive (RHI) is done away with, we will need to ensure that there is something to replace it. The current funding for RHI is not at all commensurate with what is required, and, as a consequence, people who have invested in equipment have been badly hurt. The Buglass report offered a very modest uplift, and the Executive should at least adhere to that recommendation quickly if they are genuinely committed to ensuring that renewable energy sources are maximised.

There is a series of things that need to be done. For example, we need to look at the opportunities for capturing hydrogen from wind, waste energy sources and other sources. We need to look at how to use the existing gas infrastructure network to distribute that hydrogen. There are so many opportunities to work with other parts of government. Translink has acquired hydrogen buses, and that is an area that we need to develop. Northern Ireland can be one of the leading places in the world for the development of hydrogen.

I want to look at charging points, and I have corresponded with the Minister for Infrastructure about charging points for electric vehicles. We have been told that diesel and petrol cars are being done away with. People will, as a result, be buying electric cars and will have no other option in the not-too-distant future should they want to buy a new car. We must get the infrastructure in place to support electric cars, because the current charging points are pathetic. I was involved when the current charging points were introduced in 2010. We are in a wholly different place in 2021 than we were in 2010, and a lot of the charging points do not even work effectively. It is therefore critical that our Department and the Department for Infrastructure work closely together to ensure the roll-out of charging points, and, because of its responsibility for energy regulation etc, that work may also involve the Department for the Economy.

John, there are so many areas in which we can genuinely work together on developing green growth. The Department for the Economy is working closely with us. We can work with the Department for Communities on the opportunity to retrofit housing, particularly rural housing. There are a lot of old stone houses that do not hold heat well, and there are people living in damp conditions. We can have a much better outcome for all our citizens and our environment. It can be a win-win situation, so it should not be perceived negatively.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister. His points about the lack of infrastructure for good green initiatives in rural areas are very good. Committee members who represent a rural constituency will be mindful of the fact that an electric car with a low battery would create practical difficulties on a long journey across a constituency. I ask, a little bit cheekily, whether, if we were to come knocking for an interdepartmental green recovery fund to improve our infrastructure and harness the innovations that are out there, the Minister's door in DAERA would not be closed?

Mr Poots: I will rule nothing in or out at this stage, John. Everything has to be value-based, but, initially, I will not say that is something to which we would be opposed at all.

Mr Blair: Thank you.

Mr Harvey: Thank you, Minister. We are thankful for your recovery and for attending today. I have just a couple of questions. What are your plans for future support for productive farmers?

Mr Poots: Productivity is key. We want to have efficient, productive farms, because, very often, those are the farms that are providing environmental benefits. They produce a high level of proteins for the consumer and do so very efficiently. We want to ensure that that productivity is supported and that people can become ever more efficient in what they deliver. Over the next number of years, that may lead to us reducing the length of time that animals spend on farms and so on, because we will get better productivity from doing that. Farm support should not just be about saying, "Here is £300 million. We will just spread that jam around as best as we can". It should be more targeted and focused. For example, I want to see high-progeny bulls being used for suckler cows, as, consequently, their calves will have higher growth rates —

Mr Harvey: Exactly.

Mr Poots: — better confirmation etc so that they meet the market's requirements. We need to encourage farmers not just to produce something that they want to produce and then find a market for it. We need to encourage them to identify the markets and then produce what the markets need. Perhaps that is from where the success of the chicken industry has come. It is very market-focused and produces goods that are wanted by that market. We need to get all farming and primary producers to that place.

There is significant work to be done. The funding envelope is not bigger, however, so we need to work with the sector and the Committee to identify how best to spread that envelope in order to make the most effective use of the money. It is not about taking something away from someone but about ensuring that the people who are delivering get something for it.

On the other side of that, it is important that we support those who are taking environmental steps. If we are to continue to have a high level of agri-food production in Northern Ireland, we have to do it in an environmentally sustainable way, and that will involve changes to some of our current practices. It will involve ensuring that our peatlands are optimised. The practice of drying out peatlands, which has taken place over time, therefore needs to change. In some places, we are looking at overgrazing and, in others, under-grazing. There are so many opportunities for us to address the situation and ensure that we have that highly productive, environmentally friendly farming system in Northern Ireland.

Mr Harvey: Do you have any plans for an NI brand and for how we promote our high-quality agri-food products?

Mr Poots: In some senses, we are being forced down that road by the protocol, because of the tagging system that is being imposed on us. You ask about "brand NI". We are not Scotland, we are not Ireland and we are not the UK. We have something different. To that end, we should ensure that we have the highest quality in all aspects of what we are producing and then sell it as the highest quality, because NI can be a niche. NI can sell to the EU, which the rest of the UK will struggle to do.

NI can also sell to the UK in a way in which the EU will struggle to do. We are therefore in a position in which marketing Northern Ireland produce is something that we can benefit from, because we can demonstrate the quality of the produce that we have. We should not shy away from that. We have the best-quality produce of anywhere in the world, and we should be proud of what we are producing. We should not be afraid to go out and sell that product, be it in Europe, in the UK or in the rest of the world, so we should avail ourselves of the advantages that exist out there for us.

Mr Harvey: Good. To finish, Minister, can you update the Committee on the TB policy?

Mr Poots: The business case for a new TB strategy has now been done. It is passing through the final economists now. It is my intention to consult publicly on a TB strategy in the spring of this year. We will therefore be moving to that stage quite quickly, and it is good that we have got to that point. It has taken a while to get there, but, nonetheless, it is critical that we reduce the spend on tackling TB. We cannot keep forking out £40 million of public money every year on it. We have to do something better, and we can do something better. It is entirely wrong that, when it is avoidable, we are slaughtering so many animals with TB. Consequently, I hope that we will have a strategy that will have buy-in from the agriculture sector, and I trust that it will have buy-in from the environmental sector, because we will also have a healthier wildlife population when we complete the implementation of the strategy, and that is good news for the environment. I hope that we will have widespread buy-in and that we can move forward, which will be to the benefit of the taxpayer, the farmer and, indeed, the environment.

Mr Harvey: Exactly. Thank you, Minister.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Thank you, Minister. I have to say that I am glad that you sort of acknowledged the benefits of the protocol there, given our ability to have access to the rest of the EU, while Britain will struggle to have that access.

Mr Poots: I have never been shy in acknowledging that. Mr Chairman, it is a bit like a football match in which you score a wonder goal — that is the benefit of the protocol — yet you get hammered 6-1. Nobody talks about the wonder goal. Instead, they talk about the bad defeat. I do not know what the equivalent numbers are in Gaelic football. I had not thought about that one before the meeting for your benefit.

Mr McGlone: There are a few penalties on the way, too.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): There is a bit of political football being played. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Poots: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): I will move across to County Fermanagh now and to Rosemary Barton. Rosemary, are you there? *[Pause.]* We need to get Project Stratum down to Fermanagh quickly. Can you hear me, Rosemary?

Mr Poots: It is the south Tyrone people taking everything first. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): I will go to Maurice next and come back to Rosemary when she comes back online. Maurice, can you get in? *[Pause.]* We cannot hear Maurice. We will move on to South Belfast. Clare?

Ms Bailey: Yes, I am here.

Minister, it is really good to see you back again. I am glad to see that you have made a quick recovery. I never doubted it. Well done. I hope that you continue to recover well.

I want to ask you about the horticulture sector, if possible. You mentioned the COVID support schemes in particular. You recently met representatives of the ornamental horticulture industry. Whom was it that you met? Were requests for any additional compensation schemes made, and will any schemes be made available? I am not sure whether there are eight or 10 current applications. When should the applicants expect to receive some sort of payment? By my estimates, you allocated £1.6 million to cover the COVID finance scheme for the sector, but, by my calculations, and I could be wrong, only £300,000 of that will be spent on the current applications.

Mr Poots: We met the Horticulture Forum for Northern Ireland, the horticulture sector representative body, although probably not all of them, and it raised the issues that, I assume, the wider horticulture community wanted raised. One concerned the compensation, or support packages, for last year. The letters of offer will, I believe, go out next week. DAERA apologised to the forum that it had taken longer to get them ready. It was trickier than the Department thought, so it took longer to get them ready. We are, however, now in a position to issue letters of offer and hopefully make payments this month, which will be of some benefit to horticulturists.

We discussed issues with the importation of goods from Great Britain. The move towards the end of last week on bulbs and various other items was beneficial. We still, however, have outstanding issues around the importation of trees and hedging and around a lot of the bare-root plants. It is ridiculous that, if people want to plant a hedge in Gortin in County Tyrone, or trees in the Mourne in County Down, they cannot currently import that material, which is from only 20 or 30 miles away, just across the sea, in Lancashire and Cumbria. It is a ridiculous position that we are in. We need to work on that, and the horticulturists want us to engage with them on that work.

The third major issue that the horticulturists raised with us was their need to start selling again this year. They spoke of the inequality that currently exists between them and supermarkets, filling stations, hardware stores and all the other places that are selling plants while they cannot. They point out, quite rightly, that their facilities are large spaces in the open air, with low footfall, and that there is no good reason whatsoever, with COVID rates falling by sizeable numbers and vaccinations being rolled out very successfully, for keeping them closed. In fact, it is safer to acquire plants and flowers in such a setting than it is in a supermarket, through which literally thousands of people pass weekly, handling things and then setting them down. They make the case, and I support it, that they can distribute their material in a much safer way than others can. I find it deeply regrettable that the situation was not resolved before Mothering Sunday, and I trust that it will be resolved positively by the Executive next week. I will certainly argue for it.

Ms Bailey: Thank you very much for that, Minister. May we go back to the funding allocation, if possible? Is it correct that £1.3 million of the allocated budget for the sector will go unused? If that is the case, what is being done to make sure that those who have not been able to avail themselves of any financial assistance will be able to access that money?

Mr Poots: I do not know. I will bring in Norman to answer that, or whichever official is most appropriate. We want to support whatever their loss happens to be. If the loss is not £1.6 million but something less than that, we want to support them to the extent of their loss and compensate them appropriately. We want to do that in as comprehensive a way as possible. I do not let on, Clare, that we can compensate everybody for every penny of loss, but I want to ensure that we encompass as many as people as possible with as close to the loss as possible. That is what we are setting out to achieve. Which official is best placed to respond to that?

Mr Fulton: Minister, I will come in on that one. The original estimate of what might be claimed from the ornamental horticulture sector was based on our estimate of 40 or 50 businesses. In the event, only eight came forward with valid claims. That was an estimate; it was not a ring-fenced sum. If that money is not being used there, it effectively can be used to address other pressures that have emerged in other sectors. For example, letters of offer will go out next week to deal with some of the issues with the pig sector, hatching eggs and organic milk. As the Minister said, it is about addressing the identified losses. We never had a ring-fenced budget per se for any given sector. We had an overall sum of money that we have used to try to address the pressures as those have emerged.

Ms Bailey: Thanks. I just want to put this on the record: we are hearing that there are 40 or 50 businesses out there in the sector but that only eight to 10 came forward and met the high threshold of evidence to avail themselves of the scheme. That tells us that there are a lot out there who could not meet the high threshold that was set for putting in a claim. I urge the Department to look at that to see what can be done to try to not let those other businesses fall through the cracks, because they need assistance and have been impacted as well.

I will move on. Minister, you are talking to us today about your priorities for the time ahead. We have heard from you and the Department about the strategies coming forward in priority areas. We have heard about an agriculture strategy, an environment strategy, an ammonia strategy and a green growth strategy. Do you have a timeline for when we will be able to see those strategies?

Mr Poots: Clearly, we have a very tight timeline in which to get a lot of that work done because of the election and the fact that, about this time next year, we will all be signing off to fight it. We want to introduce a climate change Bill, for example, and we need to make significant progress on that quickly. Officials think that it will be very challenging. I have insisted that it needs to be done and that we need to achieve it. We obviously have work to do for COP26 so that Northern Ireland can demonstrate what its contribution will be. All of those things need to pull together. The ammonia strategy is coming on well. We are making significant progress on a series of them. I am very happy to provide the Committee with a written update on the current progress and the timeline that we are aiming for, so that we all have in front of us, in black and white, what our aims and goals are in delivering on those strategies. It will probably be closer to this time next year before we have everything finalised for the green growth strategy, but it will set a template for the new Assembly that comes in.

Ms Bailey: An update would be very much appreciated, Minister. I would be very keen to have a look at that.

Lastly, I want to address the 'Energy governance for the Northern Ireland energy transition' report that has just been published. You will be well aware that that was commissioned and funded by the Executive. What are your thoughts on the recommendations? I think that there were four key recommendations, including a recommendation that a new Department for climate and energy transition be established. Has there been any discussion about that? What are your thoughts on the establishment of such a Department?

Mr Poots: I am not aware of that happening in my absence. That would be entirely reasonable at national Government level, but establishing a single Department for that would be a significant challenge for us, given that we are a regional Assembly and have fewer resources. Clearly, DAERA has a lead function on that matter and will very happily provide leadership on climate change policy, on identifying areas of concern and on identifying to other Departments what we should be doing. We have set up the green growth strategy team, which involves the other Departments, and I thank them for getting involved. We will have a course of work, over the next year in particular, that will draw in all the Departments and will identify what we need and expect of them. We have made significant progress in energy, and we can make further progress. The Department for the Economy is looking at 70% renewable energy, which, I believe, is entirely achievable. In the longer term, I believe that we can get to the point of exporting renewable energy, and that is a place where we should want to be. We will work closely with other Departments on that. It is up to the Executive to decide whether they want to establish another Department; that is not my decision alone. It is a significant call to make.

Ms Bailey: Thank you, Minister.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Are you online, Maurice?

Mr M Bradley: I am, Chairperson; thank you. I got cut off just before I asked the question.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): We saw you coming. *[Laughter.]*

Mr M Bradley: I join everybody else in welcoming the Minister back. You are looking well, Edwin, and I wish you a speedy recovery back to full health and fitness.

Mr Poots: Thank you, Maurice.

Mr M Bradley: You mentioned scoring a wonder goal in relation to the protocol. We are a country that has 0.5% of the population in the EU, yet we are responsible for around a fifth of all checks across the EU. We were told last week that we were averaging 2,000 checks, which will rise to 30,000 at the end of the grace period. How inflexible is the EU on necessary changes to the protocol and how reluctant is the EU to reach workable solutions?

Mr Poots: As part of the protocol, the Joint Committee was to oversee the smooth transition. Let us be very clear: the Joint Committee — be it the EU, the UK or both of them combined — has failed to deliver a smooth transition. Let us not take any responsibility for a failure of the delivery of the protocol, because the failure lies with the Joint Committee. What is being imposed on Northern Ireland is irrational, oppressive, burdensome and, frankly, ridiculous. You have given figures for what is being expected of Northern Ireland vis-à-vis what is happening in the rest of the EU. Nobody can justify that.

Nobody can justify what is being asked of Northern Ireland. The costs, the burdens and the imposition on consumers are entirely unnecessary.

I listen to what people say, and I heard Colum Eastwood, the leader of the SDLP, say that there have to be checks somewhere and that this is where the checks are going to be, but do we have to have those checks? I pose that question to everybody and to the European Union: do we have to have those checks? Ultimately, what this is about — what it should be about, and what, I thought, they indicated at the outset that it was about — is stopping goods that did not meet EU standards from entering the European Union. If they want us to ensure that goods that are produced in Great Britain do not enter the European Union and for that to happen at the Port of Belfast and at Larne and the other ports and the airports, that is one thing, but what in the name of goodness has that got to do with a pizza that ends up on somebody's table in Belfast or other items of food that are brought in?

I know that 'The Belfast Telegraph' and a member of the Alliance Party tried to make fun when I talked about jelly and gravy. I challenge anybody to go to their larder, to lift out all the products in it and to identify where they come from. They will find that virtually all the products in their larder are produced in Great Britain. Hartley's, HP, Heinz, Rowntree's and Cadbury — there are just so many of those big companies — are based in Britain. Their products are an essential part of the food that people eat in Northern Ireland. We cannot have a circumstance or situation where those goods go through a whole series of unnecessary checks, and, as a consequence of that, the cost of food in Northern Ireland goes up by — what? — 10%, 20%, 30%: I do not know. I do know that it will add significant uplift to food costs in Northern Ireland. That will be grossly unfair.

Why does the European Union want to impose that on the people of Northern Ireland? Why does it want to create a circumstance where the peace process is damaged as a consequence of what it is doing; where people who were brought to a place in 1998 are now saying that they are not in that place any more as a consequence of the protocol? Does the European Union want to destroy the peace process that exists in Northern Ireland? Those are fundamental questions.

Let me be very clear: we will cooperate with the European Union in protecting its single market. That is not an issue. However, what is being imposed on us goes way beyond protecting the single market, and the damaging consequences are not just significant; it is absolutely kamikaze in what it is doing to Northern Ireland. The European Union needs to reflect, draw back and work properly in the Joint Committee. The UK should not have had to make the unilateral decision, because the Joint Committee should have seen that coming very quickly. We have raised the issue over and over again with it that the end of the supermarket grace period on 1 April was not sustainable and that it needed to be extended. However, it chose to ignore that. Why is it ignoring the needs of the people of Northern Ireland? It needs to reflect upon that and to have a reality check.

Mr M Bradley: Thank you, Minister. Minister, this is only an opinion, and I do not want you to answer it. In my opinion, the EU is using Northern Ireland as a bargaining tool in negotiations with the UK, and it is punishing the UK for leaving the EU through Northern Ireland. That is only my opinion. Please, do not answer it.

How can Northern Ireland explore the need to support its own internal market, with local retailers using produce that is produced here in Northern Ireland, as opposed to importing cheaper goods of a lesser quality?

Mr Poots: There are many opportunities. One thing that happened, for example, was that one of the major supermarkets, which was importing liquid milk here, is now acquiring liquid milk locally. We should encourage those things to happen, whether that be through Departments, education and all that, and, indeed, the suppliers who supply schools, hospitals, prisons and those key areas should obtain as many of their goods from Northern Ireland plc as possible. In some respects, the protocol has driven them down that route. It is easier for them to obtain goods here in Northern Ireland directly than through some of the big distribution networks that were set up previously across the UK. It is certainly an area where we should encourage every Department to proactively engage in acquiring goods as locally as possible. It is not just good for the local community but good for the environment.

Again, some of the EU rules on procurement were quite prohibitive. We need to ensure that any flexibilities on procurement that have come about as a result of stepping back from the European Union are built in to allow people to acquire more goods at a local level.

Mr M Bradley: Thank you. Chairman, with your indulgence, I have one wee quickie if it is possible. If not, I will move on.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Go ahead: a quick one.

Mr M Bradley: A quick one, Minister. We discussed the climate change Bill last week. Is there an update on a peatland strategy to manage and restore our natural peatlands?

Mr Poots: I will put that out with my response to Clare; I will give you something in writing on where we are with all those things. A peatland strategy is critical to the whole climate change piece. It is a course of work that we are endeavouring on.

Mr M Bradley: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): We are going to try to reconnect with Rosemary. Can you get us now, Rosemary?

Mrs Barton: Yes. Can you hear me now?

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Yes, Rosemary.

Mrs Barton: Thank you. Minister, it is good to see you back again. I wish you well with your continuing recovery.

Mr Poots: Thank you.

Mrs Barton: I have a couple of questions. A few things have been asked, but I have one or two other issues. The first is succession planning. When the younger generation take over a farm, they are keen to progress and improve, but they may not have the collateral to do so. What talks have you had with banks in relation to supporting young farmers?

Mr Poots: We have had a series of meetings with banks. To be perfectly honest, those have not focused particularly on young farmers; it has been more about issues around COVID, future farming needs and all of that. The banks remain relatively positive about farming. It has proven to be consistent. It is probably not one of their big profit-makers, but it is one of those consistent things that is very reliable for them. They are working quite closely with the farming community in many areas. One of the areas in which the banks have been working with younger farmers in particular is chicken production and the development of some of the chicken units, which has enabled young people to stay at home. There has been a massive extension of that in your constituency in south Tyrone, for example. A lot of people are engaged in farming as a result of the chicken industry who would not otherwise have been able to remain in farming because they do not have the land asset to sustainably raise a family. We will continue to work with banks and to encourage succession planning.

Succession planning involves banks and policy. It is about looking at the potential for developing taxation policies that are favourable towards the long-term leasing of land as opposed to conacre and so forth. We have written to HMRC on that issue. There is a series of things that we can do to encourage succession farming. That is critical. I am not sure what the average age is now — I think that it is maybe 59 — for farming. We need to continue to drive the age of the industry downwards. It is a bit exaggerated because a lot of people continue to farm part-time when they retire because that is what they want to do. There are quite a lot of younger farmers, but we need to bring more young people in to the industry. Nothing survives without the replenishment of youth. It is important for the agri-food sector that that is the case.

Mrs Barton: Thank you for that, Minister.

You spoke about wind energy and your plans for the future in relation to your green growth strategy and driving it. Has any consideration been given to improving the electricity network? Over the years, when wind energy was discussed here in Fermanagh, the issue was about getting it on to the grid. Are there any plans to upgrade the grid, particularly in the west of the Province?

Mr Poots: You have hit the nail on the head, Rosemary. It takes me back to when I was in DOE previously. We identified quite clearly that the greatest sources for wind energy were in County Tyrone, for example, and the west of the Province in general, but the big electricity distribution was taking place in the east of the Province. I think that it was going to cost something like £500 million to bring it to the big distribution network at Tandragee. We also have the necessity for a North/South interconnector. I am supportive of that and hope that it can be moved on to give us that greater energy security. It is outwith my Department. It is the Department for the Economy, in the main, that will be looking after that, but your point about having the transmission system to carry the energy that is produced is critical. It is also an opportunity. Some companies are very energy-intensive, and it would be wonderful to see some of those companies established in the west of the Province and developing significant job opportunities in the west of the Province where the available energy happens to be. We should seek to take advantage of that as well and to encourage people to locate to places where there is extensive availability of renewable energy for business.

Mrs Barton: Thank you. Minister, I have one last question. We cannot leave it. It is to do with the loam that my colleague has been talking about. You put out a statement last night that suggested that there was no problem with bringing loam over to Northern Ireland, yet there are emails from your Department stating:

"the composition and technical specification of loam comes under Annex VI of the EU Commission ... and further stating very clearly '... I regret to inform you that the importation of these products from Great Britain (as a 'third country') into Northern Ireland ... is currently prohibited.'"

I am not saying that your statement is wrong, but is there an issue or is there confusion? Could you clarify that, please?

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Rosemary, could you repeat the last question?

Mrs Barton: It is about loam. That is the soil — I use the word "soil" very loosely — that is used for cricket pitches. There has been confusion. Earlier in the week, DAERA officials said:

"I regret to inform you that the importation of these products from Great Britain (as a 'third country') into Northern Ireland ... is currently prohibited."

However, the Minister put out a statement yesterday saying that that is not the case and that it is fine to import the loam. Minister, will you clear up the confusion?

Mr Poots: OK, I will clear up any confusion — or hopefully clear it up. I became aware of that issue yesterday morning. I activated things and got the key people involved in it. On investigation, it was identified that this loam is probably around 70% clay and, beyond that, is sand-based, so it is not something that meets the SPS requirements. Consequently, senior departmental officials and I were able to make a decision that this would not require SPS checks. An official may have given an initial position. I am giving the departmental position, which is that we can import Surrey loam. It now comes from three counties but is a loam soil that is particular to that area and is exported throughout the European Union. I am giving the position of DAERA on this: we do not have an issue with the import of the loam, and, as a consequence, the cricket clubs will be able to use that in the latter part of the year when they start to replace the damage that has been done as a result of the season's cricket. It will reduce their costs, make cricket safer and allow people to engage in that sport. I know that it is a very English sport, but Declan's former leader, the late Martin McGuinness, was a great fan of cricket, and it is a sport that many people across the Province and across the community continue to enjoy.

Mrs Barton: Thank you for that, Minister.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Indeed he was. It is widely played across north Tyrone, Donemana and *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Poots: Yes, Bready and all up round there.

Mr McGuigan: I am remembering my misspent days as a student watching one-day cricket matches when I should have been studying for exams.

Minister, it is genuinely good to see you back and looking well. As everybody else said, I wish you a continued good recovery and good health. As well as your looking well, it is clear that your bullish nature has not been diminished, nor your sense of irony. I have to pull you up on a few things about Brexit.

Mr Poots: Thank you, Philip. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McGuigan: I appreciate your attempts at deflection and blaming everybody, from 'The Belfast Telegraph' and the Alliance Party to the EU, and your seeking apologies from others. It is important that, again, it is put on record that Brexit was pursued by the British Tory party and supported by you and your party, Minister. Even after the referendum result, the DUP continued to push for as hard a Brexit as possible. That is why there are potential issues, all resulting from the decision of Brexit. It is important that that position is put on record.

From your presentation, there are clearly a lot of priorities that we need to get through this side of the election, such as the climate change Bill and the green growth strategy. I have had the discussion with officials and you, at various points, about which comes first. Is it the climate change Bill and targets, and then the strategies fall under that? You seem to be suggesting that everything to do with climate will be pursued through the green growth strategy, and I am not sure how that works in the absence of proper targets. I take this opportunity, Minister, to ask for ambitious targets in any climate Bill that comes forward. We had a presentation last week in which it was clear that the North, potentially, is not going to set net zero but just contribute to a bigger net zero. I ask that we have ambitious targets here and that we push to get net zero as quickly as possible. You said to Clare that you intend to give us a timetable for all the strategies. I am making the appeal that all those strategies need to be subsumed under an ambitious climate Act.

Subsequent to that, on other environmental issues, you talked about the plastic reduction action plan. You will, hopefully, be aware that I have a private Member's Bill on banning single-use plastics. That is something that we need. It would also be useful to get an update on any potential deposit return scheme.

Mr Poots: OK. There is quite a lot there, Philip, and thank you for that. I have come back just as bullish as ever. They did not remove that from me when they were removing the kidney, thankfully. *[Laughter.]* On the climate change issue, as things are panning out — not as is planned, but as they are panning out — we will probably be reaching the full development of the green growth strategy almost in conjunction with the conclusion of the climate change legislation. The two things will come in the early part of 2022. That is fine, because the legislation will set the policy, and the green growth strategy will be the engine to deliver that policy. If it was a car, the legislation would be its shell and the green growth strategy would be its engine, drive and gearbox that actually make the thing move. Hopefully, they will come in a coordinated way as planned and will put us in a really strong position to deliver on the issues.

We have been seeking advice from the Climate Change Committee on the setting of targets. It will be for discussion for the Committee, the Assembly and the Department. We have indicated what the recommendation from the Climate Change Committee happens to be. The Climate Change Committee is engaged and totally committed to reaching net zero, but it has been recognising that not every region of the UK would have to have net zero for the UK to reach net zero. Given the higher proportion of our population involved in agriculture and the higher number living in rural areas, we are in a slightly different position. The Climate Change Committee has acknowledged that. We all need to look at the maximum that we can reasonably achieve and make our contribution to that. It is not a matter of running away from our climate change responsibilities, which we take very seriously. However, it is important that we do it in a way that does not kill off jobs or opportunities and does not drive people away from rural communities in the process.

You came in with a couple of points at the end, Philip. Will you remind me of them?

Mr McGuigan: Single-use plastics and deposit return schemes.

Mr Poots: I am glad that you raised that one. Yesterday, I signed off on a policy that will involve a bit of legislative change. It will raise the plastic bag levy. Currently, there is a cap of 20p. We will remove that and raise the levy on all plastic bags.

We are happy to look at single-use plastics in conjunction with the Committee to see how we can achieve something on that. We have already taken steps, for example, to remove nine different single-use plastics from Departments. We are already identifying and picking off many single-use plastics. We all have very similar aims and goals.

Mr McGuigan: Has the Department any intention of introducing a deposit return scheme in this mandate?

Mr Poots: We are working on that. We hope that we can, but we have had some resistance from some of the large bottlers, who are concerned about some of the proposals. However, we have been working with, for example, Bryson Recycling. It had a trial scheme in Whitehead, which I thought provided a great opportunity. Through the deposit and return scheme, you bought the product, paying the additional money. Then, when you recycled it or put it back into the system, you scanned it into an app on your phone and got your money back. Returning the deposit helps to ensure that those products do not end up in landfill or dumped at the side of the road. People have the ability to get their deposit back easily. There are clever ways of doing this, which will probably not be the ones that I knew as a child. I remember thinking that it was great when we spotted a bottle in the hedge, because there was 10p to buy a few sweets. If we gathered up a few more, it was all to the good. We hoked about in mum's kitchen to try to find bottles and then go to the local garage to exchange them for money. What we do will be more sophisticated than that.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Patsy, you are looking in for a very quick question, are you not?

Mr McGlone: Yes, it is just a very quick question. I do not need to rehearse the Brexit argument with you. People got the protocol because they voted Brexit and supported the Tory Government, who negotiated our current position. Yes, I accept that. I want to make two points about what I am hearing from Edwin. Departmental personnel are at Larne and other ports. They recognise what the issues are, and we have heard quite a few of them. The protocol was set up, as was the Joint Committee. The Joint Committee was set up for a specific reason: to observe, for four years, what the issues were and see what the situation was. Let us not forget that we are getting rid of almost 50 years of practice, regulation and legislation. What formal submission has there been to the British Government to raise at the Joint Committee the issues ventilated by the Minister and others? It is an EU/UK Government Committee, and that is the place to raise the issues. First, has that submission been made? Secondly, Minister, I heard you speak loudly on the sale of flowers and plants. Will the Minister accept that, when it comes to selling flowers, plants, clothes, shoes and even mobile phones, the big winners are the multinationals, and the high street has taken a bit of a blast? I have a lot of sympathy for what the Minister says, but what is his opinion on that and on how we can develop the high street in our rural towns and villages?

Mr Poots: There are two issues. You say Brexit; we say protocol. You say potato one way; we say potato another way. We can go round in circles as to whose fault it is, and we will probably still arrive at the same position. However, setting aside who is at fault, there is a clear fault line. In my opinion, all the parties in the Executive should start to focus on what we can do to ensure that the European Union's single market is protected. It is entirely reasonable for the European Union to seek the protection of its single market, but it must not impose unnecessary impositions on NI plc, which, ultimately, will hammer business and consumers. In my view, all the parties should be working together and going to the European Union to seek practical solutions, not rigorous implementation. I would welcome the parties coming to a point where, instead of headbutt each other, we were working together to find solutions. That would be in all of our interests.

Patsy, will you remind me of your second point?

Mr McGlone: The second point was about the multinationals and the high streets. Edwin, I will make another point. I am genuinely seeking solutions. Is the Joint Committee, which comprises the British Government and the EU, getting a formal response from your Department or other Departments to advise it of the issues?

Mr Poots: I have written extensively, mainly to George Eustice but also to other Ministers, outlining the issues. It is all there in writing. I have had numerous telephone calls. I have engaged in numerous XO Committee meetings. The issues have been made very clear at UK level. I have also written to advise vice-president Šefčovič and made it clear directly. However, the Commission will not directly negotiate with us in Northern Ireland; it negotiates through the UK Government. We cannot go there or

join a forum to make a case. The First and Deputy First Minister did attend a meeting a couple of weeks ago, but that was the first such opportunity. Yes, all of that material has been submitted.

On the reopening of Northern Ireland, the coronavirus figures are coming down well. The pressures on our hospitals are now very well reduced, and we need to reflect on that and start to open in a phased way that does not undermine what has been achieved. We also need to take account of the fact that around 600,000 vaccines have now been distributed. In the next number of weeks, a large number of vaccinations will take place because of a major delivery from AstraZeneca. We are in a very fortunate position with vaccines. In the latter part of last year, in response to a question from me, the Chief Medical Officer said that the vaccination programme would be a game-changer. The public are now ready to see what that game change is to be.

You are absolutely right: the supermarkets have been creaming it in whilst our small shops look on. I hope that your party and others will support the Executive in ensuring that there is equity and equality and that small businesses with only one employee, that being the business owner, or a couple of part-time staff have the opportunity to earn a living again as opposed to sitting there watching supermarkets and plcs creaming it in.

Mr McGlone: Thank you very much for that, Edwin. I have one brief observation. I would appreciate it if the rural policy that you are rolling out could be done in conjunction with the Executive subcommittee on the development of the high street. Many rural towns will be badly affected by this. Also, how will your Department work with the opportunities that Invest NI has seen, given that, and you acknowledge this, we in Northern Ireland are in a position that could be used in a very positive way by using the positive aspects of the outcome of the withdrawal agreement to benefit our economy?

Mr Poots: Doubtless, we will work with whatever circumstances we find ourselves in. Fundamentally, I believe that we need to tackle all of the issues and ensure that there is zero friction between us and Great Britain on materials that come into and stay in Northern Ireland. If we can facilitate the European Union and the Republic of Ireland in particular, in terms of the materials that could end up in the single market, in a way that could not be done at the border, that is not an unreasonable thing to seek. It is unreasonable, however, to impose what is currently being asked of the people of Northern Ireland, and I encourage all parties to recognise that and to state it. Ultimately, would it not be a really powerful message to the European Union and the UK Government if all of us were to come together and say, "Listen, this is unnecessary. It is impractical, and it is an imposition that is causing harm to the people whom we represent. Here is a better way of doing it"?

Mr McGlone: Thank you, Minister.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): I would like to take the opportunity to thank you, Minister Poots. It is great to see you back and feeling healthy again. Hopefully, your recovery will be very successful in the longer term as well. Thank you for your attendance. We will be in contact.

Mr Poots: Thank you.