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Committee for Agriculture, Environment and
Rural Affairs

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Nature-friendly Farming: Department of
Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

20 May 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

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

Witnesses:

Dr Rosemary Agnew	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr Dave Foster	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): I welcome, via StarLeaf, Dave Foster, director of regulatory and natural resources policy, and Rosemary Agnew, Brexit director. I ask officials to brief the Committee, after which members will ask questions. You are very welcome, Dave and Rosemary.

Dr Rosemary Agnew (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thank you very much, Chair. I will lead off.

Good morning, members. Thank you very much for the opportunity to discuss nature-friendly farming. Dave and I realise that the Committee has a significant interest in this. The Committee has received a number of presentations on the subject and discussed it at previous meetings.

You asked that we focus on two things this morning: what DAERA is doing to encourage nature-friendly farming good practice; and what is likely to be in any future agricultural policy to support nature-friendly farming.

As you said, Chair, Dave joins me this morning, and he will cover DAERA's current actions to encourage nature-friendly farming. I will try to provide an overview of our direction of travel in how we integrate nature-friendly farming as part of future agricultural policy considerations. The Committee has received a written update on the latter part, so our oral presentation will focus more on what DAERA is doing.

Before I pass to Dave to update the Committee on that, I would like to say a few words on the development of future agricultural policy. Again, the Committee is very aware of this, and Minister Poots has set out his vision for future agriculture in Northern Ireland that is defined around four outcomes: an industry that pursues increased productivity as a means of sustained profitability; an industry that is environmentally sustainable in its impact on and guardianship of air quality, water quality, soil health, carbon footprint and biodiversity; an industry that displays improved resilience; and an industry that operates within an efficient, sustainable and responsive supply chain.

The Department wants to help the farm sector to be the best that it can be across these four areas, and, since the beginning of this calendar year, significant, ongoing work has been looking at how we will take that forward. Nature-friendly farming is central to it, and future policy must allow farmers to have the best possible tools at their disposal to deliver these outcomes, particularly the environmental outcomes. For many farms, business as usual will not be an option. The future is about doing more with less in a sustainable and innovative way, meeting the many targets that will come upon us via legislation. I note that, this morning, the Committee referred to its call for evidence on the Climate Change Bill.

We look forward to engaging with the Committee on DAERA's proposals over the coming months, but I am limited in what I can say today because some of them have not even been fully considered by the Minister at this stage. However, I am happy to take any questions that you have. I will hand over to Dave for the main focus of our presentation this morning, which is on what DAERA is doing.

Mr Dave Foster (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thank you, Rosemary. Thank you, Chair and members, for the opportunity to speak to you today about DAERA's support for nature-friendly farming. Protecting and enhancing biodiversity and wildlife is a key priority for DAERA, as is the delivery of increased opportunities for nature-friendly farming. If you are content, Chair, I will give a general overview of the support that the Department currently offers to nature-friendly farming.

First, DAERA's current agri-environment scheme, the environmental farming scheme (EFS), supports farmers and land managers to implement environmentally beneficial actions on agricultural land. Its primary aim is to protect and enhance biodiversity and water quality, as well as mitigating climate change by enabling a greater sequestering of carbon. EFS is a voluntary scheme that offers farmers a five-year agreement to implement environmental measures and actions on their land.

There are two levels to EFS. The higher level aims to protect and enhance environmentally designated land and priority habitats. That is achieved through site-specific management plans, which are usually focused on grazing regimes and habitat management measures. These plans are drawn up by an independent environmental planner and are then approved by DAERA for implementation by the farmer.

The second level of EFS, the wider level, aims to create green infrastructure in the wider countryside, outside of the land that is already in the higher level. A range of options is available, including the creation of new hedgerows, planting of feed crop for wild birds, creation of riparian margins and creation of wildflower margins. This wider level provides farmers with a menu of options from which they can select up to four different ones to form an EFS agreement. EFS also offers stand-alone options that support organic farming, the production of Irish Moiled cattle and small woodland creation. Farmers can choose to implement these options, along with a range of other options, as part of an overall agreement, or they can choose to implement these options individually.

The current status of EFS is that, after four annual intakes, around 5,000 farmers participate in the scheme. That equates to approximately 900 higher-level agreements and 4,100 wider-level agreements being in place, and it covers a total of around 55,000 hectares of land. Two further tranches are planned for this year and next. Tranche 5 of the higher level is currently open, and applications for that close tomorrow. The plan is for tranche 5 of the wider level to open in mid-August.

In addition, five EFS group-level projects are in place. Those projects support cooperative work by agreement holders in specific geographical areas. The group projects fund external facilitators to provide farmers with additional advisory support to help them to deliver their EFS agreements. The five EFS group projects specifically target environmentally designated land, water quality and priority habitats and species in particular areas. Around 500 farmers are currently supported in those EFS group projects.

I turn to the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE). It delivers knowledge transfer, innovation and technology transfer programmes that aim to improve the future performance, sustainability and resilience of the agri-food industry. CAFRE's agri-environment advisers work with farmers to provide advice across all environmental media. A comprehensive communications strategy is delivered through a variety of training courses, webinars, press articles and social media. This includes a farm advisory newsletter, which is regularly issued to all farm businesses in Northern Ireland to assist farmers in compliance across the entire range of environmental issues.

In addition, CAFRE deals directly with farmers through the business development groups, which provide a training forum to allow sharing of knowledge through peer-to-peer learning between farmers, with the aim of improving technological efficiency and environmental performance. Nature-friendly farming techniques are a key component of the environmental business groups. By the end of March this year, 3,232 farmers and growers had enrolled in a total of 165 business development groups, including 20 environmental business development groups. In addition, CAFRE is responsible for delivering training for all EFS participants in the environmental requirements of that scheme.

I will turn briefly to the work of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA). It is working with a number of partners to develop a series of conservation management plans for our special areas of conservation, and this involves engagement with key stakeholders on the necessary conservation measures. Those will be largely delivered through nature-friendly farming techniques.

On soil analysis, ensuring healthy soils is an essential element of nature-friendly farming. DAERA offers a soil sampling service and training for farmers, which provides them with detailed information on their soils: the pH levels and nutrient requirements. By optimising the pH and applying slurry when aligning chemical fertiliser with crop need, farmers can maximise crop yields, increase soil fertility and improve farm profitability whilst, importantly, improving environmental performance.

Finally, Rosemary briefly mentioned future agri-environment support, and, as she said, we continue to engage with farmers and the industry on current and future policy development as well as the practical implementation of necessary measures. That will continue as we move towards delivery of the new agri-policy framework, which will enable us to meet our key international and national commitments on climate, environmental issues and biodiversity.

Work is under way to develop future agri-environment policy, and engagement is taking place with a variety of stakeholders, including farmers, the agriculture industry and the environment sector to help to inform that work. For instance, initial meetings have taken place with the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) and the Nature Friendly Farming Network.

In summary, DAERA offers a range of support measures that aims to help to deliver and increase nature-friendly farming. Rosemary and I are happy to take any questions that you might have on what you have heard.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Thank you very much, Dave. A number of members want to ask questions, but I will kick off. You will be aware that we are engaged in the scrutiny of the Climate Change Bill. From speaking to farmers and reading articles, I note that farmers do not know where they sit on the scale and how close they are to being carbon neutral. The objective of moving towards net zero is to balance emissions with what is sequestered. I am aware of the example in dairy farming of the bovine information system (BovIS) calculator, but what tools and strategies are the Department looking at to give farmers the means to measure accurately what they are emitting and sequestering so that they can work out where they are in getting the balance?

Dr Agnew: As part of the development of our future agricultural policy, we have what we refer to in the Department as a "carbon work stream". Although it is fair to say that work is at a very early stage in that, we are looking at how agriculture can meet whatever the future target is. Irrespective of what happens with any of the Bills under consideration, we will have a target for 25 or 30 years ahead. During that period, technology will change, and new products will come on stream. A number of new products that claim to mitigate methane production by ruminants, such as feed additives, are undergoing testing,

As you said, Chair, agriculture is uniquely placed to make a contribution, and, hopefully, a significant one, but that will involve change at the farm business level. We cannot give you the tools yet, but we are exploring a number of tools and levers — soil use and the measuring of soil, soil carbon and organic matter — to try, as quickly as we can, to assist farmers through incentivisation and knowledge. As you referred to, the use of calculators could be part of the suite of tools that we take forward in our

future agricultural policy. We are still at the early development stage, but we are moving at pace, and we would like to, if I were to give you a date early in your autumn calendar, come back and talk to you in more detail about that. Dave, do you want to add anything?

Mr Foster: The Department is aware that giving farmers the right information to enable them to make informed decisions is key to improving the environmental performance and profitability of farms. Rosemary mentioned soils, and, a couple of years ago, as a result of the recommendations of the expert working group, the Department ran two pilot schemes on soil sampling to provide detailed information on soil nutrients and on the pathways that nutrients might take to watercourses using lidar. The Minister is on the record as saying that he would like to roll that out across Northern Ireland to enable farmers to have a baseline of information. We are working on proposals for the Minister on that, which will include nutrients, soil carbon and above-ground biomass. That would start to fill in the gaps and give farmers information on nutrients on their farms, as well as on carbon and biomass, so that they can start to find out where they are, as you said, Chair, on carbon neutrality and determine how they can move forward.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): I emphasise that, to move forward, farmers need a baseline: they need to know where they stand. There are conflicting reports: on the one hand, I hear that farmers have to cut their livestock to reduce emissions; on the other hand, lately, I read a report by Professor Alice Stanton, who believes that many farms are already carbon neutral. The Department owes it to farmers to come up with a calculator so they have the tools to work out their baseline. The South of Ireland developed a marginal abatement cost curve (MACC) and 26-point action plan to help farmers along that path. It is important for the Department to look in every direction. The South is slightly ahead of us, and its template would be really helpful and useful. We share the same farming characteristics across the island of Ireland, and it would be useful to have a close partnership so that we can look at what they are doing in the South and see what we can learn for the Northern part of the island.

Dr Agnew: Chair, I absolutely agree with you. When I answered you earlier, I should have said that a European innovation partnership programme that uses six farms is ongoing across Northern Ireland. Admittedly, it is only six, but it is a start. The programme looks at measuring carbon across those farms and determining how best to measure it. The carbon work stream of future agriculture policy is looking at that carefully. I could not agree with you more: we need to provide the baseline information to farmers. We need to help farmers to understand that information so that they can meet whatever the obligations will be, whether it be net zero carbon by 2045 or 2050 or, as the Climate Change Committee's report said, an 82% reduction by 2050. It does not really matter what the target is. Farmers need the information, and we are not in a position today to comment on that. It is part of active policy development, so we will have to take the Minister's views and look at what he wants to do. We are not in a position to talk in any detail about those proposals today, but we are more than happy to come back in due course. I will be truthful with you: I suspect that the autumn term is when we will be in a position to come back to talk to the Committee about that.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): I am glad that that work is under way, because we have all received a lot of representation recently from farmers who are very anxious about what future policies and legislation might mean for their business. They are hearing many conflicting stories, from having to slash their herd numbers to stories that they need only take reasonable steps. It is crucial that, at some juncture, the Department gives that certainty and lets farmers work out where their baseline is. From that, they can work out a manageable road map to help them to transition.

Mr McGuigan: Cathaoirleach, you touched on some of the issues that I was going to ask about. Rosemary said that she cannot go into detail on future plans. Recently, however, we heard from members of the Nature Friendly Farming Network, who said that a "less is more" approach to livestock production can deliver improved profitability for farm businesses, particularly in upland areas. In your introduction, Rosemary, you touched on the "less is more" concept. Will future agricultural policy help more farmers to adopt this kind of approach to improving farm profitability and helping the environment, which are both vital issues?

Dr Agnew: Thank you, Philip. I will not repeat the four outcomes — I outlined them in my introduction, and the Committee is aware of them — that our future agricultural policy seeks to achieve. They focus on increased productivity, environmental sustainability and business resilience. By maximising productivity, we want to maximise the output for a given level of input. In other words, we want to improve efficiency on farms. If you improve efficiency on farms, you can deliver significant environmental benefits. There are things like calving a cow at two years of age or finishing cattle at a

younger age so that they are on the farm for less time. Lots of things can be done to deliver positive environmental benefits.

Biodiversity is the subject that we are here to talk about today, and the Department is looking again at the types of animals used to graze certain habitats and at stock density. We are doing that to try to deliver the productivity and environmental outcomes that we are trying to achieve. As I said, we are not yet at a stage where we can say, "Here is what the Department thinks". Early in the autumn — this is why I mentioned autumn — subject to the Minister's agreement, we hope to talk about that through further engagement and consultation documents on our policy proposals. However, that is subject to the Minister's agreement. It is the start of a conversation, and we have a way to go. Remember, the targets on climate change are not tomorrow's targets; they are targets for 25 to 30 years down the road. Therefore, we need to get this right, and we need to spend some time getting it right. Dave, is there anything that you want to add?

Mr Foster: In the original policy framework consultation that took place 18 months or so ago, there was a recognition of the four outcomes that we are aiming to achieve in environmental sustainability, and the importance of that. If we can get to the stage at which farmers are rewarded for their positive work on environmental performance and start to see the environmental elements of their farms acting as almost an income source for environmental management, it will enable them to remain profitable while delivering improved environmental performance and contributing to the climate change challenges that we face. Some of the conversations that we have been having with different groups certainly underline that.

Mr McGuigan: OK. Thanks very much.

Mr Blair: My thanks to Rosemary and Dave. It is good to hear them giving more information about nature-friendly farming. We know that the Committee is exploring other avenues as well, so, hopefully, we will start to progress some actions on this.

Previous stakeholder engagements highlighted that future agricultural policy will focus on targeted outcomes related to the environment, such as actions on ammonia emissions, improvements in the condition of priority sites, water quality and other environmental targets. Will those outcomes be aligned to specific legal targets, or will they be broader and more aspirational?

Dr Agnew: John, thank you. I will pass that question to Dave.

Mr Foster: Thank you, Rosemary. As Rosemary outlined, we have been looking at the targets and metrics for developing future agricultural policy. There will be a mixture. Some high-level targets will apply to the whole policy frameworks, and some of the individual work streams will have more specific targets. Rosemary mentioned the carbon work stream, and there will be a specific agri-environment work stream. Those are the most relevant work streams to the environmental targets.

The targets and metrics will flow from a number of places. For instance, the Programme for Government (PFG) has, I think, seven environmental indicators, almost all of which flow from legal obligations. Some of those are certainly relevant when it comes to agricultural policy on nutrients and greenhouse gas emissions. Where relevant, targets will reflect the statutory obligations. We are also cognisant of the work going on with the UK Environment Bill: the creation of the Office for Environmental Protection and the requirement to produce an environmental improvement plan. That will be part of our consultation on the environment strategy once that has been developed later in the spring or summer. The agri-framework recognises that targets are needed to measure progress. When it comes to the environment, many of those have a statutory basis in national and international commitments.

Mr Blair: OK. I understand the mandatory commitment to current legal obligations, but I am trying to get to whether we are likely to see additional legal obligations.

Dr Agnew: The most obvious one is a legal commitment to a climate change target.

Mr Blair: Yes.

Dr Agnew: At this stage, all that we can say is that we are looking at the targets and metrics. Certainly, any future agricultural policy will have a number of targets that are set in statute. Associated

with that, at the higher level, the future agricultural policy will have a small number of quite significant metrics that it will seek to achieve, which are the outcomes and how we measure them. It is an outcome-focused, not an activity-related, policy. We will have to develop a monitoring and evaluation framework for measuring whether we are achieving those outcomes. We have not come to any formal decision on whether those will be put in legislation. That obviously needs to be considered by the Minister as well, and we are just not at that stage, John. I know that that has not answered your question, but that is part of what is going on in the Department's policy development function.

Mr Blair: OK, thanks. I am quite content that it is work in progress and a wait-and-see situation. We can explore that further at a later stage. I am happy with that. Thanks, both.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): I call in Clare Bailey. You are pixelated again today, Clare, but it is good to see you.

Ms Bailey: It is just my Thursday morning look; what can I tell you? *[Laughter.]* You can close your eyes and not look.

We have known about the climate crisis for a very long time. We have also known for a very long time that carbon and methane are the biggest problems. During some of that time, departmental policy deliberately intensified agri-emissions through various policies like Going for Growth. Are you telling us that that was all happening without baselines or measures even beginning to be built into the sector and that none of it was being done while the problem was known about?

Dr Agnew: Clare, I will respond first and then ask Dave to comment. We measure environmental outcomes. In fact, just today, we as a Department, published the latest on what our environmental indicators show, so we measure baselines.

Sorry; there seems to be a bit of an echo, but, hopefully, you can hear me.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Could all members go on to mute unless they are asking a question, please?

Dr Agnew: Thanks, Chair.

We do measure and we have been measuring baselines. To answer your question, until we left the EU, the very significant majority of departmental policy on farm support was driven by the European common agricultural policy under pillar 1 or pillar 2. We, as part of the United Kingdom, were a member state, so we followed that policy framework. The funding for and the delivery of that policy on the ground came from the EU. We are now in a different scenario, so we are looking at our local, regional needs more. It is not quite accurate to say that we have not been measuring. We have had various annual reports and indicators looking at the environmental outcomes. Dave, I will hand across to you.

Mr Foster: On baseline information for farmers, in response to a question from the Chair, I mentioned the work on soil nutrients and soil carbon and the Minister's aspirations on that. That work is underpinned by two fairly large-scale pilot schemes that have been done. The genesis for those was the work of the expert working group, which suggested that there was a need for baseline information. That was around the time that work on the 'Going for Growth' document came out.

There was a recognition that baseline information needed to be developed. It takes time to do, particularly when it comes to land because we have so much land in agricultural use. We are seeking to expand that now, but it will take a while. We are conscious that technology is moving on. The information that we can provide as a baseline in the next few years will probably be significantly more detailed than what we might have provided two or three years ago.

Ms Bailey: Do you think that has led to an unsustainable economic agri-food model?

Dr Agnew: I sincerely hope not. In order to meet our environmental outcomes, farming and the environment must come together. They cannot compete. Farmers and landowners own a significant amount of the land that delivers the environmental outcomes. As Dave said, we must strive to ensure that the environment is the centre of the farm and becomes almost like an enterprise on it. You heard Minister Poots refer to it as a "profit centre". We need to look at new ways of doing that. We must bring

farm economic activity and delivering environmental outcomes together. It is only together that they will deliver. There is a way through this. It may take us some time to get there, and we, as a Department, will need a significant amount of engagement, but there is still a role.

Ms Bailey: That is essential.

Dave, you mentioned that healthy soils are an important factor in nature-friendly farming. I would go a wee bit further and say that healthy soils are important for all farming and much more. They are really important for biodiversity, species and habitats.

What is happening with shaping education courses in CAFRE? Are conversations being had about promoting nature-friendly and climate-friendly practices in agri-education?

Dr Agnew: *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* would need to take away. *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* education programme *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* the knowledge advisory service and knowledge programmes at CAFRE are under continual revision. The CAFRE staff are very heavily involved in our teams that look at the development of future agricultural policy. However, as for specific changes that are envisaged over the weeks, months and year ahead, it would be better if we took that question away so that we can get you some more detailed information. Dave, can you add anything to that?

Mr Foster: It would probably be better to give some detailed follow-up to that. A number of staff in the environmental policy side of the Department, which is where I work, and in NIEA are actively working with CAFRE on the inputs to the various syllabuses and curricula it offers. They input directly on environmental requirements and sustainability. A good two-way conversation is going on on that. We can provide details on what specifically that is leading to in the detail of CAFRE's programmes. There is certainly a conversation going on, and there has been for quite a while, in order to make sure that the courses at CAFRE have the most up-to-date information on environmental requirements and techniques.

Ms Bailey: That would be appreciated. I asked the Minister something similar last week, and he said that he would get back to me. I do not think I have received that information from him yet, but I could be wrong.

Mr M Bradley: Thank you very much for your presentation, folks. As always, I found it interesting.

It is wrong to focus solely on farming. DFI Rivers is responsible for over-draining waterways and floodplains etc. Those are just some of the reasons for the loss of biodiversity. In Northern Ireland, 11% of species have been lost or are under threat. It is the same right across the island. Other factors include the reduction of crop rotation and the over-reliance on chemicals as fertilisers and pesticides etc. All those matters need urgent action so that there can be a change to more organic and environmentally friendly methods, but there is a cost. Where do you think that extra cost should come from in order to aid the farming industry to adapt to more nature-friendly farming? Should it come from central government, DAERA or somewhere else? Farmers need financial help to become more nature-friendly.

Dr Agnew: Thank you, Maurice. I will start and then hand over to Dave. You are right. We need to deliver public goods from farming. That will become more critical. However, we want to deliver productivity as well as those public goods on environmental sustainability. We need to look at how we incentivise farmers to do that, and I am specifically using the word "incentivise". Some of that may be done through providing them with knowledge and some through bespoke measures to try to encourage them to change their adopted techniques. In other words, it could be done through a scheme or funding, but we might be able to do it better by providing them with knowledge. Again, I go back to the fact that it is part of the ongoing policy development work. How much of it do we do by giving knowledge? How much do we need to incentivise? How much do we need to do by regulation? Obviously, regulation is the final step. If we could do it by the easier method, that would be better.

You asked who will pay for it. All funding that goes to farmers comes from Treasury, and, as we move forward, we will need to undertake all the necessary business cases in order to demonstrate the need for any support that we give to farmers. DAERA's budget comes from Treasury, so it is coming from UK Government anyway and will, therefore, be funded by UK Government. Dave, would you like to add anything?

Mr Foster: No, I think you pretty much covered it all, Rosemary. I will emphasise what you said about the mix of techniques to bring about the environmental outcomes that we want. Knowledge, education and support in particular schemes might enable outcomes to be achieved, as would the backstop of regulation that is used in certain cases. It is very much about trying to seek the best of those in the circumstances, and that might vary.

Mr M Bradley: Thank you. Chair, it would be wrong if we did not celebrate the return of the crane to Ireland after an absence of 300 years. Bord na Móna has ceased peat extraction and has re-wetted some peatlands. That has had an important impact and has seen the return of the giant bird. I have not seen one, obviously, but they are over a metre high and have a wingspan of four feet. It proves that if you re-wet the peatlands and re-establish the habitat, species may return. Furthermore, it can safeguard the numbers of existing species and those that are under threat of extinction.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Thank you, Maurice. I could not agree more. That was definitely a good news story. I move now to Strangford and to Harry.

Mr Harvey: Rosemary and Dave, it is good to see you again. Rosemary, you opened your comments by talking about more for less, but you omitted to say that the farmer should be better paid as well. *[Laughter.] [Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]* Did you produce a leaflet for the farming scheme? How did you relay the information to the farmers? You have had 5,000 participants, so it has been well advertised and spread about. How do you cater for different areas having different needs or capabilities? We have a variation in climate, landscape and soils. How do you address that?

Dr Agnew: Thank you, Harry. I will ask Dave to respond to your question on how we encouraged the 5,000 applications to the environmental farming scheme.

Your question on how we cope with the different areas is very valid, and, again, we are looking at it. There are specific areas of environmental interest, so do they need bespoke environmental measures that farmers might need to cooperate with, for example? Dave, you can comment on that. We are looking at that as part of our active consideration. Chair, there is a bit of echo again.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Members, again, turn off your microphones if you are not speaking.

Mr Foster: Thanks, Rosemary. The Department uses a variety of communication tools to make farmers aware of environmental farming scheme applications, whether that is via the press, social media, a website, information at DAERA Direct offices or a combination of those. We are always looking to improve that, so we are very happy to hear about areas where we have not been getting the right reach to see what more we can do. We recognise that farmers need to be aware of something before they can avail themselves of it and make those choices.

It is very true that there are different requirements in different areas. The current scheme, EFS, is bespoke. I mentioned an environmental planner going out to develop a site-specific management plan for applicants to the higher level. That is tailored to the locality of the farm. With the wider scheme, farmers can choose from a menu of options. Our IT system includes a lot of underpinning geographical information. When we know that there are particular areas that might have water quality issues, the system can help to point farmers in the direction of measures that will help with water quality. We use a mixture of human beings and technology to try to ensure that the scheme delivers in a tailored manner for the particular requirements of a farm or an area.

Looking to the future, we recognise that one size does not fit all. In order to help with our policy development, we have been looking at developments elsewhere. We looked at the scheme that has recently been launched in England, and we talked to colleagues in Ireland. Rosemary mentioned the European innovation partnership programmes. We also looked at some EU LIFE projects that deliver tailored geographical outcomes for farms. We are very much of the view that what a farmer does needs to reflect the needs of his or her farm and that the schemes that the Department puts in place need to be able to facilitate that as much as possible.

Mr Harvey: Thank you very much, Dave. Not only are we a diverse people but we have a diverse landscape.

Mrs Barton: Thank you for your presentation, Rosemary and Dave. I have a follow-on from Declan's question about carbon sequestration. We referred to the diverse landscape in Northern Ireland. We

also have diverse soils in terms of soil fertility. There are farms in the lowlands of Fermanagh and in the uplands of Antrim. There needs to be a little less of a one-size-fits-all approach to farming in Northern Ireland. We need to look at the specific types of farming and specific areas of farming when looking at carbon sequestration and greenhouse gas emissions. We have beef animals and cows and sheep, all of which produce very different emissions. Is any work being done that will look towards individualising the work on farms for farmers more?

Dr Agnew: Thank you for your question, Rosemary. We have to look at the balance. If we were to try to tailor future agricultural support to 24,500 individual farms, DAERA would never deliver that support. It would be so cost-intensive and would not deliver the outcomes that we are seeking to achieve for the Department or the farmer.

There is merit in what you say. We can look at the various levers that we could use with farm types in order to deliver for carbon. That is part of the carbon work stream. We are not yet at a stage where we can talk about how we can take that forward. We have not got that far, but part of the carbon work stream under the agricultural policy will look at that. I mentioned that calving heifers at two years of age as opposed to two and a half years of age has a positive benefit on the climate. If we finish animals sooner, that has a positive impact on the environment, and that is all around increased productivity.

It could be — I say only that it "could" be — that we will have a menu of things that we will suggest that farmers need to comply with in order to receive their payments. I use the word "suggest" at this stage, but we will suggest ways to help them to incentivise. As we talked about, the beginning of that is trying to transfer knowledge to farmers, meaning knowledge on the baseline and on how they can achieve those things. It would not come into that regulation phase unless we were not seeing some improvement, but it is part of active consideration. I think that the balance has to be struck between what we can achieve and what we can actually deliver. Dave, do you have anything to add?

Mr Foster: On the science side of things, you are quite right, Rosemary, that the industry is a diverse industry and the landscape is a diverse landscape. We work very closely with Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) and other science providers. We spend a lot of effort to ensure that the Northern Ireland inputs to the greenhouse gas inventory, which is the overall measurement of our progress on climate change from all sectors, not just agriculture, which we are talking about today, are as up to date and accurate as can be. If we think that assumptions that have been made for other parts of the UK do not apply here, we seek to gather the science to ensure that it is reflected and updated in the inventory.

We mentioned the Minister's desire to roll out wider-scale soil sampling. In doing that, we recognise that soil types are very varied across Northern Ireland and that, if we are going to start to measure soil carbon as well as soil nutrients, we need to have the test that will give an accurate reflection of that, no matter what the soil type. We have been talking with AFBI, recognising that, in certain parts of Northern Ireland, we might need to do some development work in order to make sure that our testing is fit for purpose and that we are accurate in and fair to all different parts of the industry and all the different landscape and environment types across Northern Ireland.

Mrs Barton: I have one more question, and it is on the genetics of livestock and how to improve the economy and environmental performance of grazing livestock. I heard Rosemary say the quicker the finishing of animals, the better it is for greenhouse gas emissions. That is in contrast to the farming of our native breeds such as Dexter cattle. We have to take cognisance of trying to get a balance between the use of our native breeds and the use of what we will call foreign breeds that we are already using in our farms.

Dr Agnew: Rosemary, I totally agree with you. At that stage, I was only giving you a few examples of what we could do. One of the areas that we are starting to look at again is how the genetics and a livestock data programme could be embedded in a future agricultural policy framework in order to improve not just the environmental performance but the economic performance. There will be different solutions for different farms on different landscapes, given the diversity, but it is about trying to suggest what those would be at this stage. We are not at the point where we can suggest that. I can give you examples today, and I do not disagree at all with the examples that you gave me, but we are not even at the stage of coming forward with those policy proposals.

Mr Irwin: Thank you for your presentation. I am a farmer, and I believe that the vast majority of farmers want to play their part in doing what they can on nature-friendly farming. I am sure you accept

that they need help, support and guidance. Certainly, they are not the experts. They want to play their part, but they need clear guidance from government and the Department on it. The sooner that guidance comes forward, the better.

Dr Agnew: We acknowledge your comment, William. In the responses that Dave and I gave, we indicated that knowledge is a huge part of that as well as guidance and incentivisation. We totally recognise that.

Mr Irwin: The Climate Change Committee has come forward with recommendations. The other UK regions accepted its findings and recommendations. Do you agree that it is wise that Northern Ireland does something similar?

Dr Agnew: Chair, it is probably better that I do not comment on that because I do not lead on climate change and neither does Dave. Suffice to say that the Department is undertaking its own analysis of the various proposals. Our colleagues will come to the Committee to give their views on that.

Mr Irwin: Are you saying that the Department will look at the recommendations made by the Climate Change Committee, yes?

Dr Agnew: Yes.

Mr Irwin: OK. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): We need to urgently move on because we are under pressure. Clare, can you ask a very short question, and can we get a very short answer?

Ms Bailey: Thanks for letting me in again, Chair. Rosemary, when talking about measurements, baselines and how you collate statistics, you mentioned the Northern Ireland Environmental Statistics Report. I googled it and noted that the 2021 report was published this morning.

Dr Agnew: Yes.

Ms Bailey: It shows absolutely no improvement in our water quality or any reduction in our greenhouse gas emissions. I just want to put that on the record. How can we have any faith? There is a lot of talk going on but little action to address the harms being done.

Dr Agnew: All I can say on that, given my role on future agricultural policy, is that those are the baseline figures that we are looking at. We have set a series of outcomes and are now looking very seriously at what we can do to militate against the fact that those indicators are not changing. We should remember that agriculture is not the only sector that influences water quality, for example. It is not all down to agriculture.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): OK. Thank you, Rosemary. I do not want to disrupt you too much, but I need to move on to the next item of business; we have people waiting for us.

I thank you very much for coming this morning, Rosemary and Dave. It was really helpful and informative. Good afternoon to you.