



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Animal Welfare (Service Animals) Bill
and Green Growth Strategy:
Mr Edwin Poots MLA,
Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

14 October 2021

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

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

Witnesses:

Mr Poots	Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr Kevin Hegarty	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Ms Tracey Teague	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr Arron Wright	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): Minister, thank you very much for coming along. You are very welcome. I also welcome Tracey Teague, and, online, we have Arron Wright and Kevin Hegarty from the Department.

Minister, I will hand over to you to brief us on accelerated passage for Finn's law and the green growth strategy, after which I will invite members to ask questions.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thank you very much, Deputy Chair. Good morning, Committee members, and thank you for the invitation to be here. I appreciate the opportunity to meet and to continue to engage as we move forward on a number of issues.

Last week, my officials provided you with an overview of the findings from the public consultation on the Animal Welfare (Service Animals) Bill, commonly known as "Finn's law", as well as an update on the way forward for legislation. Almost 98% of respondents were in favour of the policy proposals set out in the consultation. I was delighted that Committee members were happy to add their backing to the Bill. That support is appreciated and serves to underline how keen everyone is to see the new law in place.

Chair, you noted that I had written to you and the Committee to seek support to use the accelerated passage mechanism for the Bill. As my letter stated, that is not the normal process for such a Bill.

However, in this instance, there are robust reasons for using it. I appreciate that seeking accelerated passage means that the Committee may not have the opportunity to scrutinise the Bill in the detail that it would wish to. However, the Bill is uncontroversial and proposes simple amendments to the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 that mirror the changes that are in place in other parts of the UK. Nothing in the Bill could be classified as contentious, novel or repercussive. The matter was debated at length in the Assembly in February 2020 and received unanimous support from all five main parties. Although I am conscious that there is limited time left in this Assembly mandate, I feel that it is right to use all the tools at my disposal to introduce the Bill and progress the legislation as speedily as possible, especially when the law change had such significant backing from the Committee, MLAs in the Chamber, animal welfare organisations and the general public. The timetable for the Bill is tight, but I can alleviate some of the pressure by using accelerated passage and thus ensure that the legislation is updated.

I would also like to update the Committee on the progress of the green growth strategy and use the opportunity to thank you for your continued engagement and support during its development stage. My officials have consulted and updated the Committee on a number of occasions, providing written and oral briefings on progress and timelines. That has included receiving feedback from the Committee on the initial strategy framework document in March and providing the Committee with the first draft of the strategy in August. You will have received the latest draft.

As well as engaging with the Committee, my officials have engaged with key stakeholders, including the green growth forum and young people. We also sought advice from neighbouring Administrations in the UK and the Republic of Ireland and from the Climate Change Committee (CCC). The inter-ministerial group that was set up to reflect that partnership and the collaborative nature of green growth has resulted in our working towards a shared goal, further demonstrating the ambition and desired outcomes of the green growth strategy.

Further to that, the strategic oversight group, which consists of senior civil servants from across Departments, has been integral in shaping the draft green growth strategy. That collaborative approach and level of engagement is a key aspect of the strategy. Without all of us working closely together, it will just not work. By way of example, the energy strategy, which is an Executive strategy led by the Department for the Economy, is in the final stages of completion and provides an ambitious pathway to decarbonising energy. The strategy covers almost 60% of our total emissions and forms an important part of Northern Ireland's overall plan for addressing climate change. We simply must work together on those important issues. I am pleased to say that we have been liaising closely with the team leading on the development of the energy strategy. It has an important role to play in achieving our green growth goals.

As, I am sure, you are fully aware, the green growth strategy is the Northern Ireland Executive's multi-decade strategy, balancing climate, the environment and the economy in Northern Ireland. It sets out the long-term vision of a solid framework for tackling the climate crisis in the right way. The version of the strategy that you received in August has, as you would imagine, been further developed following feedback and comments received from members of the green growth inter-ministerial group, the strategic oversight group and senior officials in other Departments. The strategy now includes key chapters, including 'Reimagining our future', 'Balancing climate, environment and green jobs', 'Pathway to a low emissions society', 'Transition in the right way', 'From policy to delivery' and 'Measuring and monitoring our progress'.

An important alteration to note includes the consolidation of the Executive's commitments from 2010. This now provides a much more focused, achievable and tangible set of commitments that will provide a framework for implementing positive change across Departments. We also received feedback that the strategy was too focused on climate change and did not include enough on the environment and the economy. That, too, has been rectified, and the strategy is now much more balanced in that respect.

You will note, too, that consultation questions have been added. In implementing the commitments and principles set out in the green growth strategy, we must ensure that the transition to a more sustainable economy is fair and just for everyone. A just transition is at the heart of the draft green growth strategy. We aim to have an Executive-approved draft green growth strategy launched ahead of the Conference of the Parties (COP) 26, which, as, I am sure, you all know, will take place in Glasgow in November.

It has been an extremely challenging deadline but one that has helped to focus minds and provide us with a robust timeline. Without it, we might not have been in our current position of having the draft

green growth strategy at such an advanced stage, so I am grateful. The short time frame has resulted in a shorter turnaround time than we would have liked, but I am sincerely grateful to everyone who has provided input and contributed to what will be such an important strategy for the people of Northern Ireland now and for future generations. Synchronising our draft strategy with COP26 provides a unique opportunity for us to highlight at a national and global level the priority that Northern Ireland places on tackling the climate emergency, and the balanced approach that we are taking is something for all of us to be proud of.

We have made it a priority to develop and bring forward a Northern Ireland Executive Climate Change Bill that is well informed and based on the best available sound evidence and science. I understand that Colin Breen and his team will brief the Committee later today, and I will leave it to them to provide you with the relevant details. However, I believe that my Bill gives us the best chance of making the necessary changes to tackle climate change head-on and in a way that achieves the right balance between reducing emissions, protecting and enhancing our environment and ensuring that we have a thriving agriculture sector and economy in general.

Following Executive approval, we intend to launch the draft green growth strategy officially. That launch will kick-start a period of public consultation on the draft strategy. Along with online consultation, we will hold public consultation sessions and one-to-one stakeholder engagements to make sure that we hear people's views: what they agree with, what they do not agree with and what we can do to make it better. As well as that, the climate action plan is being developed. It will identify sectoral pathways, establish emissions reduction targets and outline the actions required to deliver on the commitments in the green growth strategy.

The strategy is a big step forward for Northern Ireland as we move from a high- to low-emission society and balance climate action with environmental and economic considerations. Balancing the three elements may add complexity to the challenge of addressing climate change, but that holistic green growth approach is right for Northern Ireland. It presents us with a tremendous opportunity that can help us to rebuild our economy following the COVID-19 crisis. We have the potential for a green revolution right here, right now in Northern Ireland. Through investment, research and development, innovation and working together, we can really make a difference not just for today but for future generations.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): Thank you, Minister, for providing an update on both of those issues. We will now ask some questions.

As you said, later today, we will get a briefing from the Department on the Climate Change (No. 2) Bill. Most people looking at the green growth strategy might be a wee bit confused; I certainly am. A significant proportion of what is contained in the green growth strategy seems to have come from the private Member's Bill — the Climate Change Bill. For example, I am looking at the development of climate action plans with five-yearly sector-specific greenhouse gas emissions targets. There is also, in the green growth strategy, as you outlined, the framework for a just transition. There is a commitment to working in a transboundary manner on this island with the South on decarbonisation. Many looking at that will think that it is really good that it is included in the green growth strategy but wonder why it is not included in your Department's Climate Change (No. 2) Bill. Why is it not in legislation rather than just being part of a strategy? On that basis, what has led to your desire to have a just transition in the green growth strategy but not include it in your Bill? You have included a just transition commission, but you have taken out the commitment to have a dedicated green growth climate action fund. I am not sure how one plays with the other. Will you answer all those questions?

Mr Poots: Yes, sure, not a problem. We have written to the sponsor of the Climate Change Bill, Clare Bailey, about her Bill, and we indicated compromises in that letter. We await a response to that letter, which was sent some time ago. It is a demonstration that my Department wants to work with Assembly Members and with the Committee and, on the one hand, reflect the points that they put to us whilst, on the other hand, being realistic.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): Can I stretch what you are saying to suggest that you seem to be indicating that you will consider legislating for the likes of those things in your Bill?

Mr Poots: All legislation is subject to amendment. We will be entirely reasonable when it comes to amendments to the Executive's Bill. It is important that we reflect on that. The Office of the Legislative Counsel (OLC) came to the Executive Committee re the private Member's Bill and said that it was

inoperable and totally unaffordable. When the Office of the Legislative Counsel sends a warning such as that, it is important that people pay attention.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): Even with you saying that, you are, as it were, stealing some of the clothes of the first Bill by inserting that into the green growth strategy.

Mr Poots: I would have thought that that would be welcomed by the Committee.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): I welcome it, but there seems to be a contradiction. It is a positive step, but it is still in the strategy. It would be great if it ended up in a climate Bill. It is in the private Member's Bill.

Mr Poots: I always say that climate change legislation gives you a framework but green growth is the driving force to do things. In many respects, the green growth strategy is even more important than the legislation. The strategy is the "doing" piece. We are trying to reflect an approach in the green growth strategy that is clear on tackling not just climate change but other environmental issues. On the other hand, we are saying, "There's an economy in Northern Ireland that we need to support as well". People need jobs to put food on their table and a roof over their head. We need to ensure that we can tackle climate and environmental issues at the one time. This is a great opportunity to massively improve our water quality. The improvement of water quality is good for everyone. It is also good for tourism because we will have better rivers for those who want to fish in them. All of those things are coming together. I want the green growth strategy to be as holistic as possible so that we can tackle climate change issues head-on and create a much better environment in terms of our water and air quality.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for coming along. Does the Minister agree that farmers need to be profitable to deliver on green growth and that they need government support to do so?

Mr Poots: Yes. To that end, we have been working on our request to the Executive for funding to support that change to take place. Currently, we have about £600 million to spend on areas under DAERA's responsibility to support work on, for example, animal nutrients and household waste. A series of things within the ambit of the Department will require considerable additional funding to make things happen. Good investment at an early stage will deliver good results quickly. That is where we want to get to. The sooner we start investing in that environmental change, the sooner we will ensure that we have a cleaner environment that produces considerably fewer emissions and captures carbon in a better way. Those are all courses of work that we can kick off relatively quickly, should the funding come forward from the Department of Finance.

Mr Irwin: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate that that is the case. You will agree that it is important that farmers know where they have to get to and are kept fully up to date so that they understand that in real terms.

Mr Poots: We have already been investing, for example, in low-emission slurry spreading equipment (LESSE) that will reduce methane and ammonia, and we can do other things to continue to reduce emissions. Ammonia is not one of the carbon emitters, but it has an impact on peatlands. Reducing ammonia helps to reduce carbon by ensuring that there is less leakage of carbon from peatlands. I hope that we will get the peatlands to the point where they continue to capture carbon year-on-year. Peatlands will not resolve the carbon issue, however: at best, they account for 5% — more likely 2% or 3% — of carbon emissions.

Some of the biggest things that we can do on carbon are in households. Households produce 16% of emissions, so there is considerable work to be done with the community. The key area for my Department is agriculture, which accounts for 27%. We can start to make a dent in that work quite quickly. As I understand it, carbon emissions from agriculture have come down since the 1990s, but they have grown in percentage terms because they have not come down as quickly as in other areas such as energy.

Mr Irwin: OK. Thank you.

Mr Harvey: First, I offer my condolences to our Chair, Declan, on his recent loss.

Minister, thank you for your attendance this morning. I have a wee comment on Finn's law on service animals. I am content to accept accelerated passage for the Bill. It is not contentious, and there are no reasons not to do so. The Committee has no time for cruelty to animals or animal suffering. If the Bill helps in any way to stop intentional injury or suffering, it is good.

Minister, how do you foresee green growth helping to deliver much-needed energy supply security?

Mr Poots: Thank you for your comments on Finn's law, Mr Harvey. Animal cruelty is a big issue. Sadly, elements of our society still engage in it. It is important that the Assembly pass whatever legislation it can to strengthen the law and deliver justice. I am keen to see the animal cruelty register established. It would be a good step forward for the Assembly, and it would provide dog wardens and others with further weapons in their fight against animal cruelty. There is more work to be done, and I encourage progress to be made on all those fronts.

On the green growth strategy and energy security, everybody can see the problem that we have with energy at the minute. Gas prices are rocketing. A relatively small number of countries are able to restrict the amount of fossil fuels — oil and gas — coming to the market, and, as a consequence, prices can rise rapidly at any point. That has happened this year, and it will have a consequence for every home across the country. People will have to pay more to heat their homes this winter, which will be difficult for them. There will be a cost to industry and business, and that will be passed on to our food prices and everything else. When energy prices rise so quickly, there is a severe impact.

What can we do about it? In Northern Ireland, we sit at 45% renewable energy. For years, we saw it as a disadvantage that we did not have the benefits that others had from selling fossil fuels — coal, oil and gas — on the world markets. It is now turning to our advantage that we do not have those fossil fuels because we now sit on 45% renewable electricity. We need to make that broader across the renewable energy sector as opposed to just renewable electricity, and we need to expand the amount of renewable electricity. We reckon that we can get to 70% renewable electricity onshore, and the rest will be derived offshore. A number of planning applications are in the making for offshore electricity. That is something we will have to monitor carefully to ensure we get the right balance between the environment and the renewable energy sector. Onshore, the key areas will be further wind energy, solar energy and anaerobic digestion (AD). That will require more wind turbines and more solar panels. I would love to see more businesses and farms installing solar panels. They pay for themselves relatively quickly, within probably five or six years, without renewables obligation certificates (ROCs) or assistance.

One of the biggest problems that we have is the single provider of connections to the grid. The single provider is not responding quickly enough in getting people connected, and the cost that it charges people is exorbitant. I call on the electricity regulator to open that market up and quickly, because it holds back the renewable energy green growth revolution that can take place. The single provider system clearly does not work.

We can produce a lot of hydrogen in Northern Ireland. Hydrogen production uses an awful lot of electricity, but a lot of the electricity that we are currently not utilising could be generated at night. A lot of wind turbines are not being used as much as they could because they have to be switched off at night when there is not the same power being used. We need to use the power that can be generated 24 hours a day from renewable sources but currently is not to produce another form of energy — hydrogen. That can be done on a consistent basis.

Increasing solar panels extensively when electricity is being used more heavily during the day would be a significant advantage to us. The production of hydrogen is key to driving our buses, lorries, agricultural machinery and all that heavy equipment. It has the potential to move into cars as well and be a much more sustainable form of renewable energy for transport than electricity, which involves mining materials, mainly in Africa but in other places. There are also end-of-life issues.

The other fundamental area is the anaerobic digestion of animal nutrients. Anaerobic digestion can deliver us biomethane, which is dirtier than natural gas and would need a further clean before it could be put into the pipes system. That is an area where I would like to see investment so that the gas produced from the methane from cattle, as opposed to ending up in our atmosphere and putting carbon in the atmosphere, goes into people's boilers. You win both ways: you reduce the methane from cattle going into the air, burning that methane off, and it is an environmentally friendly way of producing heat in homes.

There is enough anaerobic digestion in Northern Ireland to provide biomethane for about 62% of homes. The gas people — Firmus, Phoenix Natural Gas and other companies — tell us that their pipelines would, with moderate modification, be capable of taking that gas. That cannot happen in Great Britain, for example, because its network comprises mainly metal pipes. We in Northern Ireland could be on the cusp of leading on that. Taking methane that would otherwise go into the atmosphere and putting it into the gas network to be burnt off would be a double win. Having more anaerobic digestion would give a really good win from that, in conjunction with hydrogen. We could have oil lorries, which currently lift oil fossil fuel and deliver it to people's homes all around the country, running on hydrogen and collecting that mixture of biomethane and hydrogen and delivering it to homes across the country. That is all entirely carbon-neutral. We can use the problem in agri-food with methane production and turn it into a solution for homes across Northern Ireland. We need to take that vision and turn it into a reality.

Secondly, after anaerobic digestion we could go a step further and engage in slurry separation. That involves taking the dry materials and turning that which is phosphate-rich into fertiliser pellets. That organic fertiliser could be utilised in Northern Ireland, with the surplus sold elsewhere. Farmers, who are busy at the minute spreading slurry on fields, would get the phosphates and spread the appropriate amount on their fields. We would have to carry out soil analysis to ensure that the right amount of phosphate goes into our fields and that, consequently, we do not have run-off into rivers, thereby giving us cleaner rivers. The watery material can be compressed with nitrogen and applied by spraying, for example. Again, all that can be linked through GPS to detect whether you are spraying a heavier quantity in one part of the field. As a result, you will get the optimum amount of fertiliser added to the ground at that point. You do not get too much or too little; rather, you get the optimum amount, which the crop can utilise and benefit from and which is of no detriment to the environment. That is work that needs to be done. The remainder of the dirty water can be stored and applied, particularly during dry periods with no impact on the environment.

That is where we need to get to, Mr Harvey, as we try to find solutions. One way to rid ourselves of the problem of methane or, certainly, to reduce significantly the problem of methane produced by our animals, is to capture that and turn it into a source of energy for homes.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): Harry, before you come in again, this is an opportune moment to ask the Minister about the marine licence issued yesterday for Larne lough. Leaving aside the real environmental impacts of that decision, it seems to be in complete contradiction to the vision that you have just outlined for moving from fossil fuel to renewable energy, which everybody applauds.

Mr Poots: Absolutely not. If we go down the route of renewable energy, we will need facilities to store hydrogen, for example. When we generate that at night, we will need a facility to store it before it goes out.

On that decision, I followed the recommendation from all the experts in our Department and the sources of expertise that they sought in making a recommendation to me. I did not alter in any way, shape or form the recommendation that came before me on that decision. The decision was taken on the basis of the environmental information provided to the experts working for us.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): OK. Harry, do you want to come in again?

Mr Harvey: First of all, thank you, Minister, for a detailed answer. It is much appreciated. What engagement have you or your officials had with other Departments in designing the green growth strategy?

Mr Poots: We have the inter-ministerial group, which is supported by our Civil Service, and we have a strategic group of senior civil servants who support it and provide their qualitative information for it. That has enabled us to develop the strategy to the point where it is now with the Executive. It is our plan to launch it just before COP26 in conjunction with the energy strategy, which will be a demonstration that Northern Ireland is for real when it comes to climate change. We will take the practical steps necessary to take it forward.

I want to see us getting to the point where Northern Ireland uses 100% renewable energy and is an exporter of electricity and renewable energy. That can be done in a way that continues to support the local economy. It also takes us away from the massive fluctuations in oil and gas prices where the prices just get out of hand on some occasions. The last recession kicked off when oil hit about \$145 per barrel. It just got exorbitantly expensive. The consequence of that is that it drives the cost of

everything up. The last time that happened, the price of grain had got very high at the same time, and we now see exactly the same thing. Grain prices are high, and gas and oil prices are high. What is the consequence? The food on people's tables is rising in price quickly, and energy prices are rising quickly. It is a perfect storm that causes hardship for people.

Mr Blair: I also record my sincere sympathy to our Chairman and his family.

I thank the Minister and his team for the detailed information before us. There are a couple of things that I want to raise about green growth, but, before that, I thank the Minister for bringing forward the Finn's law proposals, which are much needed in this jurisdiction. I had an opportunity to visit a police dog the week before last. Unfortunately, it had been injured during the civil unrest earlier this year, but I am glad to report that Daphne the police dog that I met at Steeple Road in Antrim has fully recovered and appeared on the 'Crime NI' programme a couple of nights ago.

I have a couple of things to ask about the green growth strategy. I noticed in the written presentation — I can bring some of this up with officials later today if necessary — that matters such as the green growth test that were previously listed separately and specifically on the list of actions, as well as the need for a net zero fleet and estate by 2035, seem to have been absorbed into other areas. I have no problem with that. They are clearly still there, but I wonder what the thinking is behind the streamlining of those actions.

Secondly, there was formerly a greenhouse gas implementation partnership, chaired by the Department, for the sector. As far as I understand it, it operated between 2016 and 2020 and reported, I believe, in 2020, but it does not seem to feature as a strategy in any of the documents before us. Will such partnerships be replaced by some of the actions in the green growth strategy?

Mr Poots: I am conscious that I have done a lot of the talking. Tracey is with me, and she has done so much of the work on green growth, so perhaps she will deal with those issues for us.

Ms Tracey Teague (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): On the last point about the partnership, we will re-engage with the greenhouse gas implementation partnership because there has been a gap in the period of engagement, so we have just got the wheels in motion to do that. It will be in the context of green growth that we will do that.

Your first question was about the green growth test. The reason that we have put the green growth test forward picks up a bit on Harry's point about all the Departments aligning. We have made a conscious decision when we have been around that table as senior officials that one of the key ways to make a change here is to make sure that policy decisions and budget decisions are assessed not just against their purely monetary value but against their implications for climate change, for the environment and for the economy. We have streamlined that in a recommendation that all policy and budgetary decisions should go through a green growth test. That is a firm commitment that we want to take forward.

I missed your second question. Apologies, John. Can you repeat it?

Mr Blair: It was on the separate commitment to a net zero fleet and estate, Tracey, by 2035 in the original green growth strategy document. That seems to have been taken off as a separate target and, to some degree, absorbed into others. What is the thinking on that, and will that be applied across the Departments?

Ms Teague: We got feedback, John, that our 20 commitments were too many, and we slimmed them down to 10. We engage closely with DOF on procurement policies, and that will come into the targets on the fleet. Genuinely, our vision is that, should it be a Rivers van or a College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) vehicle, we want all the fleet to be net zero, whether that is through being electric vehicles or being run on hydrogen, as the Minister said. That is our ambition, and we will discuss it with DOF as part of that message.

Mr Poots: Health and Justice are two of the big Departments on this one, John. Police vehicles fall under the Department of Justice, and Health has a huge estate and has the Fire Service and the Ambulance Service. That has significant implications, and we are conscious of those other Departments in pulling it forward. We need to move to that area and quickly.

Mr Blair: Thank you, Minister. Thanks, Tracey, for that.

Mr McGlone: Minister, it is good to see you again. For us and for the listeners, can you put meat on the bones of what "just transition" is and what it will mean? How will it take shape? Can you explain a bit further the role of the just transition commission? What is it supposed to do, and what is its function? Maybe what its role might be has not been completed yet.

What learning is the Department taking from the Scottish experience of the just transition measures that have been put in place there? I know that we are certainly not like for like with the economy, given the North's heavy reliance on agri-food sectors and the number of people employed in them. What has been the Department's thinking on those aspects of just transition?

Mr Poots: What does "just transition" mean? The first element is transition: we need to transition from a society that emits a lot of carbon to a society that is zero-carbon, and we need to get to that in as reasonable a time frame as possible. That is where the "just" element comes in. We should be cautious about comparing ourselves with everywhere else in how we go about achieving it because we have our own intricacies and differences. The fact that we produce enough animal proteins for 10 million people puts greater pressure on us because, currently, as those animals are produced, there is substantial carbon leakage. Can we address that? Yes, we can, and I have indicated a means of addressing it, although it will not address it all on its own. At present, we import 320,000 tons of mineral fertiliser a year. However, moving to my idea of organic, home-produced fertilisers would reduce the carbon that we emit considerably.

Going down the route that I propose will give us the just element. Instead of saying, "See that farming business? You can just forget about it. We will wipe out over 80% of it and take the consequences that that will have for our dairy and meat processing sectors and the 113,000 jobs associated with agri-food". We could do that. I do not think it would be acceptable if the Committee proposed something that would wipe out 70,000 or 80,000 jobs in the city of Belfast. That is not a "just transition". We should not play with the words "just transition". Sticking the words "just transition" into something and then doing the absolute reverse does not stack up for me. A "just transition" is recognising that we have a problem, identifying what the problem is and knowing where we need to get to. The transition is how we get from A to B as fairly as possible. Anybody who knows me over the years in politics will know that I have always sought to find fair solutions for the public in Northern Ireland, and that will continue to be how I operate.

Mr McGlone: I hear what you say, Minister, about how farming practices can be changed and how things can be done better. I listen to what you say about the fertiliser. However, doing that will, without a shadow of doubt, require support by way of government intervention. What thinking has been done at departmental level about what support or interventions, financial or otherwise, will be provided as part of that transition to ensure that it is just and that people are not disadvantaged as a result of it?

Mr Poots: We have a paper dealing with that that is almost ready to go to the Department of Finance. In it, we look at a series of measures that will ensure that we can start to take on the issues of creating a better environment, one that emits considerably less carbon and is better placed to capture carbon than is currently the case. That will involve hundreds of millions of pounds of investment from the public and private sectors. Asking the private sector to step up to the plate and do this will create a sustainable sector, both environmentally and financially. It will be one that allows us to go to the world and say, "Not only do we produce the best food in the world, but we do it in a way that meets the highest environmental standards". That is where I want us to be. When people are concerned about a deal done with South America, which will probably happen at some stage, or deals with other places on food production, we will not be competing on the same level, because we produce the best. Therefore, we will get the best prices, and that is where I want us to be. It is sustainable environmentally and from a business point of view. That is where we want to take the industry.

Mr McGlone: Thank you very much indeed for that, Edwin.

Mrs Barton: Good morning, everybody. Good morning, Minister. I offer my support for the accelerated passage of Finn's law. The intentional injuring of animals is totally unacceptable, and I support you totally on that.

Minister, you talked about the grid and how you want 100% renewable energy. In the west, we have, for want of another expression, the most wind in Northern Ireland, blowing across from the Atlantic. Obviously, we have a number of wind energy farms etc. For years and years, the problem has been connection to the grid. When individuals go looking for connection to the grid, it seems that the cost is

a case of adding another nought on to a number. It has become very expensive; in fact, it has become impossible. That is the first thing.

As I understand it, the grid is not up to taking the excess energy that needs to be put back into it. What plans do you, along with your colleague Minister Mallon, have to upgrade the grid?

Mr Poots: The responsibility for a lot of that will lie with the regulator. That is why I stated at the start of the meeting that the regulator needs to introduce allowing more companies to carry out work on the grid. Having a single company with responsibility for it is not good for Northern Ireland, renewable energy, the environment or, indeed, business, because the costs and timescales involved are exorbitant and the delays are far too long. We need a better response. I welcome your commentary and support on that issue, Mrs Barton.

You also rightly pointed out that renewable energy production is significant in the west of the Province. For me, that creates a massive opportunity for the west of the Province, because having renewable energy consistently available is really good for business. I can think of businesses, such as the large data companies — very modern businesses — that are hugely reliant on energy. Instead of setting up those businesses in greater Belfast, for example, why could a number of them not be established in the west of the Province, possibly creating thousands of jobs, and use the electricity produced in the area? That would be a good news story. The South of Ireland has been pushing greatly to get in those data companies, but it has got to the point at which it does not have the energy to support them. Using that renewable energy, we should seek to advantage ourselves by creating a strong economy in the west of the Province.

Sometimes, people look at the issue of carbon reduction and the environment and just see problems. I look at it and see advantages, so we need to be well placed to take advantage. Everything that I will do as Minister will be to identify how we can do the right thing on the environment but also for the economy, because the economy is critical to people. It is the economy that puts food on people's tables.

Mrs Barton: Minister, thank you for that answer. We spoke about wind farms. My second question is about planning regulations for them. Given the growth of wind energy, do you have any thoughts on how we might look at those again?

Mr Poots: When I was the Minister of the Environment previously, I produced Planning Policy Statement 18 (PPS 18), which opened the door to a lot of the renewable energy that currently exists. I know that some people do not really like wind turbines and that they often happen to be placed in areas of scenic beauty. Mr McGuigan has a lot of them in his constituency, as do you in yours. I think that they are a sign of progression and progressiveness. We need to accept that there is some pain involved in that progression. When the wind turbines are turning, aside from the concrete or whatever used in the installation, which is relatively modest, they do no damage to the environment and produce electricity to keep the lights on in homes and to power businesses. We need to continue using them.

When they were being introduced, I know of people who lived close to proposed AD plants and got very excited about them, but their smell and everything else is relatively neutral, and they have taken a lot of the nasties on the food production side from the animal nutrients and done something positive with them. We need to embrace all those positive steps and make them happen.

Planning policies now lie with the Department for Infrastructure. It is not for me to dictate to the Department for Infrastructure what it should do, but we need to press ahead with my suggestion to go after data centres and so on and have the energy available for them. We need to snap up the opportunities. From County Fermanagh, you have lost so many of your young people over the years. Some of them have taken the tragic step of moving to greater Belfast, but, worse than that, some of them have gone further afield. Would it not be great to have jobs available so that people could return to County Fermanagh, County Tyrone etc? They would have good jobs on their doorstep and be able to live in the beautiful environment in those areas.

Mrs Barton: Thank you very much, Minister.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): Minister, you still have some time to spare. Clare has joined us online, but her internet connection is poor, so she has asked me to ask a couple of questions on her behalf.

If it is your intention to expand anaerobic digestion, what will happen with the excess nutrients? Has the Department done an assessment of the potential further problems for water, soil, air and health as a result of that expansion?

Mr Poots: I thought that I had explained that when I responded to Harry. I want to go beyond anaerobic digestion and have the separation. I want to take the phosphates out, do the soil analysis and the lidar and know what the ground needs for absorption. Our water quality will improve as a result. It will be organic fertiliser being spread, so there are considerably fewer issues with air quality than there would be from spreading ammonia-intensive mineral fertilisers.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): This is not Clare's question. If you are confident that biomethane from cattle can be used, why not support a net zero target for the North?

Mr Poots: I do not support it because all the qualitative scientific advice indicates that we cannot get there. I am hopeful that we can get more than 82% by 2050, and that is why I want to embrace the challenge and get on with it. I am also of the view that there is potential science out there that will help us achieve more. We cannot make assumptions that we will be able to achieve net zero, however. Doing so means that it is not a target but an aspiration. It is clear that we need to focus on what is deliverable and then build on that towards the 100%.

I, like you, Clare and everybody else on the Committee, want to get to 100% as quickly as possible, but, in life, I tend to err on the side of caution and think that you should under-promise and over-deliver as opposed to over-promise and under-deliver. I look at what has been promised in the Republic of Ireland, and it is not matched by how it is going to do it. Its road map does not demonstrate how it will achieve 100%. To say that we can get to 100% and there will be no problem doing so is a bit of a bluff, and I do not want to engage in that.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): You often talk about following the science, but the science is clear about the potential harms of not reaching net zero, not just in the North but across the globe, and about the impacts that that will have not just on our agricultural economy but across our society. You are confident about detailing some science that, you think, will go a long way to helping with the methane problem in particular. You are right that we are sitting more than 20 years away from 2045, so the targets will develop, but this is the time to offer certainty across all sectors that net zero is the target that we are moving towards and this is how we will do it.

If I may say this, Minister, within the space of a few months, you have, thankfully, moved dramatically on supporting a just transition and all-Ireland work on climate change. Most people would assume that the logical next step is to move from having two Bills to having one Bill and get climate change legislation in the North to set an ambitious net zero target.

Mr Poots: We are told by experts that ours is an ambitious target. It achieves net zero for the UK. Unless we reduce consumption, carbon production will take place elsewhere. I will not accept a circumstance in which we export our carbon problem and import our food. That will lead to significant job losses, and there will be no improvement in the environment, because the carbon will just be produced elsewhere. That will inflict damage on our people, and I have to resist that.

As a society that consumes heavily, we produce an awful lot of carbon. That is consumption of not just food but many other things. I look at a circumstance in which we would import so much from countries whose carbon footprint has increased massively, yet nobody has a word to say about that. It is wrong for people involved in the heavy consumption of goods that come from countries that continue to build coal-fired power stations at an alarming rate to inflict a hair shirt on the rural community. One of those countries produces 31% of carbon emissions, but people have absolutely no issue with importing stuff hand over fist from there and then saying that Northern Ireland, which produces 0.04% of emissions, needs to destroy its economy in order to reduce that figure. That does not make sense.

We need to take on our responsibilities, but we also have a responsibility to our community to ensure that we have jobs and that our young people do not have to go to Australia, which has not moved down this road particularly quickly, to America or to other places to make a living. I want the young people of the coming generation in Northern Ireland to have the opportunity to get a job in Northern Ireland, a Northern Ireland in which our waterways are cleaner and our air is cleaner and in which our carbon emissions have reduced dramatically.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): COP26 is coming up. I suspect that the issues that we are talking about will be addressed there. We have had the discussion, and we will not make minds meet on it today.

Clare also wanted me to ask about the ammonia strategy that we have been hearing about for a long time. Can you give us any confirmation of when we are likely to see that?

Mr Poots: Yes. We met the Attorney General and sought advice from her. We have had further scientific advice and are dealing with that in the final elements of the report.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): It will be soon?

Mr Poots: Yes. Absolutely. We are working on getting that out soon.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): Harry has one final question before you go, Minister.

Mr Harvey: *[Inaudible.]*

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): You are possibly on mute, Harry.

Mr Harvey: Sorry. Thank you, Chair.

Thank you very much, Minister. Delivering green growth and meeting climate change objectives will, in many respects, be capital-intensive. Have you considered bids for capital funds to deliver green growth?

Mr Poots: We are sitting at £600 million, but that could go up over the next five years, and that is the sort of bid that we are looking for in order to meet head-on the challenges that our environment faces. That is just the reality. We can talk the talk about having a better environment, but we now need to walk the walk, and that involves investment.

Deputy Chair, I also express my sympathies to the Chairman. I was not aware that he had had a bereavement in the family. Pass on my sympathies.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): I will. Thank you very much, Minister.

That rounds off questions, Minister. Once again, I thank you for coming to brief us this morning.

Mr Poots: Thank you. No problem.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): I thank your team of Tracey, Kevin and Arron. Thank you all very much.

Ms Teague: Thank you.