



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Infrastructure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

A5 Western Transport Corridor Scheme:
Department for Infrastructure

19 June 2024

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mrs Deborah Erskine (Chairperson)
Mr John Stewart (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Danny Baker
Mr Keith Buchanan
Mr Stephen Dunne
Mr Mark Durkan
Mr Andrew McMurray
Mr Peter McReynolds

Witnesses:

Mr Colin Hutchinson	Department for Infrastructure
Mr Seamus Keenan	Department for Infrastructure
Mr Colin Woods	Department for Infrastructure

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): I thank the officials for coming today. We are keen to hear from you on the A5 specifically. I will allow you to talk about that for about five minutes, after which we will have members' questions. If there are questions that, you feel, should be addressed in closed session, please indicate that, and we will keep that question to the end. Obviously, I want to make sure that we have as much business as possible in the public domain, but we will keep those questions aside and go into closed session to deal with them, if you are content with that approach.

I welcome to the Committee our witnesses from the Department for Infrastructure: Colin Woods, deputy secretary, transport and road asset management; Colin Hutchinson, director of A5 and active travel; and Seamus Keenan, deputy director of A5. As usual, evidence will be recorded by Hansard, if members are content.

Mr Colin Hutchinson (Department for Infrastructure): Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity to give you a briefing on the A5. You will be well aware of the safety history and the accident history with it. There has been a significant collision history and, unfortunately, between April 2006 and April 2024 there were 57 fatalities on that stretch of road.

The A5 western transport corridor will provide 85 kilometres of high-quality dual carriageway along the western corridor. It will save lives, and it will have a major impact on the economic opportunities along the western corridor. As, I am sure, you are well aware, it runs from Newbuildings to the border just south of Aghnacloy. It is important, in open session, to highlight that no decision has been taken yet by the Minister on how the scheme will proceed, so we are significantly limited in what we can say in open session. Once the decision is taken, however, we will be more than happy to come back and go

through things in open session in whatever level of detail the Committee would like. You will appreciate the legal issues around that and why we are constrained today in open session.

If the Chair is content, I propose to hand over to Seamus to take the Committee through the history of the scheme, so that everybody appreciates how we got where we are. Once he has finished, I will close our opening remarks with the time frame for moving the scheme forward over the coming months.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): If you do not mind, please speak briefly to the history, because I am sure that members around the table will be well briefed on the issues and the problems.

Mr Seamus Keenan (Department for Infrastructure): Yes, I will do that, Chair. I will be as quick as I can.

The A5 is an Executive project. It has its origins in the St Andrews Agreement and was agreed to by the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) as far back as 2007. At that time, the Irish Government's intent was to contribute €400 million towards it and to fund other major roads in Northern Ireland.

The first public inquiry was in 2011, when the vesting order and the direction order were made. There was a legal challenge in 2012 from the Alternative A5 Alliance (AA5A), which led to the quashing of the orders in early 2013. After that, lessons were learned from the habitats regulations, which are what the case fell down on, and we moved towards a new environmental statement in February 2016. Michelle McIlveen was the Minister at that time. That led to an inquiry in October 2016, which was held over two weeks by the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC). Its report came out in May 2017, and we moved towards a new decision to proceed at that point, towards the end of 2017.

At the time no Ministers were in place, so the permanent secretary of the day, Peter May, made the decision to proceed with the scheme in November 2017. Again, that decision was met with a legal challenge from the AA5A, which came to us in December 2017. During 2018, the Department was required to concede that challenge, because the main ground of the challenge was the decision-making powers of the permanent secretary at the time. Given the outcome of other Court of Appeal hearings that were held in 2018, we decided that there was no point in going to court with it, because we would lose, so the case was dropped and the orders were quashed.

Our theory was that we would get a new environmental statement and another addendum out for a new decision by another Minister in 2019. We published that addendum in March 2019, but 264 representations were made at the time, so we had to have another public inquiry. That was held in February and March 2020, again by the PAC.

In September 2020, the Department received an interim report from the PAC on that inquiry, which recommended that we carry out some more work and reconvene the inquiry on the completion of that work. It is fair to say that that work took longer than we expected. Ultimately, a new environmental statement and addendum were published in 2022, with fuller information in November 2022 and most lately in January 2023. That led to the reconvened public inquiry in May 2023, which concluded on 2 June, I believe.

We received the PAC report on that inquiry — the final PAC report — on 31 October last year. It contained 30 recommendations, many of which were difficult for us and have taken considerable time and effort to get through, both legally and from an engineering perspective, but we are now well through the recommendations and moving towards the Minister's decision.

Mr Hutchinson: There are outstanding elements of work to be done over the summer, but, at this point in time, it is the intention to put a series of papers to the Executive over the summer so that they can see the complexity and detail of the information that we will provide and have the opportunity to understand and read through that detail with a view to a decision being taken later in the summer.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): So you envisage the Minister's announcement —

Mr Hutchinson: Towards the end of the summer.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Can I ask about the funding? For clarity, can you give me the figures that have been spent on the A5 project to date?

Mr Keenan: That figure is around £110 million at this point.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Does that include legal costs?

Mr Keenan: Yes: all costs from 2007 onwards.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): How confident are you about the funding that has been secured? We have the Irish Government funding and ring-fenced funding that is secured through the Department. When you take into account the increase in costs, the Irish Government contribution is down: it is 32% of the actual cost, whereas it was 47% originally.

In respect of costs and timescales, it has to be said that there is the potential for further legal challenge. How confident are you about the funding that is secured now and the possibility that there may be a need for further funding?

Mr Hutchinson: First of all, I will point out that it is an Executive flagship scheme. With that status, there should be more confidence around funding for it.

With respect to numbers and contributions moving forward, that is still work that we are finalising. Those issues will be put in front of the Minister and the Executive over the summer period and will be fundamental to the decision that is taken and how it moves forward, but I cannot —

Mr Colin Woods (Department for Infrastructure): That is right at the heart of the decision that the Minister needs to take on how he wishes to proceed. Part of the reason why the decision also needs to go to the Executive is that a decision to proceed to construction will involve significant expenditure. In the financial environment that we are in, that absolutely needs to be something that the Executive wish to prioritise.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): If it proceeds to build stage, the timescales of the project will be significant.

Mr Woods: Yes. We have single-year budgets at the moment. From a budget process perspective, we work year by year. The question is whether we have confidence that that is the right approach and is affordable in that system and that scenario.

For 2024-25, anything that we need to support a ministerial decision to proceed is ring-fenced and is in the budget. Future years' budgets have not been set. That is why that visibility of affordability across the lifetime of the project is needed before the decision can be taken.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Since the Minister came into post, has he met all relevant stakeholders in relation to the A5? I am talking about the Alternative A5 Alliance and the groups pressing for no more delays. Has the Minister met all those people?

Mr Woods: He has certainly met an awful lot of people who are deemed to be stakeholders in the A5; I doubt very much that he has met everybody who would have an interest. As far as I know, he has not met any members of the Alternative A5 Alliance, although, as officials, we have met them over the past year.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): So the Minister is making a decision but has not met all the stakeholders.

Mr Woods: It would be perfectly typical for a Minister not to meet every individual, but the Department and his officials meet stakeholders all the time. The point of the public inquiry was to allow anyone who had a view on the scheme to express that view and have it taken into account in the consideration.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): That is fair enough, but there are significant sensitivities around the A5. That is a concern of mine. In the decision-making process, it is important that we hear all views about the A5. I take it that, as departmental officials, you have met stakeholders, but, from a ministerial point of view, this is a flagship project for the Executive. It would be disappointing to know that he has perhaps not met all the stakeholders.

Mr Hutchinson: It is fair to say that we will feed back to the Minister every view from every stakeholder we have met. We should not underestimate the importance of the public inquiry, which is there to give people a voice and to hear the voices for and against the scheme. At official level, we have met pretty much every stakeholder we are aware of across the scheme. In making his decision, the Minister will consider all the views on the scheme, both from statutory and from non-statutory stakeholders.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): I have a localised question, which will come as no surprise because I represent the area that the A5 will go through and, in my capacity as an MLA, have written to the Minister about some of the issues.

The volume of traffic on the A5 is completely different from what it would have been 50 years ago: we take that point. The Committee is also looking at road safety and the implications of people's decision-making, and the A5 is unsafe from that point of view, given the volume of traffic.

The other side of the argument relates to landowners, compensation levels and things like that. At the minute, geotechnical investigations are happening on a voluntary basis: how difficult does that make scoping out the project?

Mr Hutchinson: Geotechnical and archaeological investigations are ongoing. As any designer will say, the more geotechnical information we can get, the better. Likewise, to de-risk the job against future delays, the more archaeological coverage we can get, the better. At this point, the view is that it is not the first geotechnical information that has been gathered. We have carried out a series of other surveys over many years. The designers are fairly confident with the level of information that they have, and they are mapping it up in such a way that they are looking at the key areas.

Geotechnical information is less important in some areas than in others. For example, for a structure, you want to have as much geotechnical information as possible to define whether you need piles and, if so, how deep they will be. In locations where the ground conditions are not terribly difficult or there is no structure, you do not need the same amount of information. We are confident that we have enough information.

I should append the fact that, once we vest the land, we will have the opportunity to go into any other areas that we have not yet had permission to enter. We have enough time between vesting and construction starting.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): From how many landowners have you requested geotechnical and archaeological investigation?

Mr Hutchinson: I do not have those figures.

Mr Keenan: I do not have those figures either, but I know that we have a success rate of about 70% for landowners allowing us to go in, which has been helpful.

Mr Hutchinson: This is not an issue unique to the A5; we have it with any scheme. The last scheme that I built and opened was the A6 between Dungiven and Drumahoe. We did the same thing for geotechnical and archaeological investigation: we went on as much land as we could by agreement prior to the making of the vesting order, and we did the rest afterwards. It is about trying to get as much as possible done and being as informed as possible, so that, if the green light is given, we can get on the ground and start construction works more quickly than if we had not done all that work beforehand.

Mr Durkan: I have a wee supplementary on that point. The A6 experience was fairly recent: was the access rate on that stretch greater than, less than or around 70%?

Mr Hutchinson: I do not have the figures, but my recollection from 2016 or 2017, when we were doing the accessing, is that a number of landowners did not want us on the land. A number of landowners had planted out whatever their crop was for that year, so they did not want us going on the land, and we agreed not to. The figures would probably be pretty comparable, but they probably do not exist anywhere to allow us to say, "This was the exact figure at the time". That is my recollection.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): There are farmers along the route. You are under no legal obligation to carry out works to build underpasses for cattle and that type of thing, but the Department looks at such things on a case-by-case basis. What I have received states that, where it is cost-effective and mutually beneficial, such works will be carried out in lieu of a compensation payment. What do you mean by "mutually beneficial"? How is it beneficial to you? It is more beneficial to the landowner or the farm. I know that you will say that it is mutually beneficial from a road safety point of view, but they are also having to make a call about whether they then do not get another compensation payment as a result.

Mr Hutchinson: Ultimately, compensation is there to try to set the landowner back in no worse a position after the scheme than before it. When we are asked to provide an accommodation underpass of any sort, we get Land and Property Services (LPS) to assess what the compensation would be with the underpass and what it would be without it.

Let us take a real example. If a farm is going to be completely severed by the road, with half on one side and half on the other, the compensation will be significant. If we are going around the perimeter of the farm and there is only a small piece of land left on the other side, the compensation will be much less, from a severance perspective. It will not be practical to provide an underpass to access a quarter of an acre of land on a 200-acre farm, but, if it is half or a third of a farm, it will be more practical. To ensure that we deliver value for money for the public purse, that is the test: we get LPS to work out the compensation with and without an underpass, and, if the compensation covers the cost of the underpass, we will provide it.

We are open to those discussions. There have been discussions with all the farmers across the scheme. Those decisions have been taken over the past decade as well. If any farmers still want discussions about that, we can look at individual cases.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Before we move on, I want to say that we sympathise with the families who have lost loved ones on the A5. There is not a month that goes by that we do not have a road closure on that road, and, unfortunately, sometimes there is a fatality on the road. We are keen to ensure road safety on the A5 and to see improvements to ensure that there are safety measures on the road. We sympathise with all those families who have lost loved ones on the A5.

I will hand over to the Deputy Chair.

Mr Stewart: Thanks, Chair. I echo your comments about our sympathies with the families. It is important to state that today.

Thank you for the information so far. Colin, we talk about multi-year budgets and how important they will be. I am firmly in agreement with you: the sooner we can roll them out, the better, particularly for schemes of this nature. I take my hat off to anyone who is trying to plan a capital project of this nature on a rolling one-year budget: it is borderline impossible. I accept how difficult it is.

I want to ask about the association of the cocktail of funding with the overspends that, we know, are almost inevitable, particularly in public sector capital projects. Where does the burden of the overspend lie when that cocktail of funding is put together? Let us say that the ROI has put in x hundred million, but the scheme goes over by 25%: are the Northern Ireland Executive liable for that, or will everybody who contributed to the cocktail of funding have to take the hit?

Mr Woods: There is no obligation on anyone to take the hit in that sense.

Mr Stewart: Right. Who pays for it?

Mr Woods: At the minute, the Government of Ireland have offered €600 million towards the cost of the scheme. That is what has been put forward. There have been discussions since 2007 between the Executive and the Irish Government on the scheme — how it would be delivered and all the rest of it. The affordability mix, the sequencing mix and the time when the costs are incurred are all part of what the Minister needs to weigh up when he comes to his decision point.

It is important to emphasise again that the Minister has not taken a decision on this. We are answering a lot of questions on the work that we have done to prepare for a decision. That has to include the option to proceed, but the Minister has not yet taken that decision. There is a statutory process to support that.

On questions around future funding, there will be a need to confirm the affordability of whatever the Minister decides he wishes to do, and it is up to the Executive to be comfortable with that. The Finance Minister will then need to take account of what the Executive decide in any future budget allocations. It would be right to assume that, in general, infrastructure prices continue to rise. The project is expensive already, and that factor needs to be thought about.

In law and in fact, the liability for any cost increase sits with the Executive and the Department for Infrastructure. Whether there are other agreements that go around that is a question for another day.

Mr Stewart: The Chair made a point about the potential compensation factor for farmers and those affected by the scheme. I assume that that is factored into the initial costings. Is it an indicative anticipated figure? Is it a guesstimate?

Mr Hutchinson: It is a figure that is provided by LPS, which has carried out this type of work on the likes of the A6, the A26, the A4 and the A8. It has a wealth of experience in this.

It is worth pointing out that there were some rumours a few months ago that we were cutting the budget for compensation: that is most definitely not the case. The legislation is clear and sets out how compensation is measured and attributed to landowners. I want to make sure that it is clear that we are not cutting or attempting to cut any corners from that perspective.

Mr Stewart: I have one final point. Colin, you talked about the preparatory work that the Department has to do before the Minister looks at it. Has any of that looked at working on aspects of the project that are less contentious or less problematic and at getting started where you can make gains quickly and where no difficulties exist? Has that been factored in?

Mr Woods: All options for phasing are open at this point. That is part of what the Minister needs to decide. As part of any delivery strategy, we are not going to literally start building every kilometre — you would have 85 squads out doing a kilometre each or something like that. Yes, that will be taken into account in the process. Colin, do you want to say something else on that?

Mr Hutchinson: Yes, that is fair enough. It goes back to the fact that no decision has been taken, but any work that we have been doing, certainly since prior to the latest public inquiry, has been to ensure that how we move forward minimises the risk of any future successful legal challenge to the scheme. Everything that you mentioned in your question comes into play in those considerations.

Mr Dunne: Thanks, folks. I have a couple of points to make. The Audit Office report from February 2024 estimated the cost to be £1.7 billion. I appreciate the position that we are in — you have made it clear — but can you provide any update on that?

Mr Woods: Not at this point in time.

Mr Dunne: OK. Touching on the Chair's point about timescales, is there any further information on that? DFI was quoted last year as saying that it would like to have the scheme completed by 2028. I presume that it is unreasonable to expect that at this stage.

Mr Woods: That is part of the complicated mix of decision factors. As I said, the options on phasing have a direct impact on when you will need money and when you will finish. That is part of what the Minister will consider over the next few months.

Mr Dunne: I appreciate that. I have another point. You will probably be aware that the Committee's earlier evidence session was about road safety. The statistics for one year alone — from October 2021 to October 2022 — show that 10 people were killed on A5. Given the scale of the project, which involves over 50 miles of roadway, has any consideration been given to putting in place interim measures to reduce those alarming statistics, such as reviewing the speed limits, installation average speed cameras and improving the lighting at key junctions? I am more familiar with some parts of the road than others, but my experience is that some of the junctions are particularly dangerous, particularly for people who are not familiar with the road. Given the startling statistics and the time that has already elapsed, is there an opportunity to look at interim measures, or is the project parked while you wait for the Minister to act?

Mr Woods: It is far from being parked. There have been quite a few interventions on the existing A5 over the past number of years. Clearly, they are not having every impact that we would want them to have, but the number of interventions that we have delivered over the length of the scheme is significant. I encourage you to look at the council reports for this year and at the schemes that are set out for the A5. Three or four schemes are set out for junction upgrades and other improvements along the A5. We continue to look at that. As recently as this week, we talked about some additional work that the Minister is keen to see on improving markings and signs on the existing road, as well as other things that can help drivers to be safer on the road.

You touched on one of the reasons why the Department proposed the scheme in the first place: the existing road has so many openings and points that we consider to be less than desirable from a safety perspective that building the new offline dual carriageway is the right engineering answer, rather than trying to address every part where there is a risk. Removing the traffic from the new road would have a more beneficial impact on safety than most of the things that we could do on the existing road.

Mr Dunne: Fair enough.

Mr Hutchinson: I do not know whether any of you had the opportunity to be at the public inquiry, but one of the days of that looked at alternatives. The PAC wanted us to demonstrate or present to them on the alternatives that could be provided, as opposed to having a dual carriageway the full length of the road. That work is one of the reasons why it took longer to get information ready for the public inquiry and for the public inquiry to be reconvened in 2023. We did a thorough piece of work that looked at two plus ones and at upgrading junctions and closing junctions along the existing A5, and nothing comes anywhere near the benefits of building a dual carriageway and the number of lives that it would save.

The case of the A4 is always quoted to us, where there was a reduction in fatalities of 95% or thereabouts once the dual carriageway was built. That is the stark reality. There are no alternatives that will deliver the benefits that are needed.

Mr Dunne: I appreciate that. I was just being realistic about the time: it is years away.

Finally, has the speed limit on sections of the A5 been looked at?

Mr Woods: We are considering whether a route review of the speed limits along the road would be beneficial. Speed limits do not always have the impact that we would like them to have in a situation such as this. For example, on the A1, the speed limit drops to 60 mph in a number of places from 70 mph, and not every driver pays attention to that. We could review the speed limits, but would that change any of the behaviours that contribute to some of the accidents? It might, but it might not. It is not obvious that it definitely would. We also have to be mindful of how many people use that road for economic and social purposes for which journey times are relevant. Again, there is a balance to struck, and it is important to figure out which interventions will have the biggest impact. That brings us back to why the Department proposed an offline dual carriageway in the first place, but the question is valid.

Mr Hutchinson: There is another point to make on that. If you travel on the A5 at any time in the day, you will find that the speeds are not high. The speeds get high when there is less traffic on the road or when it gets darker. People who want to speed are less likely to pay heed to the speed limits. However, as Colin says, the speed limit is being considered.

Mr Dunne: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): We are looking at the road safety strategy, and Chief Superintendent Sam Donaldson has appeared before Committee. We have the figures on all the incidents at crossroads in Northern Ireland, but is there any specific modelling of the causation factors in the fatalities or serious injuries that occur on the A5? We hear an awful lot about the road being the primary cause of accidents when it comes to the A5. I am not taking away from the fact that people have, sadly, lost their lives on that road, but we need to understand the main cause of those fatalities and serious injuries. That is important for the public as well. I have to be honest: I hate driving on that road. When I have to drive from Ballygawley to Londonderry, I honestly hate it. I would rather take an aeroplane, because it is a really scary road to drive on. Is there specific modelling of the causation factors for accidents along the A5?

Mr Hutchinson: That is a story that I hear all the time: people are scared to travel on that road. It is difficult to point to specific causation factors for every accident. Human error is probably high up the list of causes for a lot of accidents, not just on the A5 but everywhere. If you have a road that has something like 1,200 accesses instead of, say, 20 accesses, the risk of accidents is multiplied significantly. For the new dual carriageway, the only accesses, other than those at the start and the end, will be the slip roads on and off it, so the 1,200 accesses will disappear. If you are not put in a situation where you have a difficult junction with difficult sight lines and lots of traffic coming, the chances of an accident are much lower. More importantly, on the new dual carriageway, we will not have the right-turn movement, whereby you turn out of a junction to the right across the traffic or turn into a junction across the traffic.

The statistics, which I do not have in front of me, are stark. The differences for modelling purposes, which takes all the information from across the UK and Ireland on the relationship between a single carriageway and a dual carriageway, are stark. It is in the same bracket as the A4, which, as I mentioned, saw a 95% reduction in fatalities because all the risks were done away with and drivers were no longer being asked to drive into or out of those junctions.

On the causation factors, our traffic teams have access across the board — you may have heard this earlier; I am not sure — to the PSNI's data. The causation factors will be, as far as possible, highlighted in that. Our teams that work on the A5 have access to that as well. However, the causation factors are less important on a scheme such as this where you replace the entire single carriageway with a dual carriageway because of the benefits that I just mentioned. If you were doing a localised improvement scheme where there had been three or four major incidents or fatalities, the causation factors would be key because you could specifically address them in the scheme. As the A5 will provide a global treatment for the entire route, the causation factors are less critical in our considerations.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): No offence, but I read the recent Northern Ireland Audit Office report on flagship projects, only one of which has gone ahead. You said that the A5 was one of the Executive's flagship projects, and it has been talked about since 2007 — and, locally, before even that.

I am not sure if you can talk to this because it is going through the PAC and one thing and another, but a key aspect is the level of expertise required to deliver projects such as this. We are aware of staffing levels and the difficulties in civil engineering, even at the level of tarring the roads. If the project gets the go-ahead, it will do so with timescales and the options that have been decided on. How confident are you, on the basis of your staffing levels, that it will meet those targets?

Mr Hutchinson: I have been in this role since April 2023, so not much over a year. I am in this role because of my track record of delivering dual carriageway schemes on time and to budget, a couple of which I mentioned. However, you are absolutely right: it is important to have the right key staff. We have developed, as part of the business case, a delivery team on the Department's side and on the side of the consultants who are supporting us to deliver the scheme. We have filled key vacancies and anticipate filling more of them if the scheme moves forward. I am confident that we have the right structure and that we will fill those vacancies. Seamus, who has had the pleasure or otherwise of taking the scheme forward over the past 10 years, has massive knowledge of its history, and we have managed to keep him on board.

The scheme is not without its challenges. You spoke of the challenges that we face in getting people in across the board in the industry. The Department's remuneration package is not as competitive on the engineering side as that in the private sector, but we have the ability to tap into our consultants to provide more of the services that we need if we cannot deliver them ourselves.

Mr Woods: The Minister has made clear the priority that he affords to ensuring that the scheme is resourced appropriately, whatever it looks like. We are happy that, through the development phase, we have been able to grow the team to meet the needs of the process, and we expect that to continue.

You are right to highlight the fact that, at a departmental level and certainly across the group that we work in, resourcing is a constraint. That means that you need to be clear about the priorities and ensure that they are resourced appropriately. The things that you do must be done in a well-resourced and appropriately resourced way, which means that other things either do not get done or are done on a different scale or in a different way. You need to take decisions to accommodate the priorities.

Mr K Buchanan: I have a question about land agents. I know that we are maybe going down the road a bit whenever a land agent acts on behalf of a farmer or landowner. Is that land agent normally employed by DFI? Will you explain the land agent process? If I was a farmer along the A5, what would be the process?

Mr Woods: We will pay the reasonable costs of any land agent whom a landowner needs to employ. Generally, the agent will not charge the landowner in the months and years ahead of the claim going in. Once the claim has been received, the land agent will take their fee out of it. We are paying for the land agent to be employed.

Mr K Buchanan: The landowner selects the land agent.

Mr Woods: Yes.

Mr K Buchanan: I want to make one other point. I have done some work with farmers and landowners on the A32 Magherafelt bypass and on the A6 or the Castledawson/Toome bit, as I call it. There is a degree of mistrust of DFI. It is not me saying that; it is the farmers. A farmer very much wants to farm, but they will have a conversation with an official — for example, Seamus — about the posts they are getting. Four years later, Seamus could be away — no disrespect to Seamus — and the farmer will say to the next official, "Oh, I agreed that with Seamus". Seamus has gone, but the farmers very much do the deal there and then; they do not do the emails or the follow-up. I have explained to them that the Cookstown office could come on board and insist that all communication is by email and that DFI will only issue written consent.

DFI needs to do a degree of work with landowners to get their trust. They are sceptical about DFI. Bear it in mind that, if you have a farm and a road goes through the middle of it — I am not taking away from the road safety issue — that destroys it. I have had loads of farmers telling me that money does not purchase land. If there is land 10 miles away, it is no good to you because it is not near your farm. There has to be an understanding of the impact that that has on a farm and a farming family: it destroys them. A young family will say, "We are not farming that: that farm has been destroyed". DFI needs to do a bit of work to get the farmers and landowners on its side, and it needs to stand over its agreements.

I appreciate that the A5 project has taken a long time. Compared with any road project, it has taken a long time from start to finish. I have had no good reports in relation to the A32 or the A6: the farmers seem always to get a raw deal. DFI needs to work with the landowner community to get it onside and stand over agreements.

Mr Durkan: I thank the team for coming along. A lot of questions have been asked, and you have given comprehensive answers.

I am just thinking about the Chair's question about the resourcing of the team to drive the project forward. There is a tremendous weight of responsibility on you guys too. The fact that, nearly 20 years on, having cost £110 million and over 50 lives later, not a sod has been turned on this flagship project is a sad indictment of how this place operates — or does not. Nevertheless, there now seems to be — hopefully, it continues — a real focus on getting the scheme across the line.

I want to ask about the process that has to be gone through. I am sorry if I did not fully pick up what was said on this, Colin. Obviously, we want to make sure that the Minister takes the time that he needs in order to make a decision, so that it is as challenge-proof as possible. You indicated that you expect an announcement to be made in late summer: does that mean that an announcement cannot be made before then? Are there statutory obligations that have to be carried out that mean that no decision or announcement can be made before then?

Mr Hutchinson: Earlier on, I mentioned that we are nearly there with the detail that needs to be put in front of the Minister. The Minister has seen a lot of detail, but he has not seen absolutely everything. There are still issues that he will need to consider, so that is driving the timescale. There are a couple of pieces of information that we need to close some issues, but I will not get into that in open session.

The second biggest factor is that Executive referral is required. Given the amount of information that we have, it is important that we give the Executive a reasonable time to consider the information. As I said at the start, a series of documents will be issued to the Executive over the coming months to allow them to consider the matter and, all being well, the Minister to take a decision by the end of the

summer. There are a couple of issues that we have to close down, and the process is driving the timescale at the moment.

Mr Durkan: You said that you, as a team, as opposed to the Minister, had met the Alternative A5 Alliance. Seamus, you have been involved with the project longer than the other guys: do you detect any dilution in that group's appetite to oppose or challenge the scheme, or has there been particular focus on its previous areas of concern?

Mr Hutchinson: I do not think that we can really comment on that, and we certainly cannot do so in this session.

Mr Durkan: That is OK.

Finally, there is the importance of trust, which Keith touched on, among the landowners with whom you have to do business to get the scheme going and get the show — or the road — on the road. Keith referred to his work on a stretch of the A6: it is imperative that any loose ends are tied up and any outstanding work along recently constructed roads completed, because word spreads, particularly among the farming community. If there is a lack of trust and people feel hard done by or are still in the midst of a process that has been going on for 10 or 20 years, that will not encourage people along the A5 to sit down and do business with you.

Mr Hutchinson: Point noted.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Can you talk to some of that in closed session?

Mr Woods: Some of it.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): No one else is indicating that they have a question. If you are happy, we will go into closed session and tease out some of those points. It will be useful to hear some of the other things that you might want to talk about in closed session.

Mr Hutchinson: I can give you two or three minutes to provide more information.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Perfect.

The Committee went into closed session.