



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Bovine Tuberculosis, Lough Neagh and the Farm
Sustainability Transition Payment:
Mr Andrew Muir MLA, Minister of Agriculture,
Environment and Rural Affairs

8 July 2024

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Tom Elliott (Chairperson)
Mr Declan McAleer (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr John Blair
Mr Patsy McGlone
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Miss Áine Murphy

Witnesses:

Mr Muir	Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Dr Rosemary Agnew	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Dr Alistair Carson	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr Brian Dooher	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Ms Liz Loughran	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott): I welcome the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Mr Andrew Muir and, from the Department, Ms Liz Loughran, Dr Alistair Carson, Mr Brian Dooher and Dr Rosemary Agnew. You are all very welcome. Thank you for making the time to meet us today, especially as we are in recess. That is good. I will now hand over to you, Minister and your team.

Mr Muir (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thank you very much, Chair. First, I congratulate you on your peerage. I am delighted that you received it, and I warmly congratulate you and your family.

Chair, Deputy Chair and Committee members, I thank you for facilitating this additional meeting during recess, and I really appreciate that people have come in for it. I also thank members for their support to date and for assisting progress on some of the key challenges that my Department is facing. I am pleased to be here today with my officials to update the Committee on bovine tuberculosis, Lough Neagh and the farm sustainability transition payment and to answer any questions that may arise.

As the Committee will be aware, bovine TB is a key challenge not just for my Department but for hard-working farm businesses. I have heard first-hand accounts of the difficulties faced by farmers enduring a TB breakdown, and I recognise the devastating impact that it can have by taking a toll on the farmers' mental health and causing financial hardship. However, the financial burden of TB on individual farmers, the wider industry and the Government is unsustainable. With the herd incidence rate now at 10.17%, the cost of the TB programme to my Department in 2023-24 was just under £55.7

million, £36.5 million of which was paid out in compensation. That is why I immediately asked Brian, upon taking up his post as Chief Veterinary Officer, to undertake a review of our approach. The review will look at all matters relating to the bovine TB programme and policy, including the actions contained in the bovine TB eradication strategy.

In determining the steps to address TB, it is important that we always look at what we are doing to ensure that it is evidence-based and sustainable. The review will include engagement with a range of external and internal stakeholders, and it will consider best practice and issues in neighbouring jurisdictions. I anticipate that it will be completed by the autumn. It will build on the Department's strategy and set out an action plan and the timing for key initiatives that we must drive forward, in close cooperation with the industry, to drive down incidence rates and put us on a steadier footing towards, ultimately, achieving eradication.

I know that Committee members and those in the industry are particularly interested in two aspects of the TB programme: those relating to wildlife intervention and compensation. On wildlife interventions, officials have taken on board the judicial review ruling of October 2023 and are working on providing me with advice on potential ways forward. I am clear that all factors involved in the spread and maintenance of TB must be addressed, but our actions must be based on science and firm evidence, and they must be cost-effective. My Department will therefore consider closely the science, costs and legislative pathway of any potential wildlife intervention put forward for my consideration. Any new policy proposals in that area will require full public consultation.

I turn to compensation. Today, the Committee is considering the summary of responses to the consultation on amending the compensation rate paid to farmers for cattle removed under the TB programme. Members will be aware that the Department was directed to undertake that consultation by the Secretary of State in the absence of Ministers. A total of 91.65% of respondents to the consultation identified as being from a farming interest background, and an overwhelming majority of all respondents — 98.3% — were against a reduction in compensation rates.

I thank all those who responded to the consultation, and I acknowledge the clear strength of feeling against reducing the level of compensation paid. The stark reality is, however, that the Department has to live within a very constrained budget, and, as I stated, the current programme costs — just under £55.7 million, with £36.5 million paid in compensation — are unsustainable. The programme costs are also continuing to increase significantly. Last year, the programme costs were £53 million, a marked increase on the previous five financial years, in which the programme costs each year were between £35 and £40 million and in which the average compensation bill was £21.35 million.

I need to live within my budget and ensure that we can afford the TB programme, and that currently is not the case. It means that I will have to consider how we can address the cost of the disease and sustain the disease control programmes. As such, while I note the consultation responses, I have decided to keep the matter under review. I have asked my officials to provide me with further advice on other cost-sharing options and to look, in particular, at the approach to compensation in other jurisdictions.

In addition, I wish to inform Committee members that the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) report on the TB eradication partnership (TBEP) is now largely finalised. I thank all former members of the TB eradication partnership for their engagement with the Department and their dedication to the work undertaken in providing us with assistance and advice about how we tackle the scourge of the disease. It is crucial that we assess our approach to stakeholder engagement, including the future of any type of partnership body and from where the Department receives independent, robust advice that is anchored in science to inform our approach and policy options. We therefore also need to examine what works best elsewhere and any lessons for governance. A future partnership body will be considered when the SIB report is finalised shortly and in the context of Brian's wider review.

It is often said but is, nevertheless, true that TB is a complex multifactorial disease. Therefore, if we are to have any hope of eradication, the only option available to us is to work together — government and industry — closely collaborating and seeking new approaches and renewed efforts to tackle this dreadful disease. I therefore look forward to engagement with members here today on this important issue.

Turning to Lough Neagh, I had hoped that I would be able to advise you that I had secured Executive approval for the Lough Neagh report and action plan. Unfortunately, I am not in a position to do so. I will, of course, continue to engage with Executive colleagues to seek their approval of the report and the environmental improvement plan, which it complements and supports. As the Chair has outlined,

the Office for Environmental Protection has already made a statement on actions that it is taking with regard to this.

As you are aware, last week, I updated the Assembly on the actions in the Lough Neagh report that are not dependent on Executive approval. Some of those actions are now under way or will be very soon. Those include: a review of the nutrients action programme; various education and training programmes, for example, on compliance and environmental performance to slurry spreading contractors; a scientific review of the environmental impact of sand extraction on the Lough Neagh environment; research initiatives that focus on the sustainable use of livestock slurry and the tackling of algae blooms; and our new farm support and development programme. Unfortunately, there is not enough time to discuss those and the other important actions that I outlined to the Assembly in any detail today. However, my officials will keep the Committee fully advised and look forward to updating you again when the report and action plan receive Executive approval in their entirety.

I have continued to engage with stakeholders on our proposed direction of travel. Last month, I met representatives from four key interest groups: the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU); the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association (NIAPA); Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL); and the Lough Neagh Partnership. It was a very constructive meeting, and I have undertaken to continue engagement going forward. As I previously advised you, my Department also published an inter-agency monitoring protocol for blue-green algae on 30 May. That will be reviewed at the end of the season.

In relation to enforcement, while the Northern Ireland Environment Agency proactively regulates and enforces the current regulations to protect our environment, I recognise that we need to do more. That is why I have allocated resources from my departmental budget to strengthen regulation and enforcement, particularly in relation to water quality. This will enable the establishment of an enforcement team dedicated to tackling the problems of Lough Neagh and its catchment, together with a commitment to review the regulatory approach set out in the statement of regulatory principles and intent, otherwise known as SORPI, relating to Northern Ireland Water discharges.

I have also committed additional funding to the relevant parts of my Department to enhance communication and engagement and our monitoring, surveillance and sampling activities. I am also funding two research initiatives, which I have already mentioned. My officials are working through the appropriate processes, including those to provide additional staff, to take forward the above-mentioned actions in tackling water quality issues in Lough Neagh. I also welcome the £1.5 million additional resource funding provided in June monitoring to support actions in the environmental improvement plan relating to Lough Neagh. That will supplement the work that I have already mentioned. In addition, on 14 June, I submitted Lough Neagh bids of £6.7 million resource and £19.3 million capital, totalling £26 million over five years to 2028-29, to be considered by the interim public-sector transformation board. The outcome of that exercise and whether those bids have been successful will be confirmed in due course.

Finally, turning to a longer-term issue, you will be aware of the Earl of Shaftesbury's recent comments regarding the potential transfer of the ownership of the lough into a charity or community trust model. That issue is not covered in the Lough Neagh report, which, rightly, focuses on short- and medium-term interventions that are urgently required. However, I intend to actively engage with the work of the Lough Neagh Partnership in that area, and I am meeting the Earl of Shaftesbury next week to explore his thinking in greater detail.

With regard to farm sustainability transition payments, my officials provided the Committee with a briefing on the farm sustainability transition payment and the farm sustainability payment on 23 May. Further written information was provided on 17 June to address concerns raised by members in relation to the current planning assumption to increase minimum claim size for the farm sustainability transition payment to five hectares. During recent questions for oral answer in the House, I committed to come back to the Committee to discuss the issue. I note the Committee's concerns and its preference in relation to an increase in the minimum claim size, and I am happy to have a further discussion about it today. Whilst I realise that some businesses potentially impacted on by the policy may play an important role in providing quality produce to the Northern Ireland food chain, increasing the minimum claim size is an economic decision based on evidence. Farms that are farming small areas of land are likely to have very low levels of agricultural activity. Their level of outlay on agricultural activity and risk-taking is likely to be low, although there are exceptions. Therefore, it is questionable whether such farms should receive a resilience-type payment. As the Committee is aware, a public consultation on the proposal to increase the minimum claim size to 10 hectares took place in December 2021. The proposal generated a significant degree of stakeholder concern. On the

basis of the consultation responses, a decision was announced in March 2022 that the minimum claim size would increase to five hectares with the introduction of the new payments. I am not currently planning to reverse that decision, and work is progressing to ensure that the secondary legislation requirements will be in place in the autumn.

On the basis of the 2023 basic payment scheme application data, the number of farm businesses that may be impacted by the move to five hectares of eligible land for the farm sustainability transition payment and farm sustainability payment (FSP) is around 1,400. It is important to remember that those businesses have the option to acquire additional eligible land and/or payment entitlements to ensure that they remain eligible to claim FSP. For businesses that are impacted by the increase in minimum claim size, other sources of funding exist. For example, all land managers with three hectares or more of eligible land who meet the scheme requirements will be able to participate in the Farming with Nature package when it comes on stream. I am also exploring options for particular sectors and, in particular, the horticulture sector. The number of businesses that will be affected is relatively small, but I understand the concerns raised and welcome the opportunity to engage with the Committee on the issue so that we can find a way forward.

That concludes my opening remarks. I look forward to taking questions. The officials with me are Liz Loughran; Alistair, our chief scientific adviser; and then Brian and Rosemary. I am sure that you know us all, and we are happy to take questions and have an engagement around the issues. Again, I thank you for meeting today during recess.

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott): Thank you very much, Minister. There is quite a bit in there, although I am not so sure that there are a huge number of answers for us on the issues, so we have a few questions.

You said that the SIB report on TB eradication was coming close to a conclusion. You also spoke about Brian's review. Are those interlinked in any way? Are they totally separate, or is there cooperation between the two?

Mr Muir: I will let Brian come in in a wee moment. The SIB review had been commenced before I asked Brian to undertake his review. It just happens that they are starting to move along at the same time.

Do you want to say a bit more about that?

Mr Brian Doohar (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): As you say, the SIB review was initiated well before I came into post, but it is an important part of it because, in relation to that area, it is looking into the role of TBEP, the contribution that it made and the assistance it provided to the Department. We are looking at the next steps on that, and part of the review is asking what the Department needs to move the TB eradication policy forward and what science and what body we need etc. Hopefully, that review will inform those decisions.

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott): The SIB review was around mainly that programme that had originally been in place. Is yours a much wider review? Does yours include the issue of compensation?

Mr Doohar: The SIB report is on the role of TBEP in particular, not specifically on compensation. My review will look at the whole TB programme, how we are delivering it and a more holistic approach to it. Fundamentally, it will be structured around the strategy that we already have, which the TB strategic partnership developed in conjunction with the Department. That will form the foundation of it. We will then take on board evidence from other jurisdictions, what other countries are doing, what works and whether there is new science and then what way we set up to go forward with a delivery plan.

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott): In fairly blunt terms, how quickly will we see both reviews?

Mr Doohar: I hope to have a review in early autumn on my findings to basically come with a delivery plan on how we will move forward a TB programme and the different steps of it. It will look at all the aspects of it that are needed — wildlife, cattle measures, science, governance, partnership working etc. It will look at all of those and how we can put them into a timeline with milestones and get the programme moving forward.

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott): You say probably autumn for your wider review. You said, Minister, that the other review, by SIB, was nearing completion.

Mr Doohar: That is with us in draft form. It should near completion in the next number of weeks, and it will then feed into the general review. We will meet the TB eradication partnership, and that meeting will form part of my meetings with stakeholders. I have met a lot of bodies, including the Ulster Farmers' Union, and we will meet all stakeholders that have an interest in TB. We have invited the TB eradication partnership to a meeting to give us its views on the way forward, and that meeting will happen shortly.

Mr Muir: I will say something about compensation, if I may, Chair. I welcome the allocation that the Finance Minister made in the June monitoring round. As part of that announcement, the Minister made a statement that recognised the fact that it is a demand-led pressure and that bovine TB compensation is a statutory obligation. That provides my officials and me, as Minister, with an element of reassurance. It is not a cast-iron assurance, because finances are tight, but it helps with the issue of the percentage rate for compensation. I get that there is nervousness and concern. The point is often made to me that it should not really be viewed as compensation. I totally get that. As part of Brian's wider review, we have to look at how other parts of the UK and Ireland deal with the wider costs associated with the TB programme. That is what we are looking at, and it is only right that we do so.

I came into post in February. Bovine TB as an issue was included in my first-day brief. I engaged with my permanent secretary, Katrina Godfrey, and we are considering a way forward that will give people an understanding of how we are working to get to grips with the issue. I did not want to set up another external review to produce a report, because there are an awful lot of reports knocking about. Brian took up his post shortly after I became Minister, and we agreed that he would be tasked with dealing with the issue. Stakeholder engagement has been a key element. There has been significant stakeholder engagement, and not just 20-minute meetings but proper, decent meetings to get stakeholders' views. Those meetings will hopefully inform the direction in which we go.

Mr Doohar: As I said, we are meeting relevant stakeholders in the other devolved Administrations to find out what is working well for them and what lessons they have learnt so that we can take all of that on board and make sure that we plan in the best way possible so that we do not fall into any of the holes into which they fell. Moreover, we are particularly engaged with all relevant stakeholder bodies in the South.

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott): This is my final question on bovine TB, Minister. You mentioned that you are keeping what I call "animal valuation" — you call it "compensation" — under review. For how long are you going to keep it under review? Will the situation be fairly stable for the next six months, or might you come up with an idea in August or September and then say that you are going to remove compensation or reduce the level of it?

Mr Muir: That is a fair question. I know that there is concern about the issue. The level of support that we get in monitoring rounds will be key. We have an element of stability at the moment as a result of June monitoring and the Finance Minister's statement. I said in the Chamber and will say again today that I have no desire to change the compensation percentage rate, but I have an obligation to ensure that we balance our books, so it is only fair that I say that the situation has to remain under review. We need to be conscious of the need to balance our books, because, if we do not, we will end up in a serious situation with Treasury.

There are no plans to change the compensation percentage rate. The work that my Department and I have been doing with the Finance Minister has been really useful, and I hope that what I am saying today gives people some reassurance that the Finance Minister has recognised that bovine TV compensation is a demand-led pressure. That reassures me, and I hope that it reassures the farming community.

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott): OK. Thanks. I will move on quickly to Lough Neagh. In your statement to the Assembly last week, Minister, you accepted that there is no quick fix. I think that we all broadly accept that, although I suppose that measures can be taken to try to improve the situation in the short term.

You mentioned the sustainable use of slurry, which is something in which I am very interested. A lot of nitrates and phosphates come in in animal feed and go back out as slurry. How much progress is being made on the sustainable use of slurry? How much encouragement has been given to the private sector? It will be key if we are to try to resolve the issue.

Mr Muir: My officials will come in on that in a second. I am passionate about the issue. I talk regularly to my friends, and they say that I have changed over the past number of months, because those are the issues that I now raise. Sustainable use of slurry is a positive example of how we can deliver change in the agriculture sector for the benefit of both the environment and farmers. We have the small business research initiative (SBRI). We have done phase 1, which was essentially proof of concept, and we are moving on to phase 2. I hear the calls to engage with the Ulster Farmers' Union, NIAPA and environmental groups. They want us to move more quickly. That is really encouraging, because we are pivoting from the idea that slurry is something that is a problem to the idea that it is absolutely a resource. We want to move at pace and do so along with the farming community and the private sector. The next step will therefore be phase 2, which is coming up relatively soon.

Dr Alistair Carson (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Yes, after a successful phase 1 that demonstrated the proof of concept for centralised anaerobic digestion and for nutrient recovery, phase 2 is about turning those proofs of concept into reality, with scale separation of livestock slurries and the establishment of demonstrator sites. The Department of Finance has approved the full business case for phase 2, and the project will open for applications from phase 1 suppliers this month. Things are therefore moving at pace, Chair. That represents part of an overall package of nutrient management for the agri-food sector, and sustainable nutrient management.

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott): May I ask about algal bloom? A bit of algal bloom has been found in Lough Erne as well. Is there much more of it throughout Northern Ireland? Is it widespread?

Mr Muir: The DAERA website lists where it has been reported, and it has been reported in areas beyond Lough Neagh. I encourage people to view that list. It perhaps demonstrates that, although Lough Neagh is of significant concern and a real issue, algal bloom is a wider issue for water quality in Northern Ireland. Do you want to say a bit about that, Liz?

Ms Liz Loughran (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): It is not just a Lough Neagh problem. Lough Neagh is particularly affected because of its shallowness, but the situation is certainly not confined to Lough Neagh. The website lists all the reports that we get and the investigations that we do. Touch wood, but the weather has not been particularly warm up until now, so we have not had the kind of explosion that we had last year, but reports of algal bloom are certainly coming through.

Mr Muir: In one of our discussions, Chair, we talked about the fact that algal bloom has also been reported in parts of England. I have just come from a meeting with the Prime Minister at which we discussed Lough Neagh and climate change. The issues that we have are common challenges across the UK and beyond, and we need to work together to find solutions. That is why it is particularly important that Alistair is here and that we work east-west and North/South using the science, because doing that helps us understand a bit more about the problem and the potential solutions. That work is critical.

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott): OK. I have two things to mention quickly. First, the proposed increase in the minimum claim size for the farm sustainability payment from 3 hectares and 5 hectares is a big issue for quite a number of people. I put it on record that it is not just about being able to access the farm sustainability payment but about planning. I know that that is not your responsibility, but it will have an impact on some of those looking to get planning permission if they cannot demonstrate that they have a farm business.

My final point is about something that you have not mentioned in today's meeting, Minister, but that I did hear you mention on the radio this morning. The veterinary medicines issue seems to be getting to a very critical point. I know, and totally accept, that that is an issue for negotiation between the UK and the EU. Can you give us any indication of progress, however? Perhaps you will at some stage let us know what involvement, if any, your Department has, because the issue is crucial to the farming community here.

Mr Muir: You make a really important point. It is a crucial issue, and it is something that I have to work on with the new Government straight away. EU exit, the challenges arising from that and the potential solutions are matters that I spoke to the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland about earlier this morning. The Secretary of State shares my desire to work through those issues at pace.

I spoke to Brian, as our Chief Veterinary Officer, first thing this morning about the veterinary medicines issue. I will be approaching the new Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, particularly about veterinary medicines, potential solutions and the need to move forward at pace. The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland acknowledged earlier this morning the need to move forward with a number of EU exit issues at pace. It is to be welcomed that there is a recognition of that need and a desire to work with us. I will therefore be engaging with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I am happy to share a copy of my correspondence to him, which will hopefully go out this week, outlining the potential solutions for the issue, because I get people's concerns and know that we need to move on the issue. I will also be engaging with the Irish Government on the matter, because there are shared challenges. We can achieve much more together, and that is why it is important that I keep the Committee apprised. I particularly thank the stakeholders in the agriculture sector — the British Veterinary Association (BVA), the National Office of Animal Health (NOAH), UFU and others — for their positive and constructive approach, which has been really welcome. We want to work with them in the time ahead. The key thing for us is to give people certainty on the issues and be focused on solutions. That is what I am doing: we talked about it this morning, and the correspondence with DEFRA is being finalised.

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott): OK. Thanks for that.

Mr McAleer: Thank you, Minister, for coming along to brief us during the recess; we really appreciate that. I will pick up on a couple of points on the farm support scheme. I am disappointed that you are not taking on board the 3 hectares point; that is a break with the rest of Ireland and the EU, where the minimum claim size is still 3 hectares. Plenty of farmers near where I live have 7.5 acres of land, and they are productive farmers and good environmental custodians. The minimum claim size has an impact on them. The Chair is right that there is an impact if you go for planning permission. The Planning Service will ask, "Is there an active farm business number here?" Although it is not in legislation that you have to have an active farm business number, if the farm business is not active, as indicated by the number, the onus is on the applicant to demonstrate that they have been farming, and that becomes very challenging. That is a great disappointment.

On the farm scheme more broadly, I had occasion last weekend — we have all been out on the doors recently — to be fairly high up in the Sperrins most days. The feeling there is that the new farm scheme does not fully take on board the needs of farmers in marginal areas. I spoke to sheep farmers in the Sperrins who are losing some of their single farm payment to pay for a beef scheme, even though they have no beef cattle. You have no intention of resuming the areas of natural constraint payment that was cut in 2016. I have been raising the point for a while, through questions and one thing and another, that, under the new beef scheme, it will be challenging for farmers of native breeds in marginal areas, for example, to fit neatly into the calving intervals. When we were at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) the other week, the point was made that they may not struggle, but rather find it a challenge, to bring those calving intervals down. If you find it a struggle to do that in a college, surrounded by scientists in a controlled environment, what chance has a farmer in the snow on the side of the Sperrins? Maybe flexibility is needed. That has not been fully taken on board. My point is that farmers in marginal areas such as Cranagh in the Sperrins could be standing in 6 inches of snow while, 6 miles down the hill, there is no snow. It is a different environment. There are a number of things that the new farm scheme needs to take on board regarding the situation of farmers in the most marginal areas.

Mr Muir: No problem. Thanks, Declan. I get the concerns around this, which is why I was happy to come to the Committee and discuss it. You know by now that I am very much willing and keen to engage with people, because that is where our politics in this place sometimes fails: we do not engage and listen. I am taking on board the feedback that you have given me on the 5 hectares versus 3 hectares issue. Ultimately, I have to take into account the advice and evidence on good use of public funds and whether spending is justified. I know that that probably comes across as being a bit cold, but that is how we have to make the decisions.

Agriculture policy is important — it is critical; I totally get that and am committed to it — but it should not be there to facilitate planning applications; planning should be a separate matter. It is best — you know that I am a straight dealer — to just say that that is not right. On the future farm support and development programme and the issues that you cite, I am clear that, on the road ahead, it is important that we do that stakeholder engagement and take on board feedback. That means that, as Minister, I set the policy direction, but I cede an element of influence to the stakeholder organisations so that we can shape something that will be successful. We can potentially have a bilateral meeting on your comments to go through some of those things. It is important that we take them on board. I was

told that there is a worry that some of the schemes are going to be very bureaucratic and stuff like that. We have taken that on board and we are going to do a check every time we roll them out to make sure that they are as simple and successful as possible.

Do you want to say anything in particular on that, Rosemary? I got an Assembly question from you, Declan, on the areas of natural constraint payment. There are issues as to whether that is something that I could authorise without it requiring a ministerial direction.

Dr Rosemary Agnew (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thanks, Minister. On the suckler cow scheme, we are still working our way through the details of that to bring to the Minister for consideration. Hopefully, in the early autumn, we will be in front of the Committee. Really just to say that we have had quite a bit of push back, both on the beef carbon reduction scheme and on the suckler cow scheme, around native breeds. However, when we do an analysis of the data that is held on Northern Ireland food animal information system (NIFAIS), it does not support what we are being told. So the evidence that we have does not support that there is anything distinctly different in how a native breed performs on a farm compared with a Limousin, as one of the bigger continental breeds, or a Charolais, if we look across all the animals. All that information was in the consultation in 2021, and also the full analysis was in the decisions that were made in March 2022. However, I recognise that it is a concern, and we are looking at it again. We are looking at the more up-to-date information from that period to see whether there is any change or any difference, and that will come to the Minister for his consideration. That is probably all that I want to say. Thanks, Minister.

Mr Muir: If you want to meet offline, we can have a discussion about it. Some of the stuff is very complex, but it is important that we get feedback so that we can shape things that are viable. We are guided by evidence and science. That is not to say that we are not engaging but, ultimately, when we take decisions, I have to be able to account for that to the Department of Finance for the funding.

Mr McAleer: You said that the SBRI is open for application to phase 1 suppliers. Did three phase 1 suppliers make it through?

Dr Carson: No, six suppliers made it through phase 1. That was successful proof of concept, and we are now taking it through to phase 2.

Mr McAleer: Was that a tendering or application process for those six suppliers?

Dr Carson: Yes.

Mr McAleer: How was that —?

Dr Carson: Yes. It is a competitive process.

Mr McAleer: So they applied and you narrowed it down to six, and those six now apply to phase 2?

Dr Carson: Yes.

Mr Muir: There are a number of SBRI things knocking about. There is the stuff about sustainable utilisation of slurry, but also there are suggestions and ideas that have come forward on how to tackle and potentially reduce the blue-green algae blooms in Lough Neagh. That is a separate one that we had hoped to announce soon. Essentially, that will be a call for anyone who has suggestions, for us to evaluate them and see whether we want to give further consideration to any of them. Some might be runners, some might not be. We have not properly done an evaluation yet. I think that we have about 44 so far, so quite a lot have come through, but we just need to sift through them.

Mr McAleer: There are six for the slurry one, is that right?

Mr Muir: There are six in phase 1.

Dr Carson: Yes, and it will be open for applications from phase 1 suppliers this month.

Mr McAleer: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott): I assume that you are limited to six because of the amount of money that is available. Had there had been any more suppliers, it probably would not have been worth trying to do a proper scheme. Is that right?

Dr Carson: Phase 1 was looking for proof of concept on a range of technologies, so it was quite broad-ranging. That was the establishment phase and the proof of concept. It has been successful so the SBRI will run to phase 2.

Mr McGlone: I just want to piggyback on that issue, please. It is such a specialism, and you are getting into innovative science. Who are the arbiters as to whether it is effective? Do you have to draw in specialist advice, external to the Department, or is it from the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)? Where do you get that advice from? You do not want to be buying a pig in a poke in some of these instances.

Mr Muir: Are these the 44 ideas that have come from the SBRI?

Mr McGlone: Yes.

Dr Carson: Through the process and over the autumn and winter period, we established an independent science advisory group. It contains academics and professionals from organisations across the UK and Ireland. It has acted as a critical friend in the policy review that has been undertaken. For example, it undertook a high-level review of measures for in-lake management options. When it comes to the SBRI specifically, the science advisory group's input will be developed and input to the review as appropriate, depending on the technologies.

Mr McGlone: OK. Thank you. I will stick with Lough Neagh, though I want to come on to other stuff as well. Minister, you clearly had to go ahead and announce your 20 proposals or measures for tackling Lough Neagh, but there were 17 others that were outstanding. I presume that those included new legislative measures and other measures that may have been cross-cutting with other Departments or, indeed, within the remit of other Departments. Can you give us some insight on those other 17 proposals? What is the delay in incorporating them in the overall action plan?

Mr Muir: As you rightly outlined, the proposals fall into different categories. They are primarily cross-cutting issues. It is about joined-up arrangements. The Forever Mourne model was set up, and we will have something similar: Forever Lough Neagh. We need to bring people together and have a partnership-based approach. We need to look at a conservation management plan and stakeholder engagement. That is one category.

Another category relates to the waste water treatment works. That is obviously relevant to DFI and NI Water, so it is cross-cutting. The other one relates to the sentencing framework review in regard to the fines and penalties associated with environmental crime. It will be an independent review and a consultation. Obviously, that is cross-cutting with the Department of Justice. I stated in the Chamber and will do so again today that that will be independent, it will involve a consultation, and it will take into account the fact that, in many incidences, cross-compliance penalties apply. I have taken on board feedback on that. Another issue relates to establishing a science platform. That is really key, as we have outlined. Another one is about how we manage fertiliser. The proposals around that are essentially that, where we have a surplus of phosphorus, we will save the farmer and the environment by restricting the use of fertiliser with phosphorus, because it is not needed. We do not want to contribute towards that surplus. We are also setting up a fertiliser database. They already have one in the South, so we want to do that. That is the type of stuff that is there.

As for the barriers to getting agreement on the report, I understand that there could be an Executive meeting this week. I will engage again with my Executive colleagues today to see whether any further issues need clarification. Hopefully, as a result of yesterday and today, I have given clarification on the approach that we are taking. It is a balanced approach, and I have been clear about that. It was really important for me to make that statement last Tuesday about how it is about taking a balanced approach, not a blame game. Ultimately, if we need to go to enforcement, that is, to me, a sign of failure. It would be much better if the situation were not to occur in the first place. We want to work with people. That is entirely our focus in the Lough Neagh report and action plan. I am keen to work with everyone — the AERA Committee, the Executive and stakeholders — so that we can chart a course.

It is really important to note that, as with the other issues around veterinary medicines and stuff like that, this is a long-term issue. There are no quick fixes for some of the matters. We are putting a laser-

sharp focus on taking action on them. For example, I will meet the Earl of Shaftesbury next week. That will be about more of a long-term issue, but, in the short term, we are doing the independent review on the impact of sand dredging.

Mr McGlone: Just to get back to the issues that need Executive sign-off, are you optimistic that that will be done on Thursday or very shortly by other departmental stakeholders, if I may put it like that?

Mr Muir: I am a "glass half full" person, Patsy. I am optimistic that we might get it agreed. I will try to fill that optimism with a bit of substance by writing to Executive colleagues today to see whether any further areas require clarification. It is important that we give that clarification and reassurance. I read with interest the 'Irish Farmers Journal' article last week about our proposals on fertilisers with phosphorus. It is a fact that some elements of those proposals are already a requirement and there are cross-compliance penalties on that. We will give what clarification we can. May I add something about that engagement? As I said, we met the UFU, NIAPA, Northern Ireland Environment Link and the Lough Neagh Partnership. I want to say, "Thank you" to those four organisations for their engagement around the issues. That has been really positive, and the commentary from those organisations in recent times has been constructive, and I welcome that.

Mr McGlone: Thank you for your answer, Minister, but the message to the Executive from key stakeholders whom I represent — those who live around Lough Neagh — is, "Get it done". That is the primary message from the people I represent.

Mr Muir: I agree with that: let us get it done.

Mr McGlone: I know that you do.

May I go on to the issue of TB? Forgive me for saying so, but this seems like Groundhog Day. We are back to more consultation. Brian, you and I know from speaking to vets that it is a growing problem. Essentially, what the Department is doing at the moment is talking about compensation on the back of the spreading problem of TB. Minister, I know that you would not want to have to make a further bid for moneys to pay compensation for a spreading disease that is affecting growing numbers of livestock.

Brian, I will ask you this: what are you hearing? You do not have to have further consultation to know what is happening in other jurisdictions. Given your role, I am sure that you have already made multiple phone calls to the Chief Veterinary Officers in Dublin, Wales and Scotland, and a quick call would allow you to establish that: "Here is the problem that we have had, and here is how we have had to deal with it."

Mr Doohar: I have done that. TB is a problem that is always with us, and, for a lot of reasons, there is probably a high level of apathy about it. As regards talking to other countries, the South is the obvious one. We are talking to them, and they are concerned. They had made great strides with their eradication scheme, but, over the past number of years, numbers started going up again, and they are concerned. We are trying to learn from what they did, what worked and, probably, what they see now as having contributed to that rebound. We are looking at that at the moment to make sure that we do not get into that same landscape again. We want to engage closely with them so that we are joined-up in our thinking and our approach in order to move things forward together. As you know, the disease does not respect the border. We have to take all of that into consideration because it is important.

Mr McGlone: That would allow you to see what measures they had in place to reduce TB that they may have stopped or minimised.

Mr Muir: I understand the frustration with this, and I totally get it. We are moving at pace now, and the timelines that we have outlined on this are relatively brief. We will come back in the autumn with a way forward, but we want to make sure that, when we outline that, we will have done the stakeholder engagement. Otherwise, the first criticism would be that we had not engaged with stakeholders, and they are keen that we do so.

Mr Doohar: The thing is that we talk about TB and the disease, and, generally, that has been lost, even though we all know that. There is a need to take a holistic approach across all the transmission pathways. That is what any country that has been successful or has come near to success in eradication will tell you about what needs done. It is no secret: the knowledge is there. Now, there

needs to be an appetite for taking that knowledge and implementing it. That is what the idea will be. A lot of good work has been done with the TB strategic partnership, which has developed a strategy that never really got off the ground because of the wildlife intervention aspects and the judicial review.

That is where we are. We cannot do anything about the past, but, hopefully, we can learn a lot of lessons from it so that we do not repeat some of the mistakes and can move forward jointly across industry and government.

Mr McGlone: Here's hoping, because we will never forget the stress for families who saw their livestock wiped out. That is a big issue.

Finally, you mentioned collaboration and working with the authorities in the Twenty-six Counties, in the Republic, on the matter. I noticed a statement from an Taoiseach, Simon Harris, about veterinary issues and how the door might be slightly more open now than it was under the Tory regime. I presume that you raised that with the new Prime Minister this morning, Minister. Is there anything further that, you feel, needs to be done around that, even with the Irish Government, to make sure that a door that, maybe, was difficult or less easy to open previously could now be opened in a more — how shall I put it? — cooperative framework than might have existed beforehand with the EU?

Mr Muir: That is an important question, Patsy. The discussions that I had with the Prime Minister and Secretary of State this morning were about the faithful implementation of the Windsor framework, a solutions-based approach in dealing with any issues arising from the EU exit, while recognising that some issues will not be resolved overnight. They will take time to work through, and it is important that we are honest about that.

As Minister, I am on the record as wanting to have a sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) veterinary agreement. The Labour Party has been on the record on that. Getting that in place will require negotiation between the UK and the EU. The reset that David Lammy, as the new Foreign Secretary, has outlined between the UK and the EU provides us with opportunities in Northern Ireland to address some of the issues that we have been encountering, and that will be to the benefit of all citizens across the UK and the European Union. I will engage with the UK Government on that, particularly with the Secretary of State.

The election of a new UK Government is an opportunity for a reset in so many ways, whether between the devolved Administrations and the UK Government, between the UK Government and the Irish Government or between the UK Government and the EU. That is positive. I will continue to engage with my Southern counterparts. I am in contact with them regularly on the issue, and there has been engagement between Brian and other officials with their counterparts in the South, particularly on TB. If we could all work together, even in this Building, we could get things achieved. There are big challenges but, if we all have a sense of positivity, we can turn things around.

Mr McGlone: Is DEFRA the body that you will engage with on additional proposals? If the door is now ajar for further negotiations on that, will the Department — maybe the Department already has done that.

Mr Muir: We need to get clarity on who will be the lead on some elements of it. Some stuff on this sat within the Cabinet Office, but I will engage with anyone on this, because we want to find a better way forward on some of the issues. We are not coming to this from cold. I have had significant engagement with shadow spokespeople from the Labour Party. We recently had a really productive meeting with the shadow Ministers of State for farming, food and rural affairs.

What is heartening, if we are to be honest, is the level of interest in the issues that we face in Northern Ireland. They want to work with us on those, and that can only be good.

Mr Blair: Before I ask my questions, Chair, I add to the congratulations extended to you by the Minister on your award of a peerage. I wish you all the very best with that.

Minister, it is good to see you and the departmental officials here. On the theme of bovine TB eradication, is it clear at this stage whether consideration of wildlife interventions, which are welcome, as far as I am concerned, is greater or less than it was in the previous mandate?

Mr Muir: There is concern and debate around wildlife intervention. The member will be aware that there was a judicial review ruling in 2023, so any new wildlife measures will require consultation before

they can be implemented. My officials are working through that and will present papers to me in the time ahead.

I get the importance that people attach to wildlife intervention. As Minister, however, I will say that we need to take an holistic view of TB, and wildlife intervention is just one part of the way that we tackle TB. There is an issue with biosecurity and how we deal with that. I am very keen that we do what I have outlined today in terms of the review but also listen to the views of stakeholders. Brian has been doing that recently, and I have been doing it as Minister. I am conscious of the judicial review ruling in 2023, and that bears on my decision-making.

Mr Blair: Thank you for that. Just to stretch that out a bit if I may, would vaccinations and other measures for various forms of wildlife be under consideration again now or, if they were not fully or properly considered in the previous mandate, will they be for consideration?

Mr Muir: Yes. I will let Brian come in on that, but the trap, vaccinate and release approach is under consideration. Some work was done on that in the Banbridge area, but further consideration needs to be given to the issue and to what has been done in other parts of the UK. Do you want to say anything more about that, Brian?

Mr Doohar: Just that wildlife intervention is one of the pillars that we need to address with TB, similarly to cattle, governance and other things. We are looking at the up-to-date science behind wildlife intervention and at the legislative requirements and the financial aspects of it. We are looking at that with a view to bringing information back to the Minister and getting his thoughts and a decision on the way forward, including on subsequent consultation.

That is where we are on wildlife. As you said, however, there are options: the proactive culls and vaccination policies that there have been in certain areas and the combined test, vaccinate and release approach. Those, broadly, are the three categories.

Mr Blair: Thank you for that, Brian. Chair, I will ask this through you to the Minister and his team. I am sure that you will not be surprised that I will return to the Lough Neagh issue, combining it with the issue of the environmental improvement plan. They are, undoubtedly, closely linked.

You will all know that, like Patsy, I have constituents who live, trade and conduct recreation, such as simply walking their dog, on the shores of that lough. Their lives have been massively impacted on by what has happened there. They are desperate to see progress but are grateful, Minister, for the actions that you have been able to take independently and with your officials without Executive sign-off so far on the broader and cross-cutting issues.

I will relate that matter directly to the environmental improvement plan. I am surprised that we have got this far through the meeting without more mention being made of this. At the start of the meeting, it was made clear to us that there is some kind of pending action being taken by the Office for Environmental Protection to, through or against the Department. Can you give us more information about that? I expect that we will get a copy of whatever correspondence the Chair or Clerk have received, but can we get any more information about the urgency of that?

Mr Muir: Today, the Office for Environmental Protection announced publicly that it has commenced action in relation to my Department because of the failure to adopt and publish the environmental improvement plan. The legal duty to do so was passed last July. On taking up office in February, one of the immediate things that I turned to was getting that issue tabled with the Executive for approval. I tabled it with the Executive for approval in March. I am bitterly disappointed that the Executive have still not agreed the environmental improvement plan. The actions of the Office for Environmental Protection on that are unsurprising but very concerning. I urge my Executive colleagues to adopt the environmental improvement plan at the next meeting of the Executive.

When I took up this role, I was aware of the issues associated with Lough Neagh and of the fact that the catchment area there is large. That is why we prioritised the adoption of the environmental improvement plan. Weeks and months have progressed without agreement on that. That is not for want of trying in providing additional information and answering queries.

We also made a decision to table the Lough Neagh report and action plan in the hope that we could get both agreed in a twin-track approach. Hopefully, if there is an Executive meeting this week, we can

get that agreement. The Lough Neagh report and action plan acts as a conduit for the environmental improvement plan.

The environmental improvement plan was consulted on, and a final draft was circulated to Ministers by the previous Minister in March 2022. That draft could not be agreed, because there was no Executive at the time. There have been some updates to the plan to take account of feedback from the Office for Environmental Protection. Hopefully, we can get that agreed. It is scalable. A lot of the stuff in the environmental improvement plan is about saying that we will take action on x, y and z. My Department will gratefully take any money that it receives for that, and that money will enable us to scale up the interventions that we can make. I welcome the funding announcement from the Finance Minister in the June monitoring round last week towards the environmental improvement plan. I do not know whether that addresses any concerns in relation to the costs associated with this, but it is scalable, and it is really important that we get it agreed and published. When I speak to people, our environment and the need to protect and enhance it comes up day and daily, so let us set out a plan, which will be our first environment strategy for Northern Ireland. A lot of work has been done, and it is ready to go.

Is there anything else that you want to say, Liz?

Ms Loughran: We have done significant work with colleagues across Departments to look at scalability and costs to make sure that it is affordable. That was all done through May and June. We hope that, by providing that extra material to the Executive, we will be able to assuage any issues.

Mr Blair: It is good that Liz has raised the affordability of this, because we should look at it. I hope that members do not mind me saying, but we had a recent debate in the Assembly on ammonia in the planning context, and I could not help but feel at times that there was a tone of expectation and desire for everything to be different, but also a hope that nothing would change very much. Those things are, quite frankly, contradictory.

On the business of affordability of actions, I take it that the Department is also considering the cost of not taking action in relation to the environmental improvement plan on Lough Neagh and other matters, because actions by the Office for Environmental Protection and other remedial measures that will be needed further down the line will come at a huge cost, surely.

Mr Muir: There has been lots of analysis in relation to that. The cost of inaction can be multiples in the long term. For example, members know the millions of pounds that we are putting into dealing with Lough Neagh, but it would be much better if we prevented that from occurring in the first place. It is the entire approach in relation to that. It is important that we look at some of this as an invest-to-save, and that is why we have made bids under the transformation funding. There is a positive future ahead, but the key thing is to get stuff agreed at the Executive.

Miss McIlveen: Thank you for your presentation today. There will naturally be frustration from the farming community that there has not been an announcement today. There might be an expectation that, because we are meeting during recess, there might be, if not something groundbreaking, at least some sort of movement, particularly in relation to clarity around the compensation aspect of TB.

One of the greatest frustrations that I had when the Assembly collapsed in 2017 was the fact that we had got a head of steam in relation to TB and a plan of action. That might still have been halted through judicial reviews or whatever at that particular time, but, at that point, we still felt that we had a plan and a direction of travel. Like the Chair and Patsy, I am concerned about a review, and I absolutely appreciate that, as a new Minister coming in, you will want to look at things afresh and take some soundings from industry and others, particularly around new information that comes through, but that does not help the fact that there are farmers who are suffering as a consequence of the blight of TB.

I appreciate the two issues in relation to compensation and wildlife intervention. Wildlife intervention is not just about a cull, which is obviously very newsworthy. It is about creating a healthy badger population. If we have a healthy badger population, naturally, our herds may be a bit healthier as a consequence. There are things that could be done that do not necessarily need to be part of a review and that we know factually need to be addressed. That is in relation to skin tests and the accuracies around that. I am keen to know what work is being done in relation to that.

There are also issues in relation to the fact that calves under six weeks old are not tested, yet the process to be able to move those calves can take many months, which then puts them into the

category of needing to be tested. If the process was adapted, that might assist farmers with the movement of some of those cattle. I am curious about what work is being done around those simple interventions at this stage.

Mr Muir: I hope that I have given some reassurance on the compensation percentage rate. It is really important that we have trust and confidence in the Government. The previous Government lost that trust and have, clearly, paid the consequences of making pledges or statements that they could not keep to. That is why it is important that I come here and be very honest about the fact that I have an obligation to balance my budget and to keep things under review.

I have also said, however, that the June monitoring round award and the statement from the Finance Minister recognised that there are demand-led pressures. That provides me, as it should the farming community, with a level of reassurance around the issues of compensation. I have no desire to cut the rate, but I also have to make sure that I balance my books at the end of the year. We will do everything that we can to ensure that we can give that reassurance to the farming community.

Turning to testing, Patsy asked whether I will bid for more funding for TB in future monitoring rounds. I can confirm today that I will, because we need to make significant interventions in relation to that. One of them is in relation to some of the testing that we had to rescind last year because of budget pressures. The more that we can test, the more that we can identify where the problem is and address it.

Brian, do you want to deal with some of the other issues, including calves?

Mr Doohar: You touched on two points there, which were compensation and the accuracy of skin tests for six-week-old calves. We know that by the general standard interpretation of skin test accuracy, we have done well at 60% to 70%. With a more severe interpretation, we can bring that up to 80% and 90%. Therein, however, lies an issue that we need to understand, which is that because you do not have a perfect test, you actually have an imperfect test. You have to work on the basis of risk, and we need to understand that. Everything is done at risk, because we do not have a perfect test. There is no such thing as black and white. That is one of the biggest understandings that we probably forget or overlook about that test.

With the skin test, we have to use the blood test more in order to reinforce it and make it better. We had to cut back last year, and that drastically reduced the figures and definitely has not helped our programme. That may be contributing to some of the issues that we are starting to see develop as we talk. We also had to cut back on our risk tests last year in order to live within our budget, which was understandable too. Those things are, perhaps, starting to play out now, which is concerning. We will need to look at that.

I take your point about welfare movements for calves under six weeks. We should be able to facilitate the best possible with a suitable risk assessment around that and everything else. Every case will be dealt with individually, depending on the situation on-farm, but there is no reason why we cannot do those things. If you have any issues with welfare movements, please let me know so that I can speed them along for you.

Miss McIlveen: OK. When was the last Northern Ireland-wide badger survey carried out, and were there any trends that concerned you?

Mr Doohar: The badger survey that we were doing was a road traffic survey: it was about road kills. The TB incidence among the badger population was around 20%, which is concerning. Is that reflective of the whole population? It is probably, broadly, but you cannot say definitively. The 20% referred to the percentage of the population that was killed on the roads and which had TB. You are assuming that that is reflective of the underlying situation.

Miss McIlveen: Very quickly, I want to turn to Lough Neagh. I apologise that I was not there for your statement.

Mr Muir: You are grand.

Miss McIlveen: I just wanted some clarification in relation to the soil nutrient health scheme. Obviously, farmers collect data in relation to that. Will the Department use that data as an enforcement tool, or will it still be used in order to identify areas of high risk?

Mr Muir: That is an important question, and it is important that I give some assurance about that. We have stated that we want to use the soil nutrient health scheme as an opportunity to understand where things are with phosphorous levels. Rosemary can come in on this, but we are very conscious of the privacy notices and the agreements that we reached in relation to those as an education tool and not as an enforcement tool. Is that fair enough, Rosemary?

Dr Agnew: Yes.

Mr Muir: It is important that we give clarification on that.

Dr Agnew: It is contained in any documents that have gone to farm businesses that participation in the soil nutrient health scheme will not be used by the Department for enforcement. At the minute, we are looking at all the data privacy notices that we collect from farms, and that is one critical element that the Ulster Farmers' Union and the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association have brought to our attention. For example, they want to use the data to learn in order to help them change behaviours so that they can meet the climate change targets, but they do not want the data to be used for enforcement.

Mr Muir: I am glad that you raised that point, Michelle, to be honest.

Dr Agnew: We are very alert to that. It is not in the current planning.

Miss McIlveen: You can understand why it would be a concern.

Mr Muir: Yes. It is important that we clarify that, and I am glad that you asked the question. Hopefully, the clarity that I have provided as Minister is satisfactory.

Miss McIlveen: My other question is about the percentage of resource that is used for enforcement. How much enforcement will be applied to the agriculture community, when we know that there are also issues arising from waste water, septic tanks, industry and so on? The point has been raised with you before.

Mr Muir: Any enforcement action that the Department takes is proportionate. It is important that I say that. Any enforcement taken is in line with the enforcement policy of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and DAERA. Enforcement is also targeted so that there is best use of resources. It was important that I set this out in my statement last week, and I will say it again today: those who cause water pollution, whether that be from waste water infrastructure, septic tanks, industry or agriculture, will be shown no favouritism. It is all wrong.

First, we want to prevent it, and it is much better to prevent it through education and incentivisation. Enforcement action will also be taken, however. It is important that there be a balance. That is why I said that, for Northern Ireland Water, I do not believe that SORPI is fit for purpose. I will be meeting the Minister for Infrastructure about waste water infrastructure and other issues. That is why, in the Lough Neagh report and action plan, we have included stuff about septic tanks. I want to look at what the most efficient use of septic tanks is and, funds permitting, also look at introducing a grant scheme that will incentivise people to replace them.

For industry, we are now placing a clear focus on cumulative, low-risk breaches. If there are low-risk breaches, but those breaches are cumulative, we need to have an approach to dealing with them. That is important. For agriculture, it is only fair that we ensure that a balanced approach is taken. It will not be an approach whereby I, as Minister, target any particular sector. Rather, it is about making it very clear that we are taking a balanced approach that includes education and incentivisation but also regulation and enforcement. That is key.

In closing, in response to your question, and I set this out last week, government policy that was in place over decades favoured intensification of agriculture. We have talked about this through our future farm support and development programme, but we are now in a very different place. We are now about sustainable productivity. We are about working with the agriculture community, including the farmers, and I am not interested at all in any sort of blame game. That is entirely unproductive and destructive, and it helps no one.

That is how I approach the issue, and it is important that I say that to the Committee. The only way in which the Lough Neagh report and action plan will succeed is if we are able to bring people with us, and that is what I am putting my heart and soul into achieving. If anyone needs any points clarified, we are happy to engage and to provide clarity on the whole issue.

Miss McIlveen: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott): To follow up on Michelle's question, once farmers hear about enforcement action, they automatically consider it to mean against them. I am therefore pleased to hear that it does not just mean against them and that, if there is going to be enforcement, it will be applied equally across the board. Farmers see statutory agencies and big business getting away with things that they certainly would not get away with. That news will be encouraging to farmers. If they are wrong, they are wrong, and that is fair enough, as the law should be enforced, but it needs to be enforced equally across the board.

Mr Muir: I fully agree with you, Chair. It is important that you say that. No one is going to be getting a by-ball from me. The fact that they may be brand names in Northern Ireland does not mean to say that they are going to receive any favouritism. It is important that we get that message out. It is about taking a balanced and fair approach. That is what I like to do.

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott): Thank you. I have just one final point. It is not to do with today's briefing. In matters arising, we discussed a letter from you about Windsor framework implementation issues and whether you have discretion and control over certain issues. Perhaps you can confirm something for me. I read the letter as meaning that no great further progress has been made there. The last day that you were before the Committee, you said that even you were not certain about whether you had control over some of the issues. I assume that the position is still the same?

Mr Muir: The general election meant that those discussions wound down a wee bit. My previous contact, Steve Baker, has moved on to pastures new, so I await to learn my contact for what will be regular engagement. It is important that we get clarity on the issues, not just for the Committee but for the stakeholders who have asked us about the issues. Once I have that contact, I will update the Committee, probably in writing, if that is OK. It has been a wee bit tortuous trying to find out who is responsible for what. I am more than happy to come to the Committee and engage, but the regulations are in place —.

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott): We would appreciate your keeping us up to date on that —

Mr Muir: It is important.

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott): — because what you have and do not have responsibility for is a big issue in the wider farming industry.

Mr Muir: Yes. One of the issues, for example, that I do not have responsibility for is veterinary medicines.

It is an honour and a privilege for me to be in this role. It is about doing good for the people of Northern Ireland, and that is what I try to do in the role: advocate for people from Northern Ireland and try to get solutions, because the people in Northern Ireland are best placed to speak about them. That is what I am doing on that and other issues.

On EU exit, Chair, there is an awful lot that I do not tell an awful lot of people about, because, to be honest, people are sick, sore and tired of it. We are focused on solutions, and I am confident that, with the new UK Government, we can chart a course. We are also waiting for the new European Commission to come into place. That will hopefully provide an opportunity, and I look forward to going to Brussels in September or October, so a lot of work is being done.

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott): OK. Minister, Liz, Alistair, Brian and Rosemary, thank you very much for your attendance and for the information that you have given us. We wish you a good summer.