

ORAL STATEMENT TO THE ASSEMBLY BY DAERA MINISTER EDWIN POOTS MLA

30 APRIL 2020-RESPONSE TO CORONVIRUS

Mr [Deputy] Speaker I am grateful for the opportunity to update the Ad-Hoc Committee today. I want to speak to you about the arrangements that are being made within my Department to support the people of Northern Ireland in these challenging and worrying times.

As leaders, each of us must continue to do what we can, to help everyone through this crisis. As well as impacting on the health of our people, this pandemic is also driving economic, social and environmental change. So, while we need to address the problems of today, we also need to keep our eye to the future. The world will have changed in the aftermath of Covid-19 and we will have changed with it. So ...

- We must sustain our efforts to help and comfort each other through the personal challenges, brought by this disease.
- We must work together and maximise co-operation between people, businesses and the public sector to get through these difficult times.
- We must address the economic and social challenges which we can see and which are now emerging in the wake of the public health impacts.
- And we must begin to plan to ensure that as we leave this dark hour, we are prepared to renew ourselves, our economy and our environment.

As Minister for Agriculture, the Environment and Rural Affairs I am committed to ensuring that we make every possible effort to protect: the health and well-being of our staff; our customers and general public; and to ensure that we continue to carry out our essential services safely.

Doing our bit

On the theme of working together, we have made it a priority to work with and support others across the system. This is consistent with our aim as a Department because protecting the environment and public health are key priorities for DAERA under all circumstances. I am therefore very grateful that DAERA has been able to provide Belfast City Hospital with 30 powered respirator units which will undoubtedly contribute to saving lives. The Chief Veterinary Officer is working with the Southern Health & Social Care Trust to provide veterinary resources. This will assist the COVID contact tracing and also potentially provide assistance to healthcare professionals in the Trust area. Our College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) has made over 20,000 coveralls and other Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) available to the Health and Social Care Trusts and to colleagues in Veterinary Service Animal Health Group. Some of these have already been collected.

Contingency planning and prioritisation of work

DAERA continues to undertake a vast amount of work to ensure that we can deliver essential services to the people of Northern Ireland and with your agreement I will update you on that programme. As many of you will be aware we have a huge spread of responsibility, including the agri-food industry, waste, fisheries, the environment and rural sector. Each and every one of us comes into contact with at least one of these services on a daily basis. But most of the time they

are hidden from view; many people don't even realise that they are there – which is a good thing, because it shows they are working. However, if there is one thing that we have learned in this crisis, it is that we should cherish those services and never taken them for granted.

Support for the agri-food sector

We provide food for some 10 million people, so it is crucial that our supply chains do not falter. And I want to pay tribute to everybody across the private and public sectors, from farm to fork, for maintaining those supply chains so well.

These supply chains are working effectively, thanks to the dedication and commitment of workers within the chain. It is entirely understandably that there have been concerns across stakeholders that staff may contract the virus and that they could be unable to work. I am grateful therefore to everybody who has helped put safety measures in place. When industry made calls for their key workers to be tested for Covid-19, we listened. In fact we have listened at every stage, meeting with the industry at least once a week and, for the majority of the crisis, two or three times a week.

We are currently working with agri-food stakeholders to identify the categories and numbers of key workers (private and public sector) that could be tested to inform Government planning exercises. Estimates from the Northern Ireland Food and Drinks Association (NIFDA) suggest that output from the sector remains at around 100% in terms of meeting customer demands. Levels of absenteeism are reported as having reduced to 8.5% on average (22/4/20) from a high of 14% (3/4/20).

As the crisis continues, however there is concern that farm incomes could fall due to a Covid-19 related slump in market prices. This could be made worse if farmers can't get product to market or can't get feed – or if input prices drop. We must ensure, as far as we call, that the flow of produce from farms is not interrupted. Thankfully that has not happened to date and hopefully the risk of it is receding, although we cannot rule out future problems. Industry representatives have raised concerns that a sharp fall in beef prices is on the way. The latest market statistics show that beef prices, which had been stable since the beginning of the year, have started to fall. There are also concerns about what lies ahead for the dairy sector as international markets have weakened considerably in recent weeks. And we know that there are difficulties within ornamental horticulture, with dedicated growers facing major difficulties in getting produce to markets.

I can assure you that my Department is working diligently with representatives of the red meat and dairy sectors; listening, offering support and guidance. More importantly, we are taking action where we can. Officials are in daily contact with the industry on those matters and have recently received independent analysis of the impacts that COVID-19 is having on both production and processing in the red meat industry. A similar industry-sponsored report for the dairy sector is expected by the end of next week. We are closely monitoring local, national and international markets to obtain information and intelligence. Both streams of work will go some way to help us develop and deliver the type of support that may be needed to weather this particular storm.

Moving on to Fisheries, my Department has provided a substantial scheme of £1.5m worth of support for the sea fish catching sector and letters of Invitation to apply for the scheme have been issued. Some vessels continue to fish where there is a market for the catch, but overall activity is greatly reduced due to the market collapse for fish. There has also been a severe drop in sales of aquaculture products. DAERA officials have been gathering the relevant economic information to examine the extent of the impact and what measures might be necessary to support the sector.

This includes consideration of the recent amendment to the European, Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF), which provides the possibility of granting financial compensation to aquaculture

farmers for the temporary suspension or reduction of production as a result of Covid-19. Additionally as a result of the drop in sales, increased stocking densities may increase welfare and disease issues. The Department continues to engage with the sector on these matters.

Supporting and protecting our customers

My officials have been working tirelessly with farmers to assist them in completing their Single Applications. With less than three weeks to the closing date for Single Applications (**midnight 15 May 2020**), DAERA's Single Application Advisory Service will be available from 9am-3pm over the weekends of the 5 to 6 of May and the 12 to 13 of May.

We are providing enhanced advisory services and have seen a substantial increase in the number of applications that have been received to date. The latest figure for received applications is 13,188. This represents 53% of the total number of applications expected in 2020, and an increase of 23%, compared with the same date in 2019. I welcome this increased rate of applications by farmers and agents and would encourage those with outstanding applications to act now. The deadline for Entitlement Transfers is the 4 May 2020 and the deadline for Single Applications is 15 May 2020.

Supporting rural communities

My Department will continue to do all that it can to ease the burden and worries of people and businesses in rural communities. DAERA officials are working in collaboration with a wide range of delivery partners in the statutory, community and voluntary sectors. In the past three weeks I have secured £2.5m for DAERA for the 2020-2021 Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Programme. I have pushed that support towards dealing with the immediate impacts of Covid-19 in the rural sector and I have also fast tracked over £2m in payments to projects. These will support rural businesses and the community and voluntary sector, providing them with some degree of assistance and security during these difficult times.

Rural Support has reported an influx of calls to their helpline on a range of issues. They include farmers worrying about benefits, their mental health, and a possible slowdown in the supply chain. Rural Support continue to provide a listening ear and help. Working in tandem with local councils and the Department for Communities (DfC), DAERA people and vehicles are delivering food parcels to the most vulnerable people in our communities, ensuring that they can keep safe. The Minister for Infrastructure and I recently confirmed a collective arrangement for Rural Community Transport Partnerships (RCTP). These play a key role in delivering services to rural people and communities. Working in tandem with local Councils and Health Trusts, the RCTPs are proving to be a very effective means of delivering food, medicine and other services to vulnerable people.

Last week I confirmed that Forest and Country Parks were open for pedestrian access. This is to provide people with open green spaces to exercise, consistent with public health advice on social distancing. In doing so, it is important that people maintain compliance with the Covid-19 regulations, including where there is 'reasonable excuse' to travel for exercise. Car parks, as well as caravan, camping, angling and associated facilities remain closed.

Supporting the environment and public health

DAERA continues to deliver key public health and environmental protection messages around waste management. Messages include bin hygiene, respect for key workers, the importance of recycling and warning against fly-tipping. Waste industry workers have been designated as key workers and I have issued a letter to all those working in the waste industry thanking them for their continued work, recognising their role.

The waste sector is vitally important in safeguarding public health, protecting the environment and servicing the economy. Waste and recycling services are critical public services. They should be maintained as far as possible in order to protect the health of the Northern Ireland public from a build-up of waste; safeguard the important flow of materials, (such as those materials needed for food packaging) and to deliver a low carbon circular economy agenda.

I recognise there has been an increase in reports of fly-tipping and have used a range of communications to remind the public that it is not only illegal, but that it is also damaging to public health and the environment. Our waste workers are already burdened with increased household waste, so fly-tipping is a further burden on them. An added risk, in dry weather, is that fly-tipping increases the risk of wildfires. I have approved guidance to Councils to inform their decisions on the re-opening of household waste recycling services. Clearly these decisions will be made on a case-by-case basis, but as these services start again when the time is right, they will help to reduce fly-tipping incidents. I would also assure you that my officials in NIEA are closely monitoring the situation and working with our local Councils.

NIEA staff are continuing to operate their 24 hour pollution response service as part of their work to protect our water bodies. This is particularly important in catchments which supply drinking water. That is why scientific staff within our laboratories are prioritising their work on analysing raw water quality samples. This will support NI Water's provision of safe drinking water and effective waste water treatment. In addition NIEA's Drinking Water Inspectorate is working closely with NI Water to ensure that it maintains the required drinking water standards for all of its customers and for those who use a private water supply.

I would also wish to acknowledge the valuable contribution of environmental non-government organisations (eNGOs) and recognise the impacts of Covid-19 on that sector. DAERA staff continue to work with them and with other government colleagues to understand and seek a way forward.

In Conclusion

I, and my Department, remain fully committed to playing our part in tackling this crisis. We will ensure that every effort is made to mitigate the impacts of this pandemic. Importantly, we understand that this means not only helping ourselves and our stakeholders, but also reaching out and helping as many people as possible.

As we push on and continue to deliver those essential services that we can deliver safely, it is important to remember that we will recover. Over recent weeks and months we have been forced to live and work differently, and to behave differently. I pay tribute to everyone that has played their part. But even in these darkest times we need to look ahead. We owe it to everyone to ensure that everything we have learned in facing these challenges is put to good use. When planning for recovery, it is crucial that we do so in a holistic manner. Everything must work in tandem. Within DAERA we have developed new and innovative ways of working; travelling less, using less energy, finding new ways to communicate and to learn. We must take this learning with us and use it in developing future plans.

I would like to pay tribute to staff throughout the wider Agri food industry, including my own staff in DAERA for their dedication and commitment throughout this time. For many of them the impact of Covid-19 on their work is far more profound than just changing where they working; it has also fundamentally changed the work they do and how they do it.

Rather than picking up where we left off we must re-imagine the future. We must work across government and with the private and voluntary/ community sectors, to co-design and deliver social and economic renewal. Sustainability must be at the heart of what we do and economic renewal must better recognise the importance of our environment as a pathway towards a sustainable future. This will require collective commitment and action and I recognise the important role that the Northern Ireland Executive will have to play. I will also continue to work with Executive colleagues to do whatever I can to get us through the current crisis and play a full part in the development of a recovery plan for Northern Ireland.

In my statement to this committee on 07 April 2020, I informed you that my Department had already started developing proposals to support the recovery of our economy, environment and people. This work is continuing. We are reflecting on our enforced experience of Covid-19, examining the lessons we can learn from it and how we can take them forward to optimise flexibility, productivity and resilience. I look forward to sharing them with you in the coming weeks.

Thank you.