

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM THALMHAÍOCHT, BIA AGUS MUIR

JOINT COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND THE MARINE

Dé Máirt, 25 Bealtaine 2021

Tuesday, 25 May 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 3.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 3.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Teachtaí Dála/Deputies	Seanadóirí/Senators
Martin Browne,	Victor Boyhan,
Matt Carthy,	Lynn Boylan,
Joe Flaherty,	Paul Daly,
Marian Harkin,*	Tim Lombard,
Brian Leddin,	Denis O'Donovan.
Carol Nolan,*	
Michael Ring.	

* In éagmais/In the absence of Deputies Michael Collins and Michael Fitzmaurice.

Teachta/Deputy Jackie Cahill sa Chathaoir/in the Chair.

Rewetting of Peatland and its Impact on Farmers: Discussion (Resumed)

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Deputy Kehoe. Deputy Nolan is substituting for Deputy Michael Collins and Deputy Harkin is substituting for Deputy Fitzmaurice. Before we begin, I remind members that, in the context of the current Covid-19 restrictions, only the Chairman and staff are present in the committee room. All other members must join remotely from elsewhere in the parliamentary precincts. The secretariat can issue invitations to join the meeting on MS Teams. Members may not participate in the meeting from outside of the parliamentary precincts. I ask members to mute their microphone when not making a contribution and please use the raise hand function to indicate. Please note that messages sent to the meeting chat are visible to all participants. Members of the committee will be prioritised for speaking slots.

Today's meeting is in two sessions. The first is engagement with officials from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the second will be with representatives of Teagasc. The subject of the first session is the rewetting of peatland and the impact on drainage for surrounding farmland. From the Department's peatlands issues and land designation section I welcome Ms Suzanne Nally, assistant principal officer, Ms Audrey Carroll, assistant principal officer and Ms Adele Shelton, assistant principal officer. We have received their opening statement and briefing material and these have already been circulated to members. We are limited in our time due to Covid-19 safety restrictions and so the committee has agreed the opening statement be taken as read so we can use the full session for questions and answers. All opening statements are published on the Houses of the Oireachtas website and publicly available.

Before we begin, I must read an important notice on parliamentary privilege. Witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the evidence they are to give to the committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. Witnesses are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given. They are asked to respect parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Participants joining the committee meeting from a location outside of parliamentary precincts are asked to be aware that the constitutional protections afforded to those participating within parliamentary precincts does not extend to them. No clear guidance can be given on whether, or the extent to which, participation is covered by absolute privilege of a statutory nature.

We move to questions from the committee. I see Senator Paul Daly has his hand up, as does Deputy Harkin. We will begin with the Senator.

Senator Paul Daly: I thank the Chairman. I welcome the officials and thank them for their two comprehensive submissions. I have a couple of points and questions. They are specific to each of the two areas, namely, the rewetting of bogs and horticultural peat, although there is a bit of a link between the two. Starting with the rewetting of bogs, I seek some clarification from the witnesses further to the contents of their submission. In the larger scheme of things, with the anticipated sequestration and storage of carbon, who do the officials see getting credit for the carbon, going forward? This is a big debate in the agriculture sector about whether the carbon that is sequestered or stored in Irish lands would be accredited to the sector. I would like some comment on that from the officials. To whom do they see the credit being given?

On another point, I might quote a paragraph from the officials' submission:

The Government's approach, as set out in the National Peatlands Strategy, is to recognise that domestic turf cutters have a traditional right to cut turf and that this right is balanced with the conservation objectives for protected bogs and the legal obligations on the State.

I would like the officials to comment on that, based on the fact that at the moment, Bord na Móna, which is answerable to the Department in this regard, is not issuing licences to people who have turbary rights or who need a Bord na Móna licence to cut to turf on what were traditionally their family banks, which are leased from Bord na Móna. Why are the officials not intervening there to back up what their submission states?

On the horticultural peat, the comprehensive report the officials have given us and all the work done to date is quoting investment and research into alternatives, while at the same time we have ceased production. Is that not putting the cart before the horse? I have the two reports in my hand and while I see fully and welcome the possibilities of carbon sequestration and storage by wetting our peatlands, I cannot see the justification for the current situation, nor justify it to members of the public who question it. Last week, I spoke to a haulier who specialises in peat haulage and he is currently drawing peat from the port of Drogheda down to the south of the country. This is peat that has come into this country from, I think, Lithuania, transported on a diesel-burning ship, loaded onto his lorry and transported down the country because the officials' Department cannot or did not intervene in the scenario through the courts and through the planning process, which has horticultural peat production ceased at the moment. This despite the officials openly saying in their statement that we are now, and only now, investing in research for alternatives. That is certainly putting the cart before the horse and a serious contradiction between the two submissions from the Department. I would like a little more elaboration on that point also.

Chairman: Who wants to take the Senator's questions?

Ms Suzanne Nally: I will take the first question on carbon credits. The restoration of Ireland's bogs will give many benefits in terms of carbon sequestration, storage and capture. At the moment there is no policy in place, no measure for the trading of carbon credits for peatlands restoration. However, this is an evolving area and the Department with the responsibility for any policy in that regard is the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications. I am aware the UK has a peatlands code in place and there have been a number of measures undertaken in other member states. It is expected that the restoration of over 22,000 ha of raised bog habitat within the special areas of conservation natural heritage area network will directly reduce and halt carbon loss, meet our national conservation targets and result in estimated emissions reductions of 47,000 tonnes of CO₂ per year.

On the right to cut turf, as was stated, the National Peatlands Strategy recognises the domestic turfcutter has a traditional right to cut turf and this is respected. There has been a lot of consultation and collaboration between the Department and turfcutters on this. Bord na Móna is under the remit of the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications. On turbary rights, there are discussions ongoing between Bord na Móna and local landowners and turbary rights holders and I do not really have any further information in that regard to impart to the committee today. My colleague, Ms Shelton, may have some.

Ms Adele Shelton: The only thing I could add to what Ms Nally has just said is that my understanding is that the fact that Bord na Móna is not, in some circumstances, reissuing licences

is to do with a ruling from an Bord Pleanála which restricts it in this regard. We repeat that Bord na Móna is under the aegis of the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications.

Senator Tim Lombard: There was no reference to my questions on horticulture peat.

Ms Suzanne Nally: I will take that question as well. The draft interim update was submitted recently to the Minister. The working group is continuing its deliberations and is due to finalise a report in the coming weeks. My colleagues and I are not involved in this area of responsibility but we await the outcome of the report.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I appreciate the Chairman allowing me to intervene. Ms Nally answered the question on carbon credits and said that there is no policy or measure in place to trade carbon credits. Will the carbon credits be attributed to the agri sector?

On the rewetting of bogs, as the Turf Cutters and Contractors Association liaised with the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, on rehabilitation projects previously is it correct to say that no work can be carried out on anyone's property without their consent whether it is blanket bogs or other types of land? Will the NPWS pay a premium for any part of the schemes that concern designated lands? Finally, what assurances can the witnesses give today that the rewetting projects will not affect the productivity of nearby farms?

Ms Suzanne Nally: On the rewetting of bogs, the way that the NPWS manages its national protected raised bog restoration programme is to minimise impacts on adjoining landowners. The Deputy is correct that it is done on a voluntary basis. If any impacts are identified then we would consult the landowners. If the landowner has concerns about the potential for impacts then we would not proceed with the restoration works. All projects are done by total collaboration and mutual agreement.

The way that the restoration plans are developed at present is that the majority of the marginal and periphery drains are kept open to minimise impacts on agricultural, marginal and surrounding lands. The aim of the restoration and rewetting of the bogs is to raise the water levels in the bog to at or below the surface to encourage the growth of sphagnum moss, which is the building block of peat. If it is too wet the sphagnum moss does not grow. What we are trying to do is retain the water on the bogs to encourage peat forming habitats.

Deputy Marian Harkin: Ms Nally said in response to an earlier question on carbon credits that there is no policy and measure to trade carbon credits. Will whatever carbon credits there are be attributed to the agricultural sector?

Ms Suzanne Nally: I do not know is my honest answer. The whole space is evolving and there is a lot of discussion on carbon credits and the peatlands code. As I said, there is no policy in place at the moment but the issue is subject to further cross-governmental and departmental discussions.

In response to the question on premiums, if there are particular impacts on land, by private landowners, the Department is in the process of introducing a financial incentive scheme called the protected raised bog restoration incentive scheme. It is an area-based payment to compensate anyone who facilitates restoration works on their lands or given access to those lands. We are still developing the terms and conditions of the scheme and hope to roll it out on a bog-by-bog basis. We have had the pilot scheme under the living bog project, which is an EU-funded life project and the Department is the co-ordinating beneficiary on 12 special areas of conserva-

tion raised bog sites in the Border, midlands and west region.

Deputy Martin Browne: I have a few questions on the Vote. A working group has been set up to discuss the effects that the ban on peat harvesting will have on the horticultural industry. The group has only just given its interim report to the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, and the recommendations are weeks away from being published. Is the Department aware that suppliers to the industry are fearful that they could go out of business by September if the harvesting and horticultural period is not allowed?

I want to put it on record that when we talk about horticultural peat use in the mushroom industry, over 80% of the mushroom industry is peat free and that only 15% of the peat base is necessary to allow mushrooms to sprout. Does the Department have concerns about alternatives to horticultural peats such as coir and so on? They will need to have fertilisers, nutrients and bio-stimulants added to them. The run-off from these additives will have an impact on water courses, rewetted bogs, potentially, and ultimately on pollution levels. This is a requirement with the ban on horticultural peat, which goes against the farm to fork strategy that we all have heard about.

Is there a case for the moss peat industry to continue to harvest peat on a case-by-case basis? I mean where binding guarantees are given that cut-over bogs post harvest will be allowed to regenerate ecologically in perpetuity and that whatever post harvest activities is allowed.

On rewetting bogs, at a meeting of this committee in March Dr. David Wilson spoke about the Abbeyleix project where no flooding was reported and said that it was a role model. I asked him about the issues surrounding the Shannon area where industrial extraction took place and when I read the transcript of the debate I realised that Dr. Wilson did not offer solutions on the flooded areas. Can the witnesses offer more certainty or solutions?

The use of boglands has changed the landscape. What level of certainty does the Department have right now about the impacts that rainfall, for example, would have on rewetted lands that have been harvested for decades and are very different from what they once were?

Finally, on the ability of the small scale turfcutters to work on private bogs with 30 ha and below, does that apply to a single landmass of 30 ha or is the landmass connected to a bog miles away due to hydrological circumstances? What impact could rewetting have on those farmers?

Chairman: The three witnesses are here to discuss peatland issues and are not experts on horticultural peat. I suggest that they note the questions and get someone else to provide written answers if they do not have the answers the committee members require concerning horticultural peat.

Deputy Martin Browne: Yes, if the witnesses do not have answers than please supply a written response.

Chairman: The person who deals with the issue in the Department was not available today. I suggest that the witnesses note the questions and supply the committee with written answers.

Ms Adele Shelton: On the industrial scale harvesting around the Shannon area, my involvement is with the enhanced decommissioning, restoration and rehabilitation scheme that is being implemented. Bord na Móna operates the scheme that encompasses approximately 33,000 ha from which it previously harvested turf for electricity generation. As I said, it is being operated by Bord na Móna. This Department, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, is the

regulator for that scheme, which is very wide in its scope. Of course, some of the bogs that will be rehabilitated as part of that enhanced peatland rehabilitation scheme, EPRS, are adjacent or close to the Shannon.

I am aware that Bord na Móna has issued a statement regarding this restoration and rehabilitation work on its land which will address concerns regarding potential risks to surrounding lands and landowners and the Department is aware that Bord na Móna is considering such risks to surrounding lands along with any other relevant risks when it is designing the individual bog rehabilitation plans. However, the assessment of such potential risks to an individual bog would be an operational matter for Bord na Móna because it feeds in to the design process for these rehabilitation bog packages. As I said, I am fully aware that the risk to surrounding landowners is something that is foremost in Bord na Móna's mind when it is developing these bog rehabilitation and restoration plans, although in saying that I am not here to speak to the operational workings of Bord na Móna.

Ms Suzanne Nally: I might follow on from that in relation to the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, restoration programme. In terms of the impacts on surrounding lands and how certain we can be of low impacts as such, for our protected raised bog restoration programme extensive hydrological analysis was carried out in advance to understand and predict the water flow off and around these bogs. We do surveys on a bog by bog basis and consult with local landowners as well and then decide whether to review the restoration plans. We might decide to not put in place a number of peat dams based on concerns of local landowners. We are trying to rewet the bog itself and not the surrounding landscape at all. To help allay concerns, we have developed drainage management plans for every one of the raised bogs special area of conservation sites and also a number of the raised bog national heritage areas, NHAs, which are designated under national legislation.

As for what the drainage management plan involves, we engaged consultants who surveyed each bog, consulted the local landowners to identify any flooding issues or historical flooding issues, analysed the drainage network, set out any impediments to the drainage channels surrounding the bog and put in place a number of recommendations to maintain the drainage going forward to ensure that there would not be any impact on the conservation objectives of the site or surrounding lands.

These plans are being finalised. We will be going back to the landowners who provided input into these plans and having further consultation on those plans as well. When we are developing our restoration plans, we are taking into account the recommendations of each drainage management plan.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The line coming through to me from Ms Nally is poor and I am not sure if I picked up on everything that has been said. I thank our guests for attending.

Chairman: I find the sound poor from Ms Nally as well.

Deputy Matt Carthy: We received an update or a supplementary opening statement from Mr. Lucas as an update on his previous attendance. Am I correct in saying that the Chairman has indicated that none of our guests can speak to that?

Chairman: Yes.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I have to say it is crazy to suggest that the Department would come in to talk about rewetting bogs and peat and not expect us to ask questions in relation to horti-

cultural peat and not be in a position to answer questions. We are the committee dealing with agriculture. We are dealing with a sector that is potentially facing crisis. That is not good enough. I want to register my disappointment with that in the strongest possible terms.

Chairman: The Deputy has my full agreement.

Deputy Matt Carthy: It is not good enough to get it in writing and try to read through the information on this. We have a statement that reads, “The review ... concludes that there are significant positives and negatives arising from ending the use of peat moss in the horticultural industry.”, without setting out what those positives or negatives are as they perceive them. I presume they mean, by the negatives, the 17,000 jobs that could be at risk taking the current approach but there is nothing set out in terms of the immediate crisis that we face and everything reverts back to this working group that is operating behind closed doors.

In respect of the questions that have been answered, the Department has been asked on a couple of occasions about the carbon credits and who benefits from the sequestration. Obviously, that is the benefit we as a country get out of this if it is done correctly. Are our three guests all saying that they have no idea whether it is individual landowners, farmers or the wider sector that will benefit from this substantial work that we are asking communities to engage in?

Ms Adele Shelton: Maybe I can come in there to apologise to the Deputy. Mr. Brian Lucas retired last week. Unfortunately, he is not available to attend this meeting today.

As the Deputy will be aware, it is such a broad remit. Peatlands and the work of peatlands encompasses so many different aspects at present and that is why all three of us are here. We all work in the peatlands area. It is such an incredibly broad brief.

Unfortunately, none of the three of us works in the horticultural body of work and our apologies for that. I am sure, if an invite was sent at a later date, somebody would be available to speak to the Deputy in more detail on the horticultural questions that have been raised here today.

Unfortunately, with the Deputy’s question about the carbon credits, to repeat what Ms Nally has said as I understand her line was bad for the Deputy, it would be a matter for the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications to develop a national policy surrounding carbon credits. It is an evolving situation. I field many questions from turf-cutters on that issue but, unfortunately, it is not up to this Department to develop that policy. We will, of course, if requested, feed into it but it would not be something that this Department would be taking a lead on.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I understand that. Is it fair to say that if there was a policy somebody would have told Ms Shelton by now?

Ms Adele Shelton: I am sure, as the peatlands section, within the Department, of the National Parks and Wildlife Service we would certainly be asked to give our considerations and our thoughts to any such policy.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I wish Mr. Lucas well in retirement. I am not sure whether his retirement came as a shock to the Department. Either way, it would have been appropriate if somebody was able to discuss the important issue.

I may have picked the following up wrong from Ms Nally. I refer to adjoining landowners

where bogs are being rewetted. Was the inference from the consultation process Ms Nally outlined that if those adjoining landowners are not satisfied with the assurances they have got the rewetting process will not take place?

On that point, in terms of the opening statement and the goals that have been set on unforeseen consequences, the big question is, how confident can the Department be that as it blocks drains the results will be as expected. We are all aware of the situation around Lough Funshinagh. Thankfully, it appears that the Office of Public Works, OPW, has reversed course and will now facilitate the installation of an overflow pipe but we see the very significant consequences if these things are not got right. In the opening statement, I found the language was interesting. It states, “the impact of the restoration measures to surrounding lands is kept to a minimum.” That is very different from saying that the impact will be minimal. What does Ms Nally consider to be the acceptable impact on adjoining lands, and going back to that question, is that spelled out for adjoining landowners and what engagement takes place between them? If this process develops correctly it can be a huge amenity, not only in terms of carbon sequestration but also biodiversity and all of the rest. This should be a positive process, but it is important that communities are part of the process in order to make sure it is a success.

Ms Suzanne Nally: On the point on horticulture peat, we were specifically invited here today to talk about the subject of rewetting and not horticultural peat. The working group does not operate behind closed doors. There are a large number of stakeholders in the working group from a number of different organisations and bodies.

On the Deputy’s question on the impact on surrounding lands and consultation with landowners, in the majority of cases we do not suggest or draft a proposal to block a marginal drain. We will 100% consult with adjoining landowners. If they are agreeable to the rewetting or blocking of a marginal drain we will purchase the land, enter into a land management agreement or provide financial incentives in that regard. The NPWS has over 30 years experience in restoring raised bogs and has encountered no significant issues in that time that would raise concerns in terms of the impacts on adjoining landowners.

We are confident that the restoration plans are robust and well surveyed and investigated. A lot of preparatory work was put into them. There is ongoing monitoring of water levels. We put in place physiometers in advance to measure water levels before, during and after restoration works. We also have regular on-site monitoring. I hope that answers the Deputy’s question.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: I thank the witnesses. I appreciate they are here to talk about the issue of rewetting. I take on board that the NPWS has 30 years of experience in this area. As someone who grew up looking out at a bog I am conscious that they were thousands of years in formation and there is a lot more there than 30 years. There are a lot of imponderable facts when one is looking at rewetting.

I take on board what the witnesses said about consultation with farmers and that there is an opportunity for farmers to have their land bought out if they do not want to go down other roads. Farmers may not want a project to go ahead at all. Climate is changing. We have seen how we have struggled to cope with flooding. Over the past ten years we have seen multiple examples of that right across the country. I have some questions on the nub of the issue.

If the NPWS comes to my farm gate to take me through a consultation process and I am somewhat sceptical and ask a representative to show me how the process will evolve, can I see a time-lapse video of what will happen over the next ten, 40 or 60 years and how it will impact

my farm or the likely impact it will have? Is there any provision in such a time-lapse video for freak weather patterns? We have had a number of exceptionally wet winters. If they happened again, is that factored into how the process will evolve over ten, 20 or 40 years?

My final question relates to the ESB. How involved is it in this process, in particular where there has been large-scale peat production in midland areas which is now coming to an end? We all appreciate the merits of rewetting boglands. The ESB has responsibility for the control of water levels on the River Shannon. As much as rewetting the boglands will have an impact, the biggest impact on water levels on bogs is what happens on the River Shannon and how it is controlled.

In terms of the plans the NPWS has for the midlands, specifically Longford-Westmeath, how engaged is the ESB with that process? If we asked the ESB to open sluice gates it simply would not happen. Is the ESB in agreement with the plans of the NPWS? Is it on the end of the phone? If something is not working will it open the gates?

Ms Suzanne Nally: On the Deputy's question on time-lapse videos, I could bring a farmer to a million examples of raised bogs that have been recently restored or which were restored ten or 15 years ago to show him or her the effects of restoration on surrounding lands. In terms of a time-lapse, we would have historical hydrological data that we can use in our restoration programme which sets out the varying water levels and takes into account climate changes during that period.

After one to two years we would expect that the bog would become more of a wetland area. After five years we would see additional vegetation and sphagnum moss growth and some peat forming conditions. To see it return to its natural state as a bog will take 30 or more years.

In terms of consultation with the ESB, the focus of the NPWS is on protected raised bogs, special areas of conservation and natural heritage areas, NHAs. None of the sites we are rewetting was part of large-scale peat extraction. We have some areas of former industrial excavated peat for which we are putting in place enhanced restoration measures. The ESB would not be part of the consultation with the NPWS on the restoration programme at this point in time. It may be involved in the Bord na Móna programme.

Ms Adele Shelton: I will jump in on the Bord na Móna restoration plans. It has engaged widely with stakeholders regarding its rehabilitation plans, and that feeds into the final plans it has drawn up. I am not aware of any particular consultation that may have taken place between Bord na Móna and the ESB, but if the Deputy wishes I can consult with Bord na Móna and come back to him with an answer.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: I thank Ms Shelton. I would appreciate that.

Ms Adele Shelton: No problem.

Deputy Brian Leddin: I welcome the witnesses and thank them for coming before us to share their expertise. I congratulate them on the significant work they are doing. In the past year funding for this kind of work has been significantly ramped up and we will see some very positive outcomes from that. I have no doubt the witnesses are at the centre of that. I would like to take this opportunity to extend my best wishes to Mr. Brian Lucas who was a mainstay of that section of the Department for a long time and wish him well in his retirement.

I am glad Ms Nally clarified the situation regarding the appearance of the NPWS here today.

We are not here to discuss horticultural peat. We are here to discuss the rewetting of bogs and I am glad we have been brought back on track. I agree with Deputy Carthy who made a good point on the potential for the widescale restoration of biodiversity and that community involvement is critical to that. I have no doubt that the NPWS have significant plans in that regard.

In the opening statement the wild Atlantic nature LIFE project on the western seaboard was mentioned. Perhaps the witnesses could say a little bit more about that and what the experience so far has been. I ask the witnesses to say a little bit more about the relocation of turf cutters from protected to non-protected raised bogs. I also note that the EU in its biodiversity strategy has a target of restoring 30% of degraded carbon-rich ecosystems. Could the witnesses tell us more about the opportunities for Ireland in the further restoration of bogs, in particular in upland areas?

I also wish to ask about the flooding prevention potential of rewetting bogs, which is starting to attract significant attention. There are questions about the suitability of the Arterial Drainage Act. I am interested to hear the witnesses' thoughts on that and where we need to go with respect to that Act. It comes under the OPW, which is part of another Department, but this issue is cross-cutting. The witnesses might have some insights on that.

Ms Suzanne Nally: The Deputy made an interesting point on community-led restoration. The national raised bogs special areas of conservation management plan sets out that eventually that is the way we want to go with raised bog restoration. We have seen some excellent results such as in Abbeyleix in County Laois with community-based restoration. We would support community groups in undertaking restoration measures under the peatlands community engagement scheme this year, to which the Minister awarded grants of more than €230,000 to 25 projects. One of those projects involved a restoration measures, which was a community-led restoration initiative. We definitively would like to see more of that.

The wild Atlantic nature LIFE project is funded by the EU with a budget of more than €20 million and will run for a period of nine years. The National Parks and Wildlife Service of the Department is a co-ordinating beneficiary. It involves blanket bog sites of more than 24 special areas of conservation in northern and western regions in Donegal, Sligo, Galway and Mayo. The aim of the project is to reactivate more than 5,000 ha of blanket bog and to raise awareness nationally about blanket bog conservation and the Natura 2000 network. It aims to work with farmers and local communities across a wide range of services provided from the blanket bogs. The project aims to adopt a results based approach building on successes of other locally adapted programmes such as pearl mussel European innovation partnership, EIP, project, rewarding landowners for the quality of the habitat produced. Landowners can undertake voluntary measures such as drain blocking with the aim of improving habitat quality. A pilot results based project will be launched in June this year and extended to other special areas of conservation outside the Owenduff-Nepin complex next year.

Ms Adele Shelton: Under the cessation of the turf cutting scheme, turf cutters can opt for either relocation to a non-designated bog or a financial package of €22,500. The vast majority of turf cutters who qualify for this scheme opt for the financial package but approximately 10% have opted for relocation, where feasible. To date, the Department has relocated 106 turf cutters from 12 designated raised bogs sites to non-designated relocation sites. Work on a number of other potential relocation sites is moving through the process. Some of those may require planning permission. To date, the Department has received planning permission for two relocation sites in County Galway and these sites have been fully developed and are now operational. Similarly, the Department has made two section 5 declarations to the planning authorities in

counties Roscommon and Westmeath. In both instances it was deemed by the planning authorities that these sites were exempted development and they, too, are fully operational.

In some cases we have not been able to find a suitable relocation site near where the turf cutters were previously cutting turf, even though we have undertaken exhaustive investigative works across all of the midlands. To date, where suitable relocation sites have not been identified, the Department has offered those turf cutters the opportunity to take a lump sum payment of the balance of their €22,500 with a view to them potentially purchasing an individual plot. In some instances it can be difficult to acquire the land or get planning permission. That is what prevents some of these potential relocation sites from being progressed from the Department's point of view.

Deputy Brian Leddin: I also asked a question on the Arterial Drainage Act. I am conscious it might not be an area of expertise for these witnesses. Perhaps they may have something to say on it but, if not, would they respond, in writing, at a later date?

Ms Suzanne Nally: We work with the OPW on our restoration plan where it encompasses the OPW's drainage network within its remit in terms of ongoing maintenance to ensure the conservation objective of the sites is still met. Other than that, what further remit or role the OPW may have is open for further consideration. We can provide a written reply if required.

Deputy Brian Leddin: I thank Ms Nally for that.

Deputy Carol Nolan: The first issue I wish to raise is turbary rights, which is a major one in my constituency of Laois-Offaly. Families depend on turf for fuel. Approximately 40% of the houses in County Offaly alone depend on turf as their own source of solid fuel and heating. One of the speakers made the point that it is important that turf cutters are respected. I would go further. Turf cutters have been subjected to a creeping criminalisation, It has been unfair, unwarranted and very upsetting for many families with which I have dealt. I have dealt with turf cutters. I want to state that clearly in bringing their concerns to the table.

It is not enough to respect them. Turf cutters and the tradition of turf cutting must be protected. It is an activity which is part of our heritage. Heritage is part of the Department's remit. A proposal I want considered is for turf cutting to be made a heritage activity and protected under EU or international law. There are examples of that in the EU, to which we have already alluded. We are very quick to allude to the EU when it comes to climate change. Let us consider the EU's practices in protecting activities which are part of heritage. That needs to be done. I have put forward that proposal because heritage is part of the Department's remit. I emphasise it is not enough to respect turf cutters, we must protect them, as they have been subjected to much unfair, creeping criminalisation. Many households in my constituency depend on turf. Generations of families look forward to cutting turf, as they have always done. Let us not criminalise people and let us ensure they get more than just respect or tokenism. We need to ensure that turf cutting is protected.

I support the points made by Deputies Daly and Harkin on the carbon sequestration of bogs. I hope our bogs will not be treated like our fisheries, which were sold out. My colleague, Deputy Michael Collins, feels strongly about this issue. We need to ensure our bogs are not sold out and that Irish agriculture is not dealt a raw deal. Carbon sequestration credits should be given to Irish agriculture. That must be done. I make that point strongly in support of the speakers who raised the issue.

There has been some consultation on the rewetting of bogs. I have attended meetings with representatives of the Irish Creamery Milk Suppliers Association and the Irish Farmers Association. More needs to be done. There has been some degree of consultation on the rewetting of bogs but not enough. Bord na Móna has assured landowners in this respect but its assurances are not written agreements. I have said to Bord na Móna previously that it needs to provide written agreements that the rewetting of bogs will not affect landowners. I cannot understand why Bord na Móna should be paid money for bog rehabilitation before it provides such written assurances. That does not make sense. The rehabilitation of bogs should be tied into written agreements and the money allocated for it should be subject to the provision of written agreements. This is how it should fare. I want to get the witnesses' views on the issues I have raised. I also have a direct question: do the witnesses feel that turf cutting should be made a heritage activity? The Department covers heritage issues and perhaps the witnesses will give their response on that.

Ms Suzanne Nally: Turf cutting is part of our cultural identity. This is recognised in the national peatlands strategy and in the programme for Government. There are no plans to cease cutting turf for domestic use where it does not interfere with the legal obligations or conservation objectives of the State. There is a compensation scheme available for those who were cutting within raised bogs, in special areas of conservation and in natural heritage areas. My colleagues, Ms Carroll or Ms Shelton, may be able to speak further on that.

Turf cutting is a strong part of our industrial heritage. On the question of it being made a heritage practice under EU law as a protected activity is an interesting concept and needs further consideration.

Ms Adele Shelton: On the issue of Bord na Móna and the consultation process, as I said earlier and as the Deputy is aware, Bord na Móna has consulted widely on its plans. The rehabilitation plans come into the Department and we as the regulator then assess the plans on what we perceive to be their efficiency and cost benefits, to see whether they will meet the aims we are setting out to achieve in restoration and rehabilitation. Similarly, with regard to the plans drawn up by the Department for the designated raised bogs, Bord na Móna will not block any boundary drains. I do not want to presume to talk for Bord na Móna at this meeting, so unfortunately I am not able to say any more about that. If Bord na Móna wanted to take the consultation process further, that will be a decision for it to make with the stakeholders.

Ms Audrey Carroll: I could come in here, if the committee would like to hear about the cessation of turf cutting compensation scheme that was introduced in 2011.

Chairman: Yes Ms Carroll.

Ms Audrey Carroll: The cessation of turf cutting compensation scheme was established in 2011 for domestic turf cutters, arising from the cessation of turf cutting in special areas of conservation, and was extended to include natural heritage areas. The scheme is designed to compensate turf cutters for the loss of household fuel. The Department is currently paying 2,600 applicants annually under the scheme and has committed significant funds to this effort. The scheme overall pays a €15,000 annual payment, index linked, to these turf cutters, and has spent some €47 million to date. Over the lifetime of the scheme it is expected to cost €80 million. Annually, this year the Department has spent more than €1.8 million paying out the turf cutters who are in this year's payment round.

The Department has made significant efforts to resolve the turf cutting issue on designated

raised bogs. This includes the establishment of the Peatlands Council, and intensive, ongoing engagement with turf cutters on these issues, including with farming communities and non-governmental organisations, in support of the scheme.

Chairman: I thank Ms Carroll. I thank the witnesses.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Could I make a quick point of clarification? It was mentioned that the issue of horticultural peat was outside of the scope of today's meeting. The title of the meeting clearly includes the management of peatlands. The documentation circulated to members for this meeting included an update to the opening statements supplied by Mr. Brian Lucas that deals solely with the issue of horticultural peat. It was entirely in order for members to ask questions relating to that and to expect an answer if it was forthcoming. I just wanted to have this on the record.

Chairman: We will further deal with that in summing up. I thank the witnesses. We wish Mr. Lucas well in his retirement. When Mr. Lucas was in before the committee he was paid compliments by a number of committee members, which is rare enough for a civil servant. Mr. Lucas has a long and proud record. We wish him well in his retirement.

The vast majority of people would agree that rewetting of bogs can have great environmental benefits. For the adjoining farmers, however, the Department has said that it wants to proceed with agreement. But the downside, disadvantages or problems for a farmer might not appear for 12 months, two years or three years. The effects on a water table, for example, most definitely would not be seen overnight. Can a protocol be put in place whereby if a farmer has issues appearing in any period of time after the rewetting of the bogs, those issues would be addressed? That would go a long way to addressing the fears farmers have about the rewetting. One could agree to it now, and everything would be grand at the moment, but somewhere down the road the rewetting could have a seriously negative impact on the productivity of neighbouring land. It would be greatly appreciated if a protocol could be put in place with a mechanism to deal with any ongoing issues, with a guarantee to the landowners that they would be dealt with to his or her satisfaction.

On the issue of horticultural peat, the committee had a meeting some months ago when Mr. Lucas gave a presentation. We were told that the working group would report in early to mid-April on the harvesting of horticultural peat. We are now in the last week of May and we still have not had the report. I would like it to go back to the Department that the committee is seeking an immediate update on that. I am getting calls constantly from people who have private bogs and who want to cut horticultural peat. The year is slipping by very quickly. As Senator Paul Daly has said, it is environmental and economic madness to be doing what is happening at the moment. Earlier in the year, this committee got a commitment that we would have an interim report on that aspect. My firm recollection is that we were told it would be with us by early to mid-April. I would like a written update to our members as quickly as possible. This is a huge issue, on which we were given commitments that have not been adhered to. I will speak to the committee secretariat when this meeting is finished and we will put a letter to the Minister to that effect. I want the witnesses to relay back to the Department that we need a written submission to us as soon as possible. I will also ask the Minister. We need that report. It is at least six weeks late at this stage.

I thank the witnesses for their answers today. They will understand the frustration of the committee with regard to horticultural peat. It is a huge issue out there in our constituencies. The witnesses were not in a position to fully brief us on it and while I do not hold the witnesses

responsible it was frustrating for the committee.

We will suspend for a minute or two while we move to our next session.

Sitting suspended at 4.26 p.m. and resumed at 4.27 p.m.

Teagasc Education Courses and the Signpost Programme: Discussion

Chairman: I welcome the representatives from Teagasc, Dr. Stan Lalor, director of knowledge transfer, and Mr. Tony Pettit, head of education, both of whom join us remotely. You are both very welcome to the meeting. We received your opening statements and they have been circulated to the members. We are limited in time due to Covid-19 restrictions so the committee has agreed that the opening statements will be taken as read in order that we can use the full session for questions and answers, as happened in the first part of the meeting. All opening statements are published on the Oireachtas website and publicly available.

Before we begin, I must read an important notice on parliamentary privilege. Witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the evidence they give to the committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. Witnesses are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given. They are asked to respect parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Participants joining the committee meeting from a location outside of parliamentary precincts are asked to note that the constitutional protections afforded to those participating within the parliamentary precincts do not extend to them. No clear guidance can be given on whether, or the extent to which, participation is covered by absolute privilege of a statutory nature.

Before inviting questions from the members, the director of Teagasc, Professor Gerry Boyle, appeared before the committee previously and he requested that Teagasc get a chance to put forward its policy on agricultural education, which is critical to the industry.

I call Senator Boyhan.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I welcome the witnesses. I know that Mr. Pettit and his team head the educational sector in Teagasc. I studied horticulture under ACOT, the predecessor of Teagasc. That was a good while ago. I acknowledge the importance of Teagasc and its work on training. I will make a few comments and ask a few questions. On many occasions, we have discussed in this committee the question of what a farmer is. I am more interested in what is a trained farmer. Teagasc covers that in its prospectus. It talks about the national policy, which is the Government's priority, of training farmers for various farm incentives. One thing that occurred to me during the Covid-19 pandemic when many young people from transition year were out of school is that we never really got back to full education. There is an agricultural science module in the leaving certificate, yet we know that young people are hungry to learn, particularly if they live on farms. I believe there is a disconnect between the Department of Education and Teagasc, and I would like Mr. Pettit to comment on it. Many young people have said they would love to see a module of the GreenStart as part of transition year. They are young, keen and ambitious. They are working and living on the land, and they are potentially

the successors to many farms and land. That is very important, because that is the way to go. We have students going on to do agriculture in the leaving certificate, but they know very little in terms of applied agriculture after that. There is a disconnect there.

I have looked at Teagasc's prospectus. As agriculture, horticulture and forestry have got more complex, the entry requirements for many Teagasc courses have gone up. It is very important we do not dissociate the practicalities of agriculture and require people to have a number of points from the leaving certificate examination to access courses. There is an important entry there, but there is a more important entry at another level. There are many young people who left school at 15 years of age and who are running massive farms in this country. They learned this trade from being a young lad on the farm. That is important.

Mr. Pettit might touch on how Teagasc is preparing its students and graduates for the challenges and expectations of the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, because there will be educational standards feeding into that, which is important.

I will wrap up with a few points. The synergy I am talking about is the practicalities of a 50:50 in terms of practical applied agriculture, horticulture or forestry versus the academic, because that is important. How is Teagasc interacting with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in terms of farming apprenticeship, learning the trade with one's hands from the bottom up? What interested me more, and I could not get much information on this when I looked into Teagasc's work and reports, is how Teagasc is preparing people for agribusiness planning, financial management, governance and compliance. That is an important issue. How is it dealing with artisan foods? We know one will not make a full living from the farm so there is added diversification and all that goes with that. How about the issues of smart farming, precision farming, central technology, automation and robotics? That is an entirely new area of learning for young farmers.

In terms of looking back on Teagasc's students and graduates, what analysis does it do of the students who come through Teagasc courses, a look-back graduate survey? What does that show? Are people staying in agriculture? Are they moving up the chain in terms of management in agriculture, forestry and horticulture? Where are they after going through some of Teagasc's courses?

Teagasc is a very positive organisation, but cautious. The one question I have today is about how we can prepare our new graduates and new students in respect of compliance, the environmental objectives and so forth, the issues with the new CAP and how we are facing them, and how we are dealing with technology in agriculture. The latter is very important. It is cutting edge stuff. In addition, we must not forget that there are young people who may never achieve a State examination, but who have a hunger and yearning for learning and practical knowledge. It is very important that we do not close the door in some way and tell them they do not qualify for entry into courses because they do not have X number of points. There are different levels.

Finally, and I will shut up after this point, I believe in apprenticeships and in learning the trade from the bottom up. I want to hear about how Teagasc is planning to conduct hands-on apprenticeship in farming.

I thank the witnesses again. As a student of horticulture, having known it, having mentored people in this area and still doing it, I believe it is very important that we draw on the uniqueness of individuals and enhance them to be our next generation of farmers.

Chairman: Those were quite extensive questions for the witnesses.

Mr. Tony Pettit: I will begin and then hand over to my colleague, Dr. Stan Lalor. In terms of school links, that is very important. There is always room for improvement with regard to working with the schools. All our colleges have quite an involvement with schools through inviting people to the colleges each year. With Agri Aware we take in approximately 3,000 students annually in March for the walk and talk exercise. We also have open days on careers for transition year, fifth year and sixth year students. There is quite an amount of work on that. On the Teagasc public website we have resources that are available for second level schools. Some of my colleagues in the advisory regions are also looking at pilot projects to work with and visit schools to explain about Teagasc and to explain farming and food and where farming fits in the food chain. There is ongoing work on that, but it is a work in progress. I fully accept that we need to work more because these people are important for the future.

With regard to entry requirements, we have both higher education courses and further education courses. There is no educational requirement, as such, for our full-time further education courses in which one attends one of our agricultural colleges. It is an age-based requirement. One has to be 17 years of age on the January after one enters. It is similar for our part-time courses. It is adult education so it is more age based. We operate an accelerated programme and we have an entry requirement for that. However, that is an accelerated programme where people who already have another award can do the programme faster. In our higher education, there are entry Central Applications Office, CAO, points for Teagasc-linked higher education courses, but they are set by the higher education institutions.

As regards CAP, we are certainly looking at that. In 2018, Teagasc concluded the Teagasc education vision exercise. At the forefront of that exercise were the requirements for the young farmers of the future. That consultation involved many stakeholders, including a couple of hundred farmers and a range of farming organisations and agencies. Sustainability was identified as the major area, and compliance and governance were also identified as being particularly important. In addition, smart farming, digital and the business area were also highlighted. Within this as well, however, technical areas would also remain important.

As the courses and curriculums are reviewed, we must work with the awarding body, which is Quality and Qualifications Ireland, QQI. These are not Teagasc awards anymore. Each time the award comes up for review, however, we examine the changing requirements. Sustainability and all these areas will have an increasingly strong focus within the awards. Modules exist in areas such as business, but also in technology and digital technology. We also have a farm planning programme at level 6 that takes students through the whole farm planning exercise for their business, not only if they want to stay in farming but also in case they might want to consider other options. The students are therefore appraising their future in respect of land resources and the options that may be available outside farming.

The education vision exercise also recommended that we focus more on the entrepreneurial aspect of how farmers use their resources for the future. We are bearing that aspect in mind. The other point which came through in the report was that we need to focus on improving the problem-solving skills of farmers in the next generation, because it is very much an industry centred on problem solving. What is required in that regard is not just imparting theory but also helping people to gain practical skills.

Turning to apprenticeships, this again is an area that came through in the education vision report and it is one we are keen to progress. In the last call for apprenticeship proposals,

Teagasc submitted five land sector apprenticeship proposals on behalf of the industry. Two were in farming, one at level 6 to qualify as a farm technician and one at level 7 to gain an ordinary degree in farm management. We also submitted two proposals in the area of horticulture, one in applied horticulture and one in sports turf, as well as one in the area of equine studies. Those proposals are in the development stage and it is a long process to approval. We are working on the quality assurance frameworks for those five apprenticeships which we hope to submit to QQI this summer. Hopefully, the first of those apprenticeships will go to QQI for validation this autumn. Other bodies have audited these proposals as well, including SOLAS, the Higher Education Authority, HEA, and employers. The work is in progress and we hope those five apprenticeship schemes will all be launched and up and running by the end of 2022.

Turning to the graduate survey look back, we already carried out a look-back survey of graduates who qualified five years ago. The key findings from that survey are that the majority of people, based on their replies to the survey, are still involved in farming and have quickly got involved, in a matter of years, in the management aspect of their farms. Looking back over the survey replies, some 90% of the people who responded are involved at a management level in a farm, either through a partnership or as the manager within five years of qualifying from the course. We also find that more than 70% of respondents indicate they have increased their level of farming activity. We also look at the numbers who join farming discussion groups, such as profit monitor uptake and all those areas, and a significant number are implementing the practices we recommend.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I thank Mr. Pettit.

Senator Paul Daly: I thank the representatives of Teagasc and welcome them. I have several questions. To follow on somewhat from the questions posed by Senator Boyhan regarding Teagasc's input into the curriculum for agricultural science as a subject at second level, I would like to see Teagasc having more of an input in that regard. I ask Mr. Pettit to comment on Teagasc's current role in that regard. Regarding the green certificate - and I emphasise that I am asking a question here and not proffering an opinion - there were issues earlier in the year when many of the courses, especially those offered in conjunction with the ETBs, were well oversubscribed. There were massive waiting lists for places and people could just not get on those courses.

Much of the commentary at the time focused on there being no way during the selection process to pick genuine student farmers. I refer to students seeking to gain entry to these courses as a means of pursuing a career in agriculture or to take over the home farm. I contrast those applicants with those who were just signing up possibly - and I reiterate that I am asking a question here and not proffering an opinion - to acquire a green certificate to facilitate property transfers. Tax relief is available for the holders of green certificates. Could Teagasc change its selection process to overcome that issue, if it was an issue?

In passing, I also mention the role of Teagasc in respect of farm safety when it comes to education in the agricultural sector. While Teagasc already plays a role in this area and safety modules form part of the courses run in its agricultural colleges, and also in the courses run in conjunction with ETBs, and relevant information is also disseminated as part of its knowledge transfer schemes and shared with its clients, what about the people outside those loops? Does Teagasc have plans to address the way it can educate and-or influence those people in respect of a subject as important as farm safety? Teagasc does have a serious responsibility in respect of this role. I refer not only to education in farm safety, but the implementation of farm safety. I take serious issue with people who are not clients of Teagasc or who do not attend its courses

not being addressed by the organisation concerning farm safety. I feel this aspect must be addressed.

I have communicated with Mr. Pettit regarding this next topic, which is an important one and many genuine people are impacted by it. The age profiles for full-time college education, as well as the part-time courses, were mentioned already by Mr. Pettit. Applicants must be over the age of 23 to get a place on the part-time course. There have been situations where the health of the primary farmer, or whatever, has meant that the next generation to take over the farm, whether that is a young girl or a boy, must leave school once he or she reaches the age of 17. Young people in this situation are staying at home to farm. They are the next generation farmers and they require education in this area, but at the same time they are also providing essential labour on the farm.

Such a situation may arise because of health constraints in the case of parents or the current farmer. Those young people will not be able to leave the farm and go away to college full time. People in that kind of situation are ideal candidates for the part-time course, and can do such a course, but they must wait until they are 23 years old. I see the reasoning behind the age limits for entry to these courses, and if everybody could undertake these courses part time that would not be very good for the agricultural college system in future, but I respectfully request that Teagasc take a more considerate approach to exceptional and special cases, such as those I have described.

Chairman: I thank the Senator.

Mr. Tony Pettit: I thank Senator Daly for his questions. Regarding agricultural science resources, when the new curriculum was being established in this area we did have some consultation and input into that process with the Department of Education and Science, and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA, at the time. We maintain links to try to help teachers of agricultural science at second level. They approach Teagasc and we provide resources on our website for schools as well. We are always willing to help. Our Teagasc research centres and colleges are always there to support teachers with particular projects or if they need information from us. We are certainly keen to help agricultural science teachers in any way we can. If they want any kind of specific professional development opportunities with Teagasc, for example, we will facilitate such endeavours. We indicated that to those teachers previously.

Turning to the selection process for the green certificate, we aim to accommodate all those applying for places on the course. Demand has been strong for our adult education programmes, as we call them, in recent years. Our courses are separate from those of the ETBs. We are not linked. Our courses are approved separately by QQI, as are those of the ETBs in their own right. We try to take on and accommodate people as best we can on the courses we run. Changing those selection criteria for our courses would be a matter for consideration by the Teagasc authority. There is a challenge involved in trying to verify when people have a real need, as opposed to when they cannot be considered as much of a priority. However, I will refer those comments back for consideration within Teagasc. Similarly, in respect of the age requirement to be over 23 years old on entry, we certainly always look at individual cases and we have made exceptions for people whose circumstances, for bona fide reasons, mean they cannot enter our education courses in the normal fashion. We try to make arrangements for them and not confine them to the courses for those over 23. The course is validated and approved by QQI as one for people over 23 and by and large the expectation is that not all the people on it will be over 23. We look at it on a case by case basis when these situations arise and have accommodated people

who are under 23.

Safety is important in the Teagasc courses and there are modules on farm and food safety. It is also built into all the skills activities within the courses so it is integrated in that regard. We work with various organisations such as FBD and farm organisations on the Champions for Safety initiative that we run across the colleges. Outside the colleges, the Teagasc advisory service also runs half-day or one-day courses on farm safety. I take the point that other people may need to be accommodated and I will take that into consideration with our colleagues. Dr. Lalor might like to comment on that as well.

Dr. Stan Lalor: As regards the Senator's question on farm safety, it is interrelated to how we educate our students in their awareness of farm safety. There is a wider issue here in our reach with farmers on that topic. I will highlight a few things. In recent years we have changed and increased our resources in this area, such as the number of people engaged full-time in health and safety and our advisory structure. We have separated internal health and safety issues from Teagasc and the people responsible for that from our outreach on health and safety to the farming community. That is an area in which we are very active, in both research and advisory activities. Regarding how we reach the wider clients, we obviously have reach with our clients but it is very important to reach the wider farming population as well. Our ConnectEd programme, which is mentioned in our briefing note, is trying to reach a wider area. On the one hand there are rural professionals working with this cohort of farmers with whom Teagasc might not have the same reach but the farmers themselves can also interact with that platform by attending webinars and various information outlets. Within the overall knowledge transfer approach in Teagasc there is the wider area of interconnectivity in the agricultural knowledge innovation system, AKIS. That is featuring very prominently in some of the discussions around European policy, particularly on CAP. Within our knowledge transfer activities we are very conscious of not just dealing with the farmers we have as clients in our system but also reaching those wider farmers and the professionals who engage with them, whether private consultants or people working in agri-input industries professional services and so on. That is an area in which we are active and want to continue developing more and more. Health and safety is particularly relevant and important.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I again thank our guests for coming along to this meeting. The committee is united. We are not united on many things but we are certainly united in the view that education in the agrifood sector is crucially important if we are to sustain and develop the sector in Ireland and meet the many challenges coming down the line. I have a brief question on the Covid response. Teagasc students were given, by and large, the same supports as other higher education students during the course of the pandemic, such as the laptop scheme and so on. From responses I have received to parliamentary questions and FOI requests, it appears these supports were provided from within Teagasc's existing budget and that no additional supports were given by the Departments of Agriculture, Food and the Marine or Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to those schemes. I ask our guests to confirm whether that is the case.

To touch again on green certs, does Teagasc feel it has the capacity to deal with all of those applications? Is there currently a waiting list or backlog? What numbers of new applicants does it expect next year and can it deal with those numbers? Is there a need to work with the ETB sector? What role does Teagasc see for the ETB further education centres in delivering green certs into the future? I understand that ETBs can access funds through the national training fund to provide green cert course. Does Teagasc have the same access to those resources?

I ask the witnesses to provide clarification on that.

Some of the parliamentary questions I submitted to the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on green certs were transferred to the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, who then told me he did not have any oversight of green certs within ETBs. It appears that without the likes of Teagasc being given a very clear role in directing the green cert output, we could have a serious loss of direction. Joined-up thinking is crucially important and goes back to the very first question asked. All our speakers have indicated that. Teagasc is considered a leading organisation in agricultural research. However, it seems to be more *ad hoc* when it comes to agricultural education. Teagasc colleges have links to many other local third level institutions and courses but it appears this is a result of arrangements made locally. Is there scope for a more co-ordinated approach? Last year we heard reports that agriculture science teachers at second level were at odds with the Department of Education on the new leaving certificate course. Did Teagasc have any input into those second level courses? Would it be fair to say that more can be done to improve joined-up thinking across Teagasc, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Department of Education?

Mr. Tony Pettit: The funding for the Covid supports came from within the Teagasc budget. Last year, there were some savings as the year went on because activities were not normal. All the funding measures we had for Covid supports were sanctioned and approved by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine but they came from within the actual Teagasc budget and were approved by the Department.

Regarding demand, the strong area of demand has been for those adult green cert programmes, particularly in the north-west part of the country. We have had good support from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine over the last number of years. Since 2014 a total of about 117 temporary education officer posts were sanctioned, with 20 approved earlier this year. They have helped boost our intake substantially in recent years. It would be very difficult for us to operate, plan and maintain a high level of intake without that level of ongoing support. This year we hope to enrol 1,500 or maybe somewhat more in those part-time distance education courses. We will also be enrolling people in our full-time courses and across our higher education courses. In terms of gross enrolments, we are probably enrolling 2,500 students per year across various programmes. It is challenging in parts of the country and we need the temporary education officer support to provide that.

Demand in certain areas may be somewhat ahead of capacity. That is why we use the temporary education officer model to allocate resources on a flexible basis. Of the 20 education officers we are appointing this year, 15 will go to the north west, six to Donegal, four to Ballyhaise College, two in the north east and two in Mayo. As there was particular demand, we are trying to shift and match the resources all across that area. We also maintain our permanent education officer numbers to reflect demand in those regions, meaning that it would be somewhat higher than in other areas.

The ETBs are approved separately to run programmes by QQI. Teagasc has no role in that. It is a separate activity. There are areas between Teagasc and the ETBs such as learner supports and areas within courses. Teagasc has the strongest expertise in actual agricultural production and the financial aspects of it. There are personal development modules which we and ETBs could work together to deliver. There have been some arrangements locally in that regard.

On the second level agricultural science course, we do not have a direct input into it. We

were involved in some of the earlier consultations. Our main remit is to help the students and teachers. For example, in projects, we can give them a steer, resources and information as how they might develop projects for fifth year and sixth year students.

We sit outside the National Training Fund. As apprenticeships are funded through the National Training Fund, Teagasc would be eligible to access that money. In terms of other schemes, such as skills to advance, we sit outside of that. If the ETBs were able to draw down funding for research from the National Training Fund and Teagasc was outside of it, there would probably be some disparity and that we would have a level playing field in that regard. Overall, with ETBs and some private providers, there is probably a need for some joined-up thinking in terms of industry and agricultural education training.

Chairman: I call Deputy Ring.

Deputy Michael Ring: Can the Chairman hear me?

Chairman: Yes.

Deputy Michael Ring: Or Cathaoirleach, as the new title is now.

I welcome our guests. Agriculture is gone very high-tech. There are a number of sectors in the agriculture game. There are people who are high-tech and full-time farmers. There are those, like we have in the west, who are in farming on a part-time basis.

One has people putting their names for courses hoping that they will be called for them. In another case, the green certificate might be essential for a farmer to draw down grants. There was a big furore in my area this year because there was such a demand for green certificate courses. I heard Mr. Pettit say Teagasc will be allocating extra resources to the west and north west, which is important. When the Department is making the rules on how people can draw down payments, does Teagasc have any input? Can it say it is not in a position to give the farmers the courses they need?

I have great respect for Teagasc, which has been ahead of the game over the years. Farming and the whole science of agriculture are changing. At the same time, there is a module of farmers out there who will never change. What they need is support, help and back-up from Teagasc and other groups. These are farmers who are not in it on a full-time basis but just about struggling to make a living out of it. They are finding the rules and regulations, along with the educational needs, difficult. Has Teagasc any proposals or support for these kinds of people?

Mr. Tony Pettit: We are allocating the bulk of the green certificates to the education officers that we got towards the north west. It is an area of demand across the north west and the north east.

The education needs of farmers are changing and increasing. There are different categories of farmers and different levels of programmes and courses. On the green certificate, people complete a level 5 certificate in agriculture and a level 6 specific purpose in farming. People who may be going back into a more full-time and commercial level of farming are not required to go beyond that. We would recommend, however, that they would take the level 6 advanced certificate and certainly look at the apprenticeship groups when they come on stream. We accept that not every farmer is going beyond the minimal requirement for schemes. It is advisable that some would take up further courses in terms of the nature of their farming, however.

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and Revenue own the schemes and incentives directed at young farmers. As such, we do not directly influence those, other than that we would be feeding back to the Department in terms of likely demand scenarios. We would be indicating where we see pressure points arising in terms of demand, the need for us to put on more courses and hire more staff. The Department has accommodated Teagasc in that regard. There have been 117 temporary education officers for whom we have secured sanction over that period.

Dr. Stan Lalor: I have responsibility for the wider knowledge transfer area which includes education and the advisory service. We put those together within the organisation because we very much see the interaction with the farmers as a continuum of those two services. More and more, they are overlapping. One does not have a farmer coming through a course who suddenly becomes educated and then advice is all they need. Ongoing training and facilitation are needed as well.

A point was made that some farmers are struggling with rules and regulations, as well as ensuring they are meeting all the requirements and paperwork of various schemes. An ongoing challenge for our advisory service is to be sufficiently resourced in terms of being able to help the farmers who require support from us. We must also balance this with full-time high-tech farmers who have development needs in terms of their businesses and farm development opportunities. It is quite a range for our advisers to span but that is what we continue to try to do as much as possible.

For the high-tech end, we are developing the area of continuous professional development for farmers. Mr. Pettit mentioned the education vision programme. One of its recommendations was that education does not stop when one walks out of the college or when one graduates with a green certificate. It is an ongoing process, particularly with the challenges in the sector between sustainability and climate. Being able to reach and help farmers in terms of the evolving requirements of all that is something on which we are keen. We are launching a programme in Teagasc called the Evolve programme geared towards helping and reaching farmers by recognising the farmers who participate and engage in those types of development, training exercises and activities in that they can record and get credit for that. The programme is in development.

Senator Tim Lombard: I welcome the witnesses from Teagasc and thank them for the outline of their statement. I want to talk to them about the farm discussion group model and how it is working out. Obviously, last year, there were issues regarding Covid-19 and farm discussion groups. It is great to see they reverted to Zoom and other mediums. Has Teagasc started back on the practical footing of having those discussion groups at farm level? Has it put a working programme in place to tie all them together?

The model is successful and proactive. There are 12 meetings monthly, with a different farmer every month, an exchange of knowledge and knowledge transfer on a practical level. It is probably even getting at a cohort of farmers from a different generation. It has worked exceptionally well. Where does Teagasc see that going over the next two or three months, in particular? When will it start in the fields? What is the future of that programme? How will it benefit the farming and agricultural community going forward?

Dr. Stan Lalor: I will answer that one. The farm discussion group model has been an evolving innovation within the delivery of knowledge transfer over the past 30 or 40 years but, certainly, huge advances have been made in the past ten years. Teagasc has embraced it thor-

oughly, in that our approach to advisory services is towards group delivery models. That has advantages from the point of view of delivery. One can reach more farmers with information quicker and faster, when one can group them together. The studies done on discussion group participation are positive, from the point of view of what the farmers get out of it, compared to less contact on a one-to-one basis.

There is a balance to be struck between one-to-one advisory contact and discussion groups. That personal level of contact is still important. That is something we need to continue to be able to deliver successfully. From a farmer's perspective, that group interaction is significant from the point of view of the peer-to-peer learning in which farmers can share in each other's experiences and even the social aspects, given the way society has gone, especially pre-Covid-19. We are probably less isolated when more people are working at home due to Covid-19. Previous to that, the social aspect was recognised as being important as well.

As expected, when Covid-19 arrived, everything went online. Suddenly, these discussion groups had to cope with how to use various software and technologies, such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams and so on, to engage. We successfully kept groups going in that context. Towards the middle of last year as the restrictions eased, we were back doing many face-to-face meetings, which returned online for the early part of this year. However, we are starting to organise face-to-face discussion group meetings again.

Well-established groups in which the farmers know one another well are probably less vulnerable, but we are conscious of groups at the earlier stage of their development, in terms of the social cohesion within the group and familiarity between the farmers. Those groups are more strained when they are trying to depend completely on online delivery. However, we now have farmers who are better trained and more open-minded to the online engagement. Some discussion topics lend themselves adequately and quite well to online delivery models.

There have been some innovations. I have noticed some advisers, in trying to keep to the approach to discussion groups fresh through the virtual delivery, are changing aspects such as the timing of the group meetings to make them shorter, snappier and more frequent. There have been involving innovations, in agreement with and under the direction of, the groups involved in terms of trying to keep them fresh and alive.

In the future, there is probably scope for a blended approach in which there is a mix and match of both. The face-to-face and social aspects of it are important as well. It is relevant that knowledge transfer, KT, groups were supported in the previous round of the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP. There are opportunities for that to be supported again. The scope of the group is not just about group meetings. It is also about other aspects of group activities, whether it is shared experiences of technology usage or, particularly, the social aspects of groups such as trips away to broaden the everyday experience of the farmer. We see those aspects coming through loud and clear in the effective way the groups continue to be relevant in terms of a knowledge transfer. They will continue in our programme.

Chairman: As no members are indicating that they have questions, I thank our two witnesses from Teagasc, Dr. Stan Lalor and Mr. Tony Pettit, for their contributions to the meeting today and the way they answered the questions. The meeting now stands adjourned. The next meeting of the joint committee will be held in public session at 12.30 p.m. on Thursday, 27 May, when we are meeting Department officials with regard to forestry issues.

The joint committee adjourned at 5.16 p.m. until 12.30 p.m. on Thursday, 27 May 2021.