

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Work of the Department and its arm's length bodies, HC 415

Tuesday 3 March 2026

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Members present: Alistair Carmichael (Chair); Juliet Campbell; Charlie Dewhurst; Terry Jermy; Josh Newbury; Henry Tufnell.

Questions 505 to 585

Witnesses

I: Paul Kissack, Permanent Secretary, DEFRA; David Hill, Director General, Strategy and Water, DEFRA; Emma Bourne, Director General, EU Reset and Trade, DEFRA; Iain King, Chief Financial Officer, DEFRA.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Paul Kissack, David Hill, Emma Bourne and Iain King.

Chair: Good morning and welcome to this meeting of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. We return today to our ongoing work in relation to DEFRA and its arm's length bodies, and we are delighted to be joined this morning by Paul Kissack, the new permanent secretary. For the benefit of those who are following our proceedings, and for our own official record, I invite you and your colleagues to introduce yourselves to the Committee, please.

Paul Kissack: I am the permanent secretary at DEFRA.

David Hill: I am the director general for strategy and water at DEFRA.

Emma Bourne: I am the director general for EU reset and trade at DEFRA.

Iain King: I am the chief financial officer and acting chief operating officer.

Q505 **Chair:** We appreciate your attendance and engagement with the Committee. Paul, you have been in post since October of last year, so you have had a chance to see the job you have taken on. What is your assessment of the Department that you have inherited? Where do you see its strengths and weaknesses?

Paul Kissack: I have been in the Department for about 20 weeks today. I have a few initial reflections, and I will caveat these with the fact that I remain very much a newcomer to the Department and am still finding my way.

First, I would say that DEFRA is a very important Department in what it achieves for the country and what it does for the country. This is something I knew already; indeed, it is the reason I came into the Department and wanted to be there. It is a central Department within the Government, but its importance is sometimes underestimated.

It is critical for three areas in particular. First, it is a Department of the economy. We are responsible for the important infrastructure that underpins economic life in this country, whether that is through our food system, soil, air, water or indeed nature itself, and we are responsible for some important economic sectors, including farming, food and fisheries.

Secondly, it is a Department of national security and resilience. Again, that is underplayed at times; today of all days, it is critical for different Departments to recognise the role they play in national security. We are responsible for two of the 13 Government critical national infrastructure systems—water and food—and we are responsible for a large number of risks on the Government's risk register, including biosecurity and floods.



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Thirdly, DEFRA plays a critical role in the UK's responsibilities as a science superpower. We have about 5,000 scientists across the wider organisation, including our arm's length bodies, and the fifth largest R&D budget, at half a billion pounds a year. When I have asked different areas of the Department where their world leading science is being done, quite often the answer is here in the UK. I am not sure if we talk about that as much as we could. So those are the reasons why I am in DEFRA.

Unsurprisingly, I have spent some time reading recent transcripts of this Committee. You have raised a number of challenges for us that are both fair and right. Certainly, I have come into the Department recognising that there are some areas where change is needed. I will briefly mention three of those; maybe we will come on to more later.

First, I do not think that we are always as focused on outcomes as we need to be. This is one of the themes that came through in the reviews held prior to my arrival, including the Corry and Cunliffe reviews, which have been really helpful for shaping our work. We have regulatory systems that are often complicated and insufficiently focused on solutions; it is important to look up and out towards good results, rather than focusing on process.

Secondly, there is an issue with how we engage externally. I know that this has been an area that the Committee has particularly looked at, and that it has raised concerns about—for want of a better phrase—our customer service. We provide services direct to customers, including those we regulate, and it is important to improve the quality and timeliness of those services. That is a broad point about how we engage with different sectors, including farming and fishing, in the shaping of policies and listening to feedback.

Thirdly, we need to do more around efficiency. That is not unique to DEFRA; it is a challenge for every Government Department, given the tight fiscal position we are in, but there is definitely more we need to do over the coming years. We have a stretching savings target across the spending review period, which will require us to do much more, including with digital and AI.

So those are the three key shifts I will need to lead over the coming years. But I do not want to finish on a deficit note. For all the changes that we need to see in the Department, overwhelmingly my reflection from my first weeks in the Department, as I have travelled around multiple hubs and been out on visits and met staff, is that we have an extraordinary number of hard-working, talented, knowledgeable, dedicated staff who are in the Department to make a difference.

We are making a difference in a lot of areas, such as around flooding and extreme weather responses; early changes to the water system; planting record numbers of trees; innovative approaches to restoring nature; reforms to our waste system and addressing waste crime; trade deals—our Secretary of State is in America today, in fact—and ensuring



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biosecurity through repeated outbreaks. DEFRA officials are making an enormous difference for the good of the country, so alongside leading changes to improve the Department, I want to make sure that they are able to stand tall and celebrate those achievements and feel proud about the part they play within Government and for the country.

Q506 Chair: Thank you. Take a wee sip of water and a deep breath.

Looking at outcomes, it is fair to say that we heard from your predecessor and some of her senior team, and we were not particularly impressed. I hope we were fairly measured in the way we described it, but just to quote our own report, "Departmental officials were not sufficiently alive to the urgency of providing certainty for farmers who must necessarily plan many years ahead."

Can you give me a couple of metrics that, if you are able to deal with the challenges you have quite fairly identified, you could point to in a year or two years' time and say, "That is the change that I have driven"?

Paul Kissack: To pick up the specific example about the urgency of change for the farming community, let us go into the challenge we had around SFI and how we want that to be and feel different. We are proceeding with a degree of urgency in that area. The Secretary of State and the new farming Minister came in in September, and the Batters review was published bang on time—thank you, Minette—at the end of October. We published our response in December and at the same time announced changes to the IHT reforms, so before Christmas we gave new levels of clarity to the farming community.

At the Oxford farming conference in January—I know you were there—we announced further details on the shape of the SFI. We also announced new funding for farming collaboratives and for the farming in protected landscapes scheme. Only last week at the NFU conference, we set out further details on SFI, including how it is going to be simplified, how the windows will work and the capping system that we are putting in place. All these things have been designed to respond to the problems we had last year. Essentially, we want to give as much information as we possibly can as early as we can. The window does not open until June, but we now have a lot of details out there to help farmers prepare.

What are the metrics of success? One metric will be the uptake of these schemes among farmers. Overall, ELM schemes have been very popular with farmers and we hope the SFI26 will be as popular. As we sit here now, there are over 40,000 farmers in SFI schemes, but feedback from the sector also matters. On the back of last week's announcement, we got very positive feedback from the NFU and the CLA, not just about what we had announced, but about the way in which we had engaged with farmers and listened to the way they perceived the previous scheme, and the concerns they had about possible reforms that we were due to introduce. We actually did something slightly different in the end.

Q507 Chair: I spend a lot of my time going around the country seeing NFU



branches and local agricultural discussion groups. I cannot think of one time when, during the course of the evening, somebody has not said that DEFRA as a Department is not fit for purpose, that it should be broken up, that it should be constituted differently, that it should be part of the Department for Business and Trade—there are all sorts of different ideas. Does it worry you that the standing of the Department within the agricultural industry is as low as it seems to be? What will you do to turn that around?

Paul Kissack: Obviously, I do not agree that it is not fit for purpose. I certainly agree that there are things we need to get better, as I alluded to earlier, but I feel I have come into a Department that is—

Chair: These are not NFU politicians; they are ordinary farmers in the community, and their interaction with and perception of the Department is a poor one. You have identified a lack of focus on outcomes, and undoubtedly that will be the case. With hindsight, at the time you closed SFI, the countryside stewardship schemes should have been dealt with. How much in the way of change will you be able to drive?

Paul Kissack: I hope we will be able to change it. It is not single-handed; this is a huge priority for the Department as a whole. One thing we have been increasingly clear about over recent months is the degree to which having a sustainable, profitable, productive farming sector is a core outcome for all DEFRA. I am not sure if that was as entirely clear in the past as it should have been, but it is much clearer now. The current Secretary of State has made that one of her top four priorities for the Department, and the Department is responding.

The next step will be the first meeting of the new farming and food partnership board, which was one of the recommendations from Minette Batters' report. It will meet for the first time this month and is a genuine attempt to create a new forum for the Department, the farming community and the food industry to work together to set out priorities and rebuild trust.

Another big test for us will be how the sector plans materialise; we have committed to doing individual sector plans, initially with horticulture, then with poultry. Again, that will be a test of how well we work with the sector to rebuild their confidence.

Q508 **Chair:** Another test will be the implementation of Minette Batters' report. You have talked about the board, which is an important part. When will we get the Department's response to the remainder of Minette's recommendations?

Paul Kissack: We are responding to individual recommendations as we go, with individual announcements, but we will pull something together across the piece later this year.

Chair: You recently had some publicity for your baseline training programme.



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Paul Kissack: It is called the Allerton project.

Q509 **Chair:** Can you talk us through the thinking behind it?

Paul Kissack: In order to address the challenges you are raising, we need people in DEFRA who understand farming. There are people in DEFRA who understand farming or come from farming backgrounds, but that is not good enough. In every Department I have worked in, I have wanted to get into the sector and understand it better.

It is right that we invest in training and development for DEFRA staff. One of my priorities, particularly for those who are working in the farming part of the Department, is that staff know more about farming. We have therefore invested in training and development that will cost about £150 per head. It is a mixture of online learning and getting out on to farms to see that learning in practice, and it is a really positive thing. But it has been interesting to see how a debate has been created by the media. Some have suggested it is a complete waste of money; often they are the same people who say that DEFRA should know more about farming. From my perspective, £150 a head is a pretty good investment into one of the more important areas.

I should say that that is not the only thing we are doing. DEFRA officials are out at all the agricultural shows and livestock markets. Generally the farming community is extremely generous in welcoming DEFRA officials, even when it is not as part of a paid-for programme. Maybe it is because I am the permanent secretary, but I have yet to have a farmer say no to my turning up at their farm. I have been out on several visits already, and I have a programme of further visits ahead; that will be true for other officials as well. Within that overall approach, having a formulated paid-for scheme is good value for money.

Q510 **Chair:** Time spent at farms and agricultural shows and engaging with farmers is never wasted. You have done that, Paul, but what about the rest of your colleagues?

David Hill: I have visited farms in my time. I am also from a farming family, so I have spent my summers worming cows.

Chair: Farming families are like the mafia; they never let you go.

David Hill: They certainly do not. I think I am unique in the ExCo team as someone who knows how to worm a cow.

Chair: That is noted and could be brought back for future reference.

Emma Bourne: I have to confess that I do not know how to worm a cow, but I grew up in a farming community in a small village in Cumbria. So while I am not from a farming family, I am definitely very close to farming communities, and I remember growing up through the foot and mouth crisis in Cumbria.



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I have spent some time in farms. I have been at DEFRA for seven years now, but the majority of my time in recent years has been spent in the waste sector, so I have been looking at engaging with different parts of DEFRA's industry and stakeholder groups. But the same principle applies, which is to get out and about, know your stakeholders, know your industries, and know your partners; that applies across the board, including the farming sectors.

Chair: Iain, this is maybe not so important for you, but do you have anything to add?

Iain King: I have not been on an official farm visit. I live in a farming community, but that is the best I can offer you.

Q511 **Chair:** Let us look at one area where this might matter. There is a fairly broad consensus in the industry now that we have a looming animal welfare crisis this year in relation to the availability of New Zealand or foreign shearers for shearing sheep. We think there might be 1.5 million sheep that we will not have the workforce available to shear. What is DEFRA's contingency planning to deal with that animal welfare crisis when it hits?

Paul Kissack: I confess, Chair, I do not know what our plan is; I do not know if anyone on the panel does. We will come back to you on that.

Q512 **Chair:** This is a significant problem, and it is one of the Government's own making, because the Home Office has refused visas for these 75 foreign shearers. Has there not been any discussion between DEFRA and the Home Office on this?

Paul Kissack: I suspect that there have been conversations between DEFRA and the Home Office. We talk to the Home Office a lot about the type of issues you are describing. It has not hit my desk at this point—maybe it will be waiting for me when I get back—but I am very happy to take a look at it and write to you.

Q513 **Chair:** It is a real and looming problem. We can argue about all the reasons why we do not have sufficient shearers, and I know British Wool pushes people through training programmes all the time, but that is not going to be of any comfort to the sheep who, in July and August, are still unsheared.

Paul Kissack: I agree with you, Chair, but I would just pick up on the general point, which is how far DEFRA goes to champion the interests of farming across Whitehall when there are different Whitehall Departments involved. We see one of our key jobs as being part of the industrial strategy for farming, which is the essence of what Minette asked for in her report.

To give a couple of examples, we are in conversations at the moment—including with DESNZ—about energy prices affecting the horticulture sector, an issue that has been raised with us by lots of farming



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representatives. We are currently consulting on planning reforms around farming, which is obviously an MHCLG lead. Again, that is in direct response to what we have been asked for by farmers, and it has been welcomed. So although I cannot give you details on this specific case, on the general point we are championing the interests of the sector with our Departmental colleagues.

Q514 **Chair:** It would appear that you are doing that to mixed effect.

Paul Kissack: Let us see where we get to on those issues.

Q515 **Chair:** What I am suggesting is that the industry sees this as a looming crisis but, for whatever reason—it might be interesting for you, professionally, to drill down into the reasons—it has not filtered up through the system to your desk, if indeed anything has been done about it at all. Does that not illustrate why the industry holds a rather poor view of the Department?

Paul Kissack: I do not think you should judge how well the Department is doing by what happens to hit my desk. I will go back to the Department and work out what we are doing with that issue; we might be doing a very active programme of work engaging with the affected communities. I do not know. I will take a look and then try to form a judgment on your question.

Q516 **Chair:** In my reading of the farming press, if you are doing anything it is not filtering out, so there is certainly a communications issue there.

Before I hand on to colleagues, I want to ask about your engagement with fishing communities. Do you think you may have the same problem with fishing communities that you have with the farming industry? The non-departmental public bodies do not seem to be held in particularly high regard in the industry. We took the Committee down to Brixham, where we heard about the MMO not publishing its KPIs and its KPTs. Does that cause you some concern?

Paul Kissack: Of course. That is an area in which we need to improve. I read your report on the Brixham visit, and I recognise the issues you mentioned. At the heart of that is a recognition from the fishing fleet about the complexity of the regulations and the admin burden it is facing. Fishing regulations are indeed extremely complicated; they are one of the more complicated areas I have been trying to get my head around as I have come into the organisation.

I do not think that there is a simple response. To some degree, it is possible to simplify regulations in any area, including fishing, but you tend to lose flexibility and bespoke regulations that the fishers themselves understandably want.

The Catch app we introduced has had problems as well, so I recognise the picture that is being played back. I would say, though, that my experience of working with the director for marine and fisheries and his



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staff is that they recognise the picture and are responding to it. They are trying to be much more outwardly focused and engaged. They do not do that just through MMO, but MMO does have a very good, strong presence. We are about to announce a new chief executive of the MMO as well, so I will definitely be able to take this challenge up with them. What we have tried to do in the design of the new fishing and coastal growth fund is to exhibit a way of working that is very external, which is really looking for feedback and is co-designing with fishers. I hope that that has been well received.

Q517 Chair: Would the coastal communities growth fund be the metric by which we judge you when we are sitting here again this time next year? Is that fair?

Paul Kissack: Yes. We want it to be a success, and I feel confident that it will be. We have engaged well with the sector; we put out information two weeks ago on the areas it will cover. I expect and hope that we will get a very high take-up of applications.

Q518 Chair: Do we know when it will open for applications?

Paul Kissack: I do not have a date at this point, but it will be up and running early in the new financial year.

Q519 Josh Newbury: I want to raise the issue of the importation of illegal products, particularly those of animal origin. We have received data from the Ashford port health authority, which runs the Sevington SPS border control post, showing that in November last year, nearly a fifth of consignments that were told to make the journey from Dover to Sevington did not actually show up at Sevington.

As a Committee we have previously expressed concerns that, despite Dover being our main port of entry, the arrangements with Sevington are a weak point in our border. To be honest, these figures do not allay our concerns. We really struggled to get hold of this data; initially, DEFRA told us it would provide it but then realised that Ashford owned the data. We had a lot of back and forth before it eventually sent it to us. To the point of leadership, does this not smack of a major risk that DEFRA really does not have a grip on?

Paul Kissack: I will say a few words and then ask Emma to pick this up, because it is her patch. Are we concerned about illegal products and illegal meat? Yes, we absolutely are. We recognise the risks that you are describing and I know this is an area in which the Committee has done a lot of work that has been extremely helpful. I was down in Weybridge at the APHA headquarters last week, and it made clear to me that it was worried about illegal meat. Emma and I are due to be in Dover on 22 April so we can see for ourselves what is going on. For reassurance, we are very focused on this and we are building more capacity in the organisation for that purpose.



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On the issue of data, I will hand over to Emma, who knows more about it; however, while I do not want to sound complacent, the data in terms of non-attendance rates is improving over time.

Q520 Josh Newbury: It has not improved on animal origin; it has gone back up, so it is not a clear downward trend. That is what we are worried about.

Paul Kissack: You are describing monthly data, which presumably fluctuates a bit. I think there is a downward trend, but Emma may correct me on that.

The other thing to say is the fact that they do not attend does not mean they are not checked. The port authority is following up on those who do not attend. Neither of those things takes away from the central issue you are raising, and we are focused on this risk; I just want to put it in perspective.

Emma Bourne: Like Paul, I am relatively new to my role of director general, a position that was created a month ago. The creation of additional senior capacity reflects the Department's prioritisation of EU reset and trade issues, including the issues you have just described. I have studied your reports in depth and spoken to the teams working on this, both within DEFRA but also working closely with the Food Standards Agency and colleagues at the port. I met yesterday with Phil Douglas, the director general of Border Force, who is responsible for this area; we have an incredibly important partnership.

I completely recognise your concern that this is an important issue that we absolutely need to prioritise and address. In terms of what we are doing, I would categorise that into two phases of work. First, there is the work that we need to do now and progress immediately, ahead of the anticipated new border arrangements that will come with the SPS agreement with the EU. Secondly, we must work on what the arrangements need to look like in the future once that SPS agreement is in force.

In the short term, there are four areas of work that we are progressing. The first is exactly the issue you raised about improving the quality of data, but also how we use the data we have. This Committee has rightly pointed out that there are inconsistencies and gaps in the information; the data needs to be better utilised to understand the risks and target enforcement activities to best effect. That is exactly the conversation that I had with my Border Force counterpart yesterday: how we can better bring together the different data sets held at the border but also in the communities if illegal meat is found there. We are making sure that we have that feedback loop so that we are continuously improving the enforcement activity undertaken at the border. We are progressing a piece of work both with Dover port authority and with Border Force colleagues to bring together those data sets to better effect and inform a much more targeted enforcement approach; that is our step one priority.



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The second area is what we do with it and how we improve our enforcement activity, including the partnership at the border between Border Force and the port health authority staff. Often, as my Border Force counterpart was describing yesterday, this is not just about products of animal origin but about vehicles that may contain other illicit materials within Border Force's remit, such as tobacco, drugs and the like. A more rounded enforcement activity needs to be undertaken and that is the spirit of the conversation that I had with Mr Douglas yesterday.

The third area is how we fund and support that border activity. We have already provided some additional funding in this financial year to Dover port authority to specifically target issues in relation to illegal meats. We gave it just over £3 million in addition to its existing funding arrangements, and we are actively looking at further funding for 2026-27; that is a live discussion with Ministers and we expect to provide details on that shortly.

The fourth area, as I say, is beyond the border. It is about how we work with the Food Standards Agency and its work with local authorities and with APHA. There are two elements to that: first, really proactive communications into the industries and communities where we think these products may be going so that they can understand the health risks and actively alert the authorities. Secondly, the work of the FSA-led food crime unit, which is doing work in communities to identify these activities, seize the product, and importantly provide that feedback loop back to the border services so they can act on it and we can prevent it reaching communities in the future.

That is the immediate action, but we want to look beyond that and make sure we are preparing so that we have the right arrangements in place under the new SPS agreement next year. That will obviously look different as we anticipate not having checks and controls for the majority of goods entering from the EU under that agreement. However, what we will have is a much more active early role in the decision-shaping of new policies in the EU. We are seeking real-time access to their systems and databases to ensure that we can do much more sophisticated traceability and intelligence sharing, again enhancing that data piece.

APHA and EU agencies are already working on how they can improve the input into the international disease monitoring plus tool, so we are getting a more sophisticated readiness ahead of new arrangements in 2027. We completely recognise your concerns and there is an active piece of work across agencies to try to address them urgently.

Q521 **Josh Newbury:** Do you think it is a growing problem?

Emma Bourne: It is very difficult to tell from the data that has been identified, but regardless of the scale of the problem, it is a priority and we need to respond to it.



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Q522 Josh Newbury: Obviously, we do not know exactly what the detail of the SPS deal is going to be, but can you give us assurances that, post the deal coming into force, our checks at the border will not be weaker than they are now?

Emma Bourne: As you say, the negotiations are ongoing, but the anticipated outcome is that the majority of product coming from the EU will not be subject to checks and controls. We will retain the ability—as any member state would—to impose local and regional arrangements to specific biosecurity issues, but the focus will shift to how we enhance our traceability activity, using real-time access to the EU's agency systems and databases. That is activity that goes on across the EU already. It will look different under the SPS agreement, but it will remain a priority and a critical issue, as it is across the EU.

Q523 Josh Newbury: Most of these illegal imports are not coming through legitimate routes and they are not coming through commercial channels either; they are coming through personal import lanes. So how does a deal on commercial products with the EU mean that we can take our foot off the gas when it comes to checks at the border?

Emma Bourne: It is not about taking our foot off the gas; it is about adopting a different approach. You are absolutely right, we need to be wise to the fact that many of these products will be coming through as personal imports, but as I was discussing with Border Force yesterday, we should take a more holistic view of the range of criminal activities that we are talking about here. This is not exclusively a meat issue; it is a criminal issue and connecting it to the work that Border Force is doing on the range of criminal activities that are often connected with these consignments is a route into having the intelligence about who we need to track and who we need to trace.

The other side of it is the work that the FSA and APHA do in communities, finding out where the product goes, knowing who the customer is, and working with them so that they understand the risks. As you say, often this meat is being transported in unhygienic conditions, so both ends of the equation—working to cut off the demand as well as the supply—have to be addressed.

Q524 Josh Newbury: You mentioned that you are going to Dover. Are you going to visit Sevington as well?

Emma Bourne: We are combining the two on the same day, and my senior team are in Sevington on Friday.

Q525 Josh Newbury: I realise that I have taken up quite a bit of time, Chair, so lastly, we do not yet know whether there is data on what happens after non-attendances at Sevington. We know, as you said, that there is a process of speaking to the local authority about the consignment's destination, but we do not know how successful that system is. We do not know how we can measure its success or otherwise. Would you support us in getting that information, and if it does raise concerns



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around potentially risky assignments slipping through the net, will you look into that issue personally, Paul?

Paul Kissack: Yes.

Chair: If you have that information, you can give it to us.

Emma Bourne: We do not have that information at present. The question is, do we want to secure that information? Do we want better data on where all the product is going and how it is being followed up? That is absolutely the spirit of the work that we are trying to do.

Q526 **Chair:** On the question of illegal meat imports, can I just be clear that I understood you properly there? You said that it is not a food issue but a criminal issue.

Emma Bourne: It is not exclusively a food issue. Border Force was explaining yesterday that with many of the consignments it has identified, there may be other product in the vehicle, not just meat. So it is looking at it in terms of the full range of illicit activities that it is trying to enforce.

Q527 **Chair:** How many successful criminal prosecutions have there been of those who are responsible for this?

Emma Bourne: I am afraid I do not know how many prosecutions there have been.

Q528 **Chair:** As far as we have been told, there are none. Are you aware of any?

Emma Bourne: I know there have been a number of seizures recently. For example, the FSA-led national food crime unit undertook a seizure recently, but that was in the community. Again, that was based on intelligence sharing with other agencies.

Q529 **Chair:** We have foot and mouth in Cyprus now.

Paul Kissack: This Committee rightly challenged us on the speed of our response to the German foot and mouth. We found out about foot and mouth in Cyprus at about 4 pm on Friday 20 February and we immediately communicated that out to the ports. We had changed the IPAFF system by first thing on the Monday morning; I think we actually changed the IPAFF system before we got the formal notification through from the WOA.

Emma Bourne: Yes.

Chair: It became effective overnight. We have been told that.

Paul Kissack: We are responding very rapidly, and nothing we have described would prevent us doing so in future.

Q530 **Chair:** Is there any targeting of personal imports in relation to people



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coming back from Cyprus? That must be quite substantial traffic.

Emma Bourne: We have been working with the embassy in Cyprus to ensure that it is putting communications out to passengers. We have also been looking specifically at the movement of products of animal origin coming from Cyprus, the main product being halloumi.

Chair: Apparently it does not carry foot and mouth.

Emma Bourne: Yes, so the risk in this case is relatively manageable. But all the actions have been taken, as Paul described.

Paul Kissack: Can I just come back to the general point? I will interrogate whatever data we can find, and we will pull together as much data as we possibly can. If it tells us a story we can draw intelligence from, we will act upon that.

Q531 **Josh Newbury:** If the data is not available, does that not raise even greater concerns about the oversight that DEFRA has on this issue?

Paul Kissack: We will keep pushing on the data and how we can merge together data from different agencies. It is a complex area because so many agencies are involved, but we will keep pushing it.

Chair: We have taken quite a lot of time on this, but it is important. Charlie, you are going to raise questions on policy, degrees and design.

Q532 **Charlie Dewhurst:** As a segue from the Chair's original questioning, I was speaking to a recently retired DEFRA official; this was before your time, Mr Kissack, and I mean no reflection on your tenure. They described a failure of strategic leadership and the lack of a joined-up approach across the Department, connected to a culture of silo working. There were examples where very good work was not recognised in the right way and good practice was not shared, and where the Department was failing, that was sometimes allowed to continue. Is that a reflection you would recognise from your 20 weeks so far?

Paul Kissack: As I alluded to at the beginning, I definitely think that there is a challenge for us to become more outcome-focused. We must be really clear on what DEFRA is here to deliver, the outcomes we want to see, and who is responsible for what parts of that. We can answer those questions across the piece to varying degrees of strength and clarity.

To take a good example, the environmental improvement plan published in December is a much-strengthened version of the previous plan. It sets out 10 goals, each one underpinned by a clear theory of change and each one has an action plan with measurable targets. It has been welcomed by the OEP as a significant strengthening on the previous plan. We can therefore map the parts of the Department working towards individual outcomes; we can map it across Whitehall; we can map it with arm's length bodies. It gives us a structure of clarity: this is the north star we are aiming for and this is everybody's individual contribution. To some



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degree, it weights those contributions and how important they are within the theory of change towards what we are trying to achieve. For me, that is good discipline but it is discipline that we apply to parts of the Department at the moment. The EIP is broad and it covers much of the Department, but it does not apply to everywhere. At the moment I am working on refreshing our outcomes framework for the whole of DEFRA to try to bring greater clarity to that.

On the issue of silo working, in any Department I have ever worked in, you have teams who work to directors general; some people describe those as silos and other people describe them as clear lines of command where you can get stuff done. I actually tend to think of them as the latter. I want to make sure that everybody within the Department is clear on what they are meant to do and where they are being held to account. We have plenty of fora within DEFRA for bringing people together, including an environment board, which is leading the work on the EIP I have just mentioned. It will bring people together across all the different director general commands that are represented here and do more of that cross-cutting work.

Q533 Charlie Dewhurst: You mentioned the arm's length bodies; I think DEFRA has 34. Does that provide a challenge to accountability and responsibility in terms of delivering what you want to deliver from the Department?

Paul Kissack: To a degree, but I would not overstate it. There is a narrative that it is very hard for DEFRA to deliver things because we have 34 arm's length bodies, but I have never worked in a Department that does not have arm's length bodies. I think we can overstate the complexity. There are very different sorts of arm's length bodies among those 34; for example, we have two large executive agencies in the RPA and the APHA that are, to all intents and purposes, part of DEFRA. The length of the arm in those ALBs is very short; they are executive agencies.

In the case of the other big ones, such as Natural England, the Environment Agency and MMO, there is an opportunity for Ministers to set out very clearly what we as a Department expect from them and to hold them to account. As I came in it is one of the things that we were definitely dialling up, partly on the back of some advice we were given by our lead non-executive director, Heather Hancock. She thought the way we were holding arm's length bodies to account was not as strong as it should be.

In my brief time in the Department, I have sat in a number of meetings where the Secretary of State has held the chief executive and chair of our larger arm's length bodies to account with follow-up actions and set out very clearly her expectations for what they should do. We are due to augment that approach soon with new strategic policy statements, particularly for EA and NE, again setting out really clearly, "This is what we expect you to do; these are your priorities which we expect you to



resource accordingly, and this is how we want you to set your risk appetite.”

To my earlier point about being focused on solutions and outcomes, to some degree that requires some bodies to take a higher approach to their risk appetite. Part of DEFRA’s role is to give them the confidence to do that.

Q534 Charlie Dewhirst: I welcome that approach because there has been a failure in recent times to get a grip on the arm’s length bodies. They have gone off and done what they think they should be doing and not necessarily followed the policy that you might want to deliver from the centre.

In relation to recent unpredictability and delays in certain policy areas, farming schemes, packaging forms and so on, how much has that been part of political decision making, or is it a constraint of resource within the Department to deliver on all those things in a timely fashion?

Paul Kissack: I do not think that we have been hanging around. The new Secretary of State arrived in September. Since then, we have set out—

Charlie Dewhirst: I appreciate that it is probably before your time and the current Secretary of State’s time. But, for example, when the SFI scheme closed we were promised we would get it by last summer’s recess, so you will appreciate where that line of questioning comes from.

Paul Kissack: The closure of the SFI scheme was a conscious decision by the new Ministers. Given what had happened earlier in the year, the last thing they wanted to do was rush out a scheme that might be wrong; they would rather take their time and get it right than get it fast. We communicated that to the sector and we have engaged with it sector on how to shape that.

What you are seeing at the moment is that the Secretary of State and Minister Eagle are setting out for the sector bit by bit, piece by piece, how that SFI new offer is going to come together. I definitely do not see that as a delay; I see that as Ministers doing exactly what they said they would do, which will take some time. I do not think it is about capacity.

Could we go faster in the Department? Marginally, perhaps, but the main constraint is taking Ministers through the details of the scheme so that they absolutely understand what risks we could be running with different decisions. Going back to the earlier part of your question about ALBs, one of the key parts of this is that the RPA is the key delivery agency. I have sat in meetings with the Secretary of State and Minister Eagle where they have had the policy director advising them on what policy decision to make shaping the SFI, and then they turn to the chief executive of the RPA and say, “Tell us from RPA’s perspective whether that is actually deliverable and what is higher or lower risk.” That is really good practice, and as we go live later this year we can have maximum confidence that



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we have a set of proposals that are not only the right proposals from a policy perspective but deliverable as well.

Q535 Charlie Dewhirst: In terms of the various policy streams and pieces of work you are doing, you referenced Baroness Batters' report on farm profitability. That was commissioned in a short timeframe and delivered quickly, and yet we are still waiting on the land use framework and the farming road map. All those pieces of work are vital; they come together in order to deliver what Baroness Batters wants to see on the farm and yet we are still waiting for those two major strands. Why are those being delayed and yet we managed to get Baroness Batters' report out before Christmas?

Paul Kissack: I do not recognise the word "delayed" for either of those. The farming road map will be the final piece, and again Ministers have been clear about that. They wanted the profitability review, they wanted to set out SFI, they wanted the land use framework and then they wanted the farming road map to be the final piece. I hope we will see the land use framework very shortly and the farming road map a bit later this year; it is the final piece but we wanted to get all those other bits in train as well.

Outside the specific farming element, in terms of ministerial capacity it is worth noting that we moved from a standing start in September to produce and publish the water White Paper in December, which is the most significant overhaul of the water system since the early 1990s. So again, I do not think we are hanging around.

Q536 Charlie Dewhirst: I appreciate that but, as I say, in some work streams you seem to be able to move very quickly and in others it seems to be very slow. I would just pin you down a little more on when we might see the land use framework.

Paul Kissack: You will see it shortly.

Q537 Charlie Dewhirst: Can you put a season on it? Spring, summer, autumn?

Paul Kissack: Let me put an emphasis on it and say, "Very shortly."

Q538 Charlie Dewhirst: Excellent. We look forward to that in due course. Just on a brief point of detail on the SFI, how are you going to ensure that we do not get a repeat of what happened last time and a sudden closure of the new scheme?

Paul Kissack: The main lesson to learn is that we closed it unexpectedly and suddenly and that is why we lost the trust of farmers. Part of what we need to do is to communicate regularly how much of the budget is being used up. At the point we go live with the window, we will be able to communicate much more information about the size of the budget available and then we will be able to provide more of a running commentary on how much of the budget is being used up so that the



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farming community can look at how much is left. There will come a point where we have to close the window, but we want to do that in an orderly way.

The other aspect, which caused significant problems last time round, is that we closed the window but then realised that we had previously communicated with those who had already started, so we had to reopen it. Some of that comes down to much clearer and closer working between the Department and the RPA; as I mentioned earlier we have been working hand in glove with the RPA, so I have a level of confidence that we will not have a repeat of that.

Q539 Chair: Can I just probe you gently here? You said you do not recognise the term delay in relation to the land use framework and the farming road map. They were both promised last year, and we are pretty near the end of Q1 this year. I am the west highlander in the room here, and punctuality is not always my strongest suit, but if you do not recognise this as delay, what would you call it?

Paul Kissack: I would say that a new set of Ministers arrived in September and made some very deliberate decisions about when they were going to put out a set of documents they were being expected to publish. Before Christmas they set out publicly when they wanted to publish those documents, and we have published every one of those documents in line with what they said they would do.

Q540 Chair: So it is not delay, but just a reordered timetable; is that what Sir Humphrey would call it? At the end of the day the point is that we will probably be the guts of two years into a five-year Parliament before the Department has come up with any strategic direction for the industry. In the meantime, things like the SFI tactics are being formulated without any idea of the overall strategy and what the industry can expect of Government.

Paul Kissack: I am not sure I accept that. The farming road map will be the point at the end of the process where we pull it all together. In the meantime we are starting to set out different elements over time. That is not just about SFI; one of the announcements the Secretary of State made last week was about £345 million of capital investments in ELM and innovation grants. She set out policies around farming collaboratives—

Q541 Chair: This is exactly the problem we had with your predecessor. You have various initiatives here, there and everywhere. This was why we called our report “The Government’s vision for farming”. You are coming up with various initiatives, some of which connect with each other, but you have no overarching strategy so you do not know where they fit into the picture.

Paul Kissack: I would not agree with that. I challenge anybody to read the Secretary of State’s speech from the NFU conference last week and say that we do not have an emerging strategy; we do. It is coming together and it will finally come together.



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Q542 **Chair:** It is an emerging strategy that you are late in publishing and that nobody has yet seen.

Paul Kissack: The part of the strategy that is the farming road map will be published later this year. In the meantime, we will also be publishing sector growth plans starting with horticulture and poultry. Piece by piece we are pulling together a much clearer vision for farming in this country.

Q543 **Chair:** In every other organisation I have ever known, the strategy comes first and then tactics, but DEFRA seems to think it is sensible to do it the other way around.

Charlie Dewhirst: I was just going to make that point. Surely the road map should have come first and everything else after.

Paul Kissack: Ministers have been very clear that the road map will be the thing that comes last.

Q544 **Chair:** Ministers might be clear, but are they right?

Paul Kissack: Yes.

Q545 **Chair:** So you think it is sensible to have tactics before you have a strategy?

Paul Kissack: I have worked in lots of policy areas over 20 years and I would say—

Q546 **Chair:** Is this possibly why DEFRA is in the state that it is?

Paul Kissack: It is perfectly possible to put out an early document. The earlier it comes, the lighter it will tend to be on detail and people will say, "This is all very well but we need more detail."

Chair: Then you give them the detail.

Paul Kissack: You do that through a document that pulls together lots of detail. There is a choice to be made here; it is perfectly sensible to start setting out elements of the forward strategy and then pull the whole thing together into a single story later in the year. That is a perfectly reasonable choice.

Chair: That is an interesting view. Terry has questions on DEFRA staffing.

Q547 **Terry Jermy:** It is fair to say that there have been various waves of cuts to DEFRA. My predecessor rather famously made several cuts in the past. There has been an 8% headcount reduction since July '24, and there will be a further planned 5% reduction this financial year. How confident are you that the Department will be able to meet its statutory responsibilities given what is quite a significant reduction in staffing?

Paul Kissack: The overall reduction we have seen since March '24 is now about 15%, but yes, I am confident. At the spending review, like other Departments, we were given particular savings objectives we had to make. We have a 10% administrative savings cut to reach, and about



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two-thirds of our administrative costs at the Department are in staffing, so it is inevitable that we will be looking to reduce our staffing.

At the time of the spending review we were going from 7,300, which was the March '24 figure, down to 5,800 by March 2029. That is a reduction of about 21% or 1,500 people. That is the overall context across the spending review period.

We made some very early progress on that, which is the 15% reduction from March 2024 to where we were at the end of 2025. That was a deliberate decision at the time to make early progress towards a reduction we knew we would need to make and potentially to provide a bit of headroom to bring new skills into the Department while still remaining on that trajectory. That approach was also supported by a voluntary exit scheme through which about 300 people left.

Around about summer last year, when we signed the common understanding with the EU and received the Jon Cunliffe report on water reforms, we identified time-limited but quite significant pressures in those two areas: the EU reset work and the front end of water reforms. As we sit here now, we are actually in the process of reprioritising staff across the Department and recruiting into vacancies in those two particular areas to rebuild staffing, albeit in time-limited roles. The objective is still to get back to that SR trajectory that I described at the beginning by the end of this Parliament.

Q548 Terry Jermy: Underneath those headline figures are the actual numbers. Of even greater concern for me is the change in experience and skills. Increasingly in your Department, but also in some arm's length bodies, we have seen a loss of very experienced and competent staff. Farmers are very honest people. They tell me repeatedly that when a DEFRA official turns up it is often the farmer who tells them what they need to be doing. To be honest with you, that is a huge concern.

How are you ensuring that among the remaining staff there are the right skills and, perhaps more importantly, the experience? There needs to be a balance of both. How are you ensuring that the mix is there?

Paul Kissack: That is an ongoing challenge for any Department and any organisational leader. Each ALB has its own particular challenges in the way that you are describing. To go back to our voluntary exit scheme, we turned down 240 applications from people whose skills and knowledge were needed within the organisation. We made a judgment with the people we let go that there was an opportunity to be on our downwards trajectory and bring in the new skills that we need.

Some of the skills that the Department requires are continuous; certainly, the deep knowledge you describe will always be required, but skills needs are changing. As I mentioned at the beginning, we need more data and digital skills to meet our efficiency targets, so we are looking to bring those in. Even within the two priority policy areas that Emma and David



lead, there is a particular emphasis on bringing in a set of skills around data and digital and, to some degree, project management. Like any organisation, we need to replenish our skill base over time.

I am not going to hide the fact that we have challenges with staff engagement at DEFRA; the latest civil service people survey results, which came out earlier this week, are really disappointing. We went backwards in terms of the overall staff engagement scores in 2025 and we are now about 5 percentage points behind the civil service benchmark. That is definitely not where we want to be. At the same time, thousands of people apply to join DEFRA; nearly 5,000 applied for new roles in October last year, and this month and last, we will be onboarding 300 people into DEFRA. In that sense, we do not have a problem with attracting people to come and work in DEFRA. I think our turnover rate is about 13.7% at the moment, but that compares to a long-running norm of about 12%, and it is influenced by the voluntary exit scheme. I am not alarmed by the turnover rate—though I would like to bring it down—but I am very worried about the staff engagement level, and I want to bring that up.

In terms of our overall staffing numbers, the priority right now is to try to bring more people into the organisation to build up the areas that have immediate pressures.

David Hill: May I just add a point on skills retention? Your challenge is a very pertinent one, and we are in a competitive market with other Departments, other agencies and other parts of the public sector. We have some limited flexibility around our remuneration and retention policies, so where we identify particular skill requirements, we have sought to identify certain premiums that we would pay. We have applied that, for example, to certain scientific roles, certain veterinary officer roles, and certain resilience and national security functions. Where we have pay flexibility, we are using that as part of a targeted recruitment and retention strategy.

Q549 **Terry Jermy:** I will come back to retention, but I have a separate point. Paul, you mentioned recruitment, and earlier the Chair mentioned baseline agricultural training. I have spent a number of weeks defending that to farmers because I agree with you: we want DEFRA staff to be knowledgeable about farming. But if you have a turnover of staff, you are going to be repeating that training year after year. Are you reviewing your recruitment processes? Presumably, you want to recruit people with that knowledge in the first place; is there a barrier? Are we ever going to move away from solely recruiting people who do not have that knowledge in the first place?

Paul Kissack: We recruit for the skills of the job and, generally speaking, we will be recruiting people who could in theory work in a number of different areas of policy. Most people who work in DEFRA for a prolonged period of time—including the people on this panel—will have worked in multiple parts of the organisation. That means we tend not to



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be recruiting for a specific set of background knowledge, but we obviously prize background farming knowledge, fisheries knowledge or environmental knowledge, if that is what someone brings into the organisation.

One thing I personally feel strongly about is that we need to make sure we are building up our policy capability outside London. I happen to be formally based in York; I am the first perm sec of a ministerial Department not to be based in London and I split my time between North Yorkshire and London. We have policy hubs in Newcastle, York and Bristol, which allow us to reach into a different demographic as well as different catchments, and I am all for building up those skills. Most of the arm's length bodies have a really broad geographical catchment as well; MMO is all around the coast and the Environment Agency is all over the country, so we have lots of opportunity to bring people from different backgrounds into our work.

I do not have any immediate plans to pivot our recruitment approach into particular areas of knowledge. There will be certain jobs where we require a particular knowledge, but I would rather be bringing people into the Department who have a passion for the work that we do, wherever that passion comes from, and that we fulfil their passion by giving them interesting and useful work and getting them out on to farms. Minette's phrase was that she wants to see more civil servants in the lambing shed; I do not know whether farmers really want to see that.

Terry Jermy: We have heard that there is a demand.

Paul Kissack: I confess that, much to the annoyance of my office, I have taken her at her word and I will be in a lambing shed either next week or the week after. Whether the farmer wants me there, I do not know. No doubt they will tell me afterward.

Q550 **Terry Jermy:** Or whether the lamb wants you there! I just wanted to get back to your point around changes in priorities; you quite rightly recognise that there has been a shift. Your officials have confirmed that water and SPS are consuming resources. What aspects of DEFRA's work are you not staffing as well as you would like? Where are those staff coming from? Where are the gaps?

Paul Kissack: There are four priorities for the Department, and you have mentioned two: the EU reset and water. Those two in particular are the ones that are drawing in new staffing at the moment. There is a time-limited element where we need a lot of staff in those areas to get through the front end of the reforms that we are taking forward. The third area is around farming. I do not think we have big gaps in our farming directorates; while you might disagree that there are no delays, we are getting on with stuff in the farming directorate and I have confidence in our capacity there.



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The fourth priority area for the Secretary of State is around restoring nature, environmental planning and interaction with the wider planning system. How do we support infrastructure development, including housing, while also delivering a win-win for nature? Again, that is currently well-resourced and we have restructured in order to put more weight behind that. You are right, though, that we have moved people from other areas. We have detailed conversations line by line with Ministers about areas where we might either stop, pause or pivot away—or possibly be able to do things slightly more efficiently—so it is not as straightforward as just stopping various things.

Q551 **Terry Jermy:** Can you give me some examples of where they have come from?

Paul Kissack: Among the things that we have stopped, the Northern Ireland team for example has now been folded into because that is a pivot for them. We are closing the NOx programme because that has come to the end of its time. We have reduced the central comms budget and closed down an international strategy team that was sitting at the centre of the Department. We have slowed down some aspects of animal welfare work, but not all aspects. We have slowed down or paused some elements of the work we are doing within biosecurity, but not the areas we think are highest risk. It is a long and complicated picture, but we are definitely dialling down in certain areas.

The overall resulting vacancy rate across different areas is about 5% but, with the exception of Emma and David's area, where we are recruiting, there are no areas of the Department where I could say, "That's a big priority area, we have a lot of work to do, and we don't have enough people."

Q552 **Terry Jermy:** Going back to the earlier point on retention; it is a huge concern for staff morale. Looking at the figures, and certainly from our own conversations with officials around morale, it contributes to turnover, as does pay. Could you just confirm and reiterate what you are doing to retain good staff and address those concerns about morale? It is not all about pay; I am sure that would be a big part of it, but what else is going on to retain the staff we have, especially if you are spending significant sums now training them?

Paul Kissack: You are right; it is not all about pay, but pay is an issue. Curiously, of the eight different subcategories within the latest civil service results for DEFRA, pay was the only one that got better in terms of people's views of the Department.

There are three things in the staff survey results the ExCo has decided to respond to. The first is whether people feel a strong sense of connection to the purpose of the organisation and know what we are here for; we score relatively poorly in that area. It is actually quite hard for DEFRA compared with most other organisations I have worked in, because we



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cover so many different things, but that is a reason to work harder at telling the story and being proud of the contribution we make.

I go back to where I started: we are an economic department, a national security department and a science department. We are a serious player in Government and people should feel proud to work at DEFRA, but I do not think they always do. I do not think we always tell that story as convincingly as we should. So a lot of the work I am doing at the moment is to try to instil a stronger sense of connection to purpose, which is really important to people's sense of engagement. People in public service come to work because they want to make a difference and they want to see how they are making a difference.

The second is line management. In my experience, if you are unhappy with your line management—even if everything else in the organisation seems fine—you are unhappy at work. Good line managers get the best out of people; they train and develop them, coach them and make them feel part of the organisation. So my second priority is getting back to basics on what good line management looks like within the Department.

The third is development. That may be formal training, but we are not going to send everybody out on to a farm. A lot of it is about having a good conversation with people about where they want to go in their careers and how we can support them in lots of different ways, how we can move them into work that stretches them and supports them to do that.

So those three things are where we are focusing: purpose, good line management and career development.

Q553 Terry Jermy: Are we are going to see those figures around morale and retention improve over the coming years?

Paul Kissack: I certainly hope so.

Chair: Good luck in the lambing shed. Do not spend all your CPD time in the lambing shed, though; we may need you come shearing time. Just bear that in mind.

Paul Kissack: I really do not think you would want me shearing a sheep.

Chair: Henry has some questions around resourcing and priorities.

Q554 Henry Tufnell: I am conscious that you have touched on a lot of things already, but you have a big agenda for change. We have talked about water in terms of the biggest overhaul of the water sector since the '90s and the EU in respect of the SPS agreement. We had evidence from the FSA that 300 pieces of legislation might be included in terms of part of that dynamic alignment and reset with the European Union, the Veterinary Surgeons Act is being reformed, and there is the environmental improvement plan. The Office for Environmental Protection said that you remain off track to meet your environmental outcomes.



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What is your capacity to deliver, and your assessment of that capacity, and what are your key risks in that context?

Paul Kissack: In the context of a very difficult fiscal position, DEFRA came out well from the spending review. We have about £7.5 billion DEL each year, which allows us to ensure that on average £2.3 billion is going to farmers; more of it will go to farmers through some of the nature funding as well.

Q555 **Henry Tufnell:** On your savings, you have a technical efficiency of 1% and then you have a real-terms budget reduction of 6.5%.

Paul Kissack: Could you say that again?

Henry Tufnell: In terms of your departmental spending, you had to make technical savings of at least 1% of annual day-to-day spending, and then your spending is set to fall in real terms by 6.5%.

Paul Kissack: We have to deliver £485 million of savings by 2028-2029. Some £460 million was agreed at the time of the spending review, and an additional £24 million was added in the Budget statement last year. About £300 million will be a reduction in RDEL spend because we are stopping spending on certain things, such as the Northern Ireland programme or the NO₂ programme. Quite a big chunk of it is being done within ELMS by dialling down basic payments and dialling up other elements, which are quite often capital rather than revenue. So a revenue-to-capital switch is being seen, but it means our RDEL comes down in total by about £300 million. We then have about £120 million of technical efficiencies lowering input costs but delivering the same output costs. We have programme work with ALBs around that, a lot of which is driven by digitising services and AI. We then also have some increased cost recovery, probably about £30 million. Putting those three things together gives us about £485. We are working on plans for all those things to be able to deliver our savings target. We are confident we can deliver that and, with the funding we have, deliver the priorities that we have been given by the Government.

On being off track with the EIP, it is certainly the case that from what we know at the moment it is mixed in terms of our performance and our trajectories towards the EIP targets, but in December we set out a new set of interim targets. We are confident that they are realistic, smart, interim targets and that we have designed our funding to meet those. The most important element of that funding is actually ELMS. It is the work that we are doing through farmers, landowners and the ELMS programme that helps deliver 13, I think, different EIP targets. Protecting the ELMS budget and making the best use of it is probably our single most important intervention within EIP.

Q556 **Henry Tufnell:** We talked about the reputation of DEFRA. Is the Department being overwhelmed because it is being asked to do more for less? Minister Eagle told us on the SPS that there is a massive "capacity



issue in the Department". Is that part of the problem which reflects the Chair's comments at the beginning of the session?

Paul Kissack: There is a big capacity problem—or challenge—within the Department on SPS. That is why one of the first things I decided was that we needed a group dedicated to the EU reset and appointed a new director general, who is now recruiting more people. There are about 500 people in the Department working on reset as we sit here today and we are in the process of recruiting another 200. We received additional funding from the Treasury specifically to do that, in addition to the spending review settlement, recognising that this new pressure had come along.

Are we trying to do too much? Going back to the earlier question, part of the discipline is to find areas of work that can be dialled down, paused or pivoted away from. You cannot ask people to achieve the same amount of work with fewer people working on it. There are always areas where you can gain efficiencies and do a bit of that, but overall we have to have the discipline to say, "We're going to stop doing that work, or we're going to pause that." That is part of what good leadership of the Department looks like. I have been very pleased that we have a set of Ministers who will happily sit in a room and give us those steers and say, "We accept the risk, but we're going to stop doing that and that because we need to prioritise our resources into these areas." It is always a work in progress; every week we have conversations as a top team about where we might need to move resources around, where pressures are being felt and what we do about it, but that is the nature of the job.

Q557 **Henry Tufnell:** Are you confident in having the parliamentary time to be able to deliver all these major reforms?

Paul Kissack: Parliamentary time is rather out of my hands.

Q558 **Henry Tufnell:** But in terms of those discussions being ongoing within the Department, are you flagging these concerns?

Paul Kissack: Yes. I might come to Emma on the EU reset side. Obviously, the other big commitment we have in terms of parliamentary time is around the water Bill.

Emma Bourne: On the EU reset, you are absolutely right: there is a huge legislative requirement that flows from it. The Department has responded fantastically to this. A really strong team that has pretty extensive experience delivering major secondary legislation programmes has come together to develop what I consider to be a credible plan to progress that legislation, working in partnership with the Food Standards Agency, which is also progressing legislation; we are working together on an overall programme of legislation. We are working with the Cabinet Office and the Chief Whip's office to ensure we are navigating and being fully transparent about the parliamentary time requirements associated with that. As the permanent secretary said, it is somewhat out of our gift, but in terms of whether the scale of the task is understood, absolutely. Is



it seen as a priority for the Government as a whole? Absolutely. I am confident we are doing everything in our gift to progress that work.

Q559 Henry Tufnell: David, I do not know whether you want to comment on the water side of things in terms of the Department's position on gaining parliamentary time or on resourcing.

David Hill: Obviously I cannot pre-empt the King's Speech but suffice it to say, in terms of the precise timing of the water Bill, that we are significantly scaling up our resourcing to be ready to introduce legislation. I will give you a sense of the scale of that: our staffing supporting all flood and water functions has grown by about 90 people since the start of this financial year, and in business planning we plan to increase by a further 90 next year, and we are in the process of scaling those teams up. We have also significantly strengthened the senior structure: five additional deputy directors in the team, and we are adding a further director precisely to lead on the big water reform. While we still have some gaps to plug, I feel that in terms of resourcing, we have a good plan in place.

More broadly on your question about legislative time, we have just completed quite an extensive exercise with the whole ministerial team, taking account of the demands of the EU work in particular, to go through our entire secondary legislative programme for the next couple of years, and work out precisely how we will prioritise time-critical EU reset secondary legislation and other critical pieces of secondary legislation we need to bring forward. For example, we are giving particular priority—to your point about resourcing—to bring forward SIs that allow us to levy fees and charges in certain areas of our business, because not all our funding comes from grant and aid. So we have a good-sized plan for secondary legislation that we are in a position to bring forward.

If things slip, we also have a watch list of other things we could further accelerate. That is important not just for this Session but looking further ahead because, when we get to the Veterinary Surgeons Bill, for example, we are planning with our legal team for when we can release our legal resource from current plans on to future legislation as well.

Q560 Henry Tufnell: Thank you. We touched on resourcing priorities; you talked to Terry as well. DEFRA has more arm's length bodies than any other Department. I think you said 35 arm's length bodies.

Paul Kissack: I think there are 34.

Henry Tufnell: Given the resource constraints, and the decisions you are having to make on a day-to-day basis to try to push funding resources into these priorities that are set by Government, does having that many arm's length bodies concern you? Is it something you would review? Do you think you get value for money from those 34 arm's length bodies?

Paul Kissack: I might ask David to come in because he has been overseeing our ALB reform programme, but in overall terms, the



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challenge I set out at the beginning about how we need to become more efficient and more outcome-focused as a Department applies just as much to our arm's length bodies. I do not mean that in a deficit or critical way about the work they do. If you look at the performance of our arm's length bodies over recent years, there are plenty of areas we could point to where they are getting better, including their customer service and their ability to respond. The Environment Agency is now hitting 95% timeliness around planning for the first time since about 2018. There are plenty of things we can point to where those arm's length bodies are delivering better. But the efficiency and productivity challenge sits as much with them as with us.

Quite a lot of our digital investments that we will be making as a result of our SR25 will be in our arm's length bodies. We have a big IT programme going on in the Environment Agency at the moment: the regulatory services programme. There is a very big one which is due to be run through the APHA. Our RPA IT is one of those bits which is a risk for the Department; it is one of our business-critical systems. Going back to an early part of the conversation, one of the things we have been very careful about is not going too fast on aspects of SFI in a way that our IT system could not cope with, but we are beginning to test a new IT system. So quite a lot of the answer to ALB efficiency and productivity will come through our digital work.

David Hill: I have a couple of things to add to that. First, on the headline 34 number, it is worth just reiterating the point made earlier that that covers a very diverse range of organisations—for example the Environment Agency, which has 13,500 people—and 10 of them are national park authorities, which technically score against us. Some are tiny expert scientific committees with very few people attached to them.

On your question about efficiency and value for money, one thing to bear in mind is that DEFRA is pretty unique in Government in already having consolidated back-office functions such as IT, finance and commercial functions for many of our arm's length bodies. We have already brought those together in one place, which has driven something of the order of magnitude of about £500 million of savings since that model was introduced a few years ago.

But we are always looking at whether our arm's length body landscape is efficient and effective. In fact, Ministers have reached the conclusion in respect of an area like water that change is needed, so we are bringing together the water functions of four different organisations into a single integrated environmental regulator. That is principally about the effectiveness of those organisations to deliver good outcomes in the water sector. So where there is a strong case for institutional change, we are absolutely doing that, and those water changes will be addressed in the water Bill. They will be one of the biggest changes to the DEFRA arm's length body landscape that we have seen for many years.



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Beyond that, there is a real interest and appetite for how we can get arm's length bodies to work together more effectively. Many of our arm's length bodies are often present in the same places around the country, so following the review from Dan Corry, we are experimenting with innovations such as lead regulator pilots where one of our arm's length bodies is taking the lead on working with a big scheme or project on behalf of others so that that scheme or project has a single front door to all the different environmental regulators they need to work with. For example, we are piloting that with the Falmouth docks scheme, and we have some more that we are about to announce. In a way, however you cut the institutional landscape, one of the things we really want to do is make sure that our bodies are offering a more seamless service to the businesses and communities they serve.

Q561 Chair: We shall see where you get to with the parliamentary time for that; the SPS implementation is a massive piece of work—700 officials, Emma—the implications for this will not just be felt within DEFRA. The devolved Administrations will also have to beef up their operations. Are you supporting them in that? You can go to the Treasury and say, “I need extra resource,” but are they doing the same?

Emma Bourne: We are working very closely with the devolved Governments, both at a working level where they are an integrated part of both the day-to-day project teams and the governance at a ministerial level. Minister Eagle meets with her counterparts monthly to talk about the SPS agreement to ensure that we are engaging them in the negotiations process and in the preparation of the legislation and implementation, as you describe. In terms of resourcing, as the permanent secretary described, we have had some additional support this year from the Treasury, and the devolved Governments are liaising with the Treasury directly on their resource requirements. But we have obviously shared the nature and scope of the work and we will continue to work with them as we plan that out. It has been a very collaborative process and will continue to be so.

Chair: I certainly hope so. Juliet, you are going to take us through some additional capacity issues.

Q562 Juliet Campbell: Just thinking about resources and the capacity for managing threats, DEFRA has a broad portfolio across emergency responses. Could you tell us a little about what resources are available for emergency responses, including environmental recovery from CBRN events?

Paul Kissack: I might ask David to take us through that.

David Hill: On your specific question about CBRN—chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear—we have a dedicated standing team that leads on our responsibilities in respect of recovery from CBRN incidents. That team also leads on our emergency response to flood emergency and water supply emergency. We have relationships with certain other



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agencies across Government that provide technical support to some of those CBRN recovery programmes. We have a relationship with DSTL, for example. In addition, we have a number of different reserve capabilities that allow us to surge when incidents arise.

We have three different capabilities that I will touch on, and we are building a fourth, which I will refer to. Specifically for flood, water supply, or CBRN recovery, we have an emergency reserve of around 146 staff. They work elsewhere in the Department but they can be drawn down with immediate effect if we need to scale up or stand up an emergency response. For example, they were most recently used in response to Storm Chandra in January and the response to some of the water supply disruption that we saw in the south-east of England. My head of CBRN emergencies makes the judgment call in consultation with me on whether we draw those people down.

We also have our response reserve, who are trained staff across the Department offering more of a flexible operational, policy or analytical response, which can be to a range of unforeseen incidents. For example, in the first quarter of last year, when there was an FMD outbreak in Germany, some of those staff were deployed to support our standing teams on animal welfare to do contingency planning about a pre-outbreak response here in the UK. Thankfully we did not need to call on them, but they were deployed. The resilience director who works for me decides on the deployment of those staff. We have a further dedicated reserve of 23 staff who are available for contingency planning in the event of a national power outage. We have never deployed them, I am pleased to say, but following certain exercises across Government, we concluded that we needed to be confident we had dedicated staff we could deploy who had easy access to certain locations with secure power and emergency communications in the event of a national power outage.

Over and above all that, we are working to refresh mutual aid arrangements across our four largest arm's length bodies: the Environment Agency, APHA, RPA and Natural England. We need to formalise the final details, but we have agreed in principle a mutual aid arrangement whereby the chief execs of those organisations can call on others to draw down up to 3% of their total staff if they are incapable of responding to an incident with their own resources. That is quite a significant pool across the DEFRA group. We tested elements of that in Exercise Pegasus, the tier 1 cross-Government exercise, which rehearsed for a major zoonotic pandemic just before Christmas. So we have tested elements of that, and we should be able to finalise those arrangements in the coming weeks.

That is what we can do with our own resources, but we also have access to other capabilities elsewhere in Government. There is an HMRC surge team that we are able to draw down on, should we need to do so, and we also have certain arrangements in place with the armed forces, in particular in respect of flood.



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Q563 Juliet Campbell: It looks as if there is a lot of contingency planning. How prepared is DEFRA to manage or handle concurrent emergencies?

David Hill: Many of the things I have described are about giving us some additional surge capability to do precisely that. For example, we have handled concurrent animal disease outbreaks over the last year or so.

We are trying to take a more strategic approach to all aspects of our resilience planning. We have a dedicated resilience director, and I chair a resilience board that brings together all the different bits of the Department that could conceivably face an emergency response. As I have described, we have ringfenced capabilities of named reserves, which we are confident we can draw down on to make sure that we can address concurrent emergencies. Obviously, we plan for the worst and some of our capabilities have been tested in relatively moderate incidents in recent years, but clearly one of the things we plan for is worst-case scenarios, which is where some additional resources across Government that I described might come into play.

Paul Kissack: In the context of your question, it is a risk for us. We can increase our approach to resourcing and we can improve our overall governance of this, but the reality is that there is a risk around concurrent outbreaks: if there were a significant scale, it would really test the APHA and others, depending on what the issue was. There was a PAC hearing about an NAO report on this last year, which recognised that as a risk, and it is one of the elements that is quite high up our corporate risk register. I understand that it is a risk, but it is one that we are taking action to manage as best we can, as David said.

Q564 Juliet Campbell: I am particularly interested in flooding. I want to ask you about the major capital commitment in flood defences that you are currently overseeing. By the end of this month, you will be able to better protect 52,000 properties, and an additional 14,500 properties are expected to have better levels of protection. Can you tell us how many of these properties are now better protected from the dangers of flooding?

Paul Kissack: I will look to David again on this one.

David Hill: The 52,000 figure that you cited is right; it is the target for properties better protected through the two years of the flood programme that conclude at the end of this month. We do not yet have the final outturn for the full year, obviously. We were at 47,500 better protected in December; working with the Environment Agency, we are very confident that the 52,000 figure will be achieved when we see the final outturn at the end of this month.

The 14,000 figure that you referred to was the steps taken to reprioritise an element of the overall flood budget into the maintenance of critical flood assets. We have seen a declining profile in the proportion of critical flood assets in good condition, so Ministers have set a target to turn that



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around. From memory, I think we reallocated about £108 million to additionally support asset maintenance. That is what that figure refers to.

As I am sure you are aware, we recently announced some changes to the flood funding rules, which will apply once the new programme comes into effect from April 2026. One element of the changes to those rules will be to make it easier to support and fund the maintenance of existing assets to make sure that we keep those critical existing assets in good condition.

Q565 Chair: Are you confident that you will have met the 52,000 properties by the end of this month?

David Hill: Yes. Obviously we do not have the final outturn, but we are confident we are on a trajectory for that.

Q566 Chair: In the meantime, there are presumably other properties that are coming on stream that are at risk of flooding. Do you have an assessment of that?

David Hill: You are absolutely right. The commitments made in the spending review in the infrastructure strategy announced last year are for a 10-year-forward programme for flood, which we estimate will benefit over 900,000 properties in its lifetime. We are working through the detailed metrics for the next year now and will produce interim targets towards that. The Government are making a forward commitment of about an additional £7.5 billion of capital towards that programme, which is a commitment that reaches beyond the next spending review. That is an important step, in terms of long-term flood resilience.

Q567 Chair: Over 10 years, 900,000 is roughly 90,000 a year, and you have taken 52,000. It sounds a bit like trying to fill a bath with the plug out.

David Hill: You are right: the challenge is that we are always having to adapt in the face of climate change projections. One thing that we are doing now with the forward programme is making sure that climate change projections are factored in. One of the reasons why we have changed the funding rules is to give the Environment Agency more scope to target resources where they are needed most, because the frequency and severity of extreme weather events take their toll on our existing flood assets. We have to keep investing in this, but it is a major commitment that we are making, and that time horizon also allows us to bring forward some really significant projects that will have the maximum impact.

Q568 Josh Newbury: We have asked you quite a few questions already on the capacity of the Department, so in the light of the obvious pressures on DEFRA, what are you doing to work with other Departments to pool capacity and make sure that your priorities as a Department and those of the Government are being delivered?

Paul Kissack: That is quite a big question. We do not tend to pool capacity, as such. Sometimes you might, but bringing different groups of



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officials from different organisations together into a single team is not something that we tend to do. But we do enormous amounts of joint working across Departments.

Emma has already referred to some of the work that we are doing with devolved Administrations. Not only do we work with them on the SPS, but I think we are one of the Departments within Whitehall that does the most work with devolved Administrations. Actually, it is one of those areas where the Cabinet Office, which is responsible for that relationship, would tend to look at DEFRA as one of the Departments within Whitehall with better practice.

As for other Departments, we work very closely with DESNZ, particularly when it comes to marine issues, the marine spatial squeeze and some on-land infrastructure challenges. One innovation that we have introduced in recent months is an infrastructure board, chaired by the director general for environment, which brings together different Departments focused on the top 50 infrastructure developments in the country, and considers whether environmental regulations could become a challenge to those progressing. On the water side, David runs, with his Minister, a water delivery taskforce, bringing in different Departments as required. We do a lot of work with DESNZ. Particularly around the planning reforms, we do a lot of work with MHCLG. An example is the development of the nature restoration fund, which is being led by Natural England as one of our arm's length bodies but is nevertheless being overseen by a mixture of DEFRA and MHCLG. We do a lot of work with the Department for Transport on air quality. For trade issues we do a lot of work with the Department for Business and Trade, which is in Emma's patch. We work with the Home Office on issues around Border Force as well.

So our Department works with an enormous number of agencies. I am trying to think whether there is a Department that we do not engage with. We engage with a huge number of Departments in the normal course of our work.

An issue that takes us back to the very beginning is that I am really keen that DEFRA comes to the table confident about the important contribution it has to make, not just as an economic Department but as a national security Department. I found it quite interesting that when I got this role, one of the first people to reach out to me was the chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee, to say that DEFRA is an important player within the intelligence community as a national security Department. It was very much something that my predecessor focused on, and I want to build on it. There are lots and lots of areas where we work well.

Q569 Josh Newbury: DEFRA is responsible for 89% of commitments within the new environmental improvement plan, which Charlie referred to. Do you think that that is fair, given that every sector has an environmental impact?



Paul Kissack: A lot of the work that we do in the Department, by definition, involves work that we need other people to do—either the work of other Government Departments or behaviours that we want to influence. For example, we are the funding provider and shape the policy for the environmental land management schemes, but the actual work is being done by farmers and land managers. Every outcome that we focus on as a Department requires us to think about the behaviours that we are seeking to influence in individuals, consumers, and companies. Emma is overseeing the waste reforms, for example, which are all about how to influence consumer behaviour and packaging company behaviour.

It is fine that DEFRA has the principal responsibility for driving these things through. It does not mean that we are doing all the work. A lot of what we need to do is about understanding how to nudge, change or incentivise different behaviours, whether that is in other Departments or in the country at large.

Q570 **Josh Newbury:** Do you feel as though other Departments are willing to come on that journey? Have you had any resistance or difficulty in engaging with any Departments?

Paul Kissack: We have our differences occasionally, with different Departments—the Chair was alluding to some earlier on—but we fight our corner on behalf of our sectors and the outcomes that we are trying to deliver. It is the normal stuff of cross-Government working. I have not noticed anything different, unusual or unexpected since I have been at DEFRA.

David Hill: I have a live example where the opposite is true and we do not encounter resistance. We encounter other Departments really leaning in and wanting to work with us, particularly where we see environmental objectives and other objectives such as public health align. On Friday, I joined a taskforce that Sir Chris Whitty, the chief medical officer, has agreed to chair, looking at the evidence base underpinning public health in relation to water, both bathing waters and drinking water. Chris has been happy to lean into that work, accept that commission from DEFRA Ministers and lead that work on behalf of the Government as a whole, which obviously gives us access to his ability to convene science academia to support that strand of our work. It is an important part of how we work as a Department, being able to draw down all that expertise wherever it sits elsewhere in Government, because clearly public health and the water environment are absolutely intrinsically connected.

Q571 **Josh Newbury:** There have been some areas in which concern has been raised about how well we are doing in cross-governmental efforts on the environment. The OEP flagged what it feels is inconsistent engagement from senior officials and Ministers across Government, not just DEFRA, with the environmental principles policy statement. Repeated findings have also flagged a lack of progress across Government on climate adaptation, and the feeling that it is really falling short.



Paul, you mentioned advocating to other Departments. What are you doing to make sure that there is strong action in those areas where people are raising concerns?

Paul Kissack: There will always be challenges along those lines, and it is good to hear them; I will reflect on both of those that you have just raised. It is part of my job sometimes to go and have a conversation with the permanent secretary of other Departments to make sure that this is being given the priority, whatever the issue is in the Department.

Generally speaking, we have really good, positive working relationships across all Departments. Sometimes we will disagree. Sometimes we will want the Departments to place more emphasis on something. The environmental principles policy statement is a good example. It is work in progress, but I hear you, and I am happy to make sure that I am leaning into that challenge.

David Hill: There are some positive things on our work on adaptation. There are things we thought had an impact. In the last spending review, when all Departments put forward their spending bids, we agreed with the Treasury that Departments would have to articulate how those investment proposals would meet climate adaptation objectives and climate resilience. We have recently worked with the Treasury to revise the Green Book, which is the appraisal guidance. Hardwiring these things into the way spending decisions and investment decisions are made is really important.

On the underpinning science and research, our chief scientific adviser co-chairs, with the Government chief scientific adviser Dame Angela McLean, a board drawing together the chief scientific advisers across Government. While we do not resile from the challenge from the Climate Change Committee, there are some things we are seeking to do to really make sure climate resilience is properly embedded across the Government machine.

Q572 **Josh Newbury:** Another responsibility for DEFRA, from a cross-governmental perspective, is rural proofing, which I have heard the Secretary of State refer to several times. The last rural proofing annual report was published in March 2024. Could you tell us when the next report is going to be published? Will it cover the last two years? Will it more clearly look at how well rural proofing is actually implemented on the ground, rather than simply explaining the Government's policy in rural areas?

David Hill: The previous Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs took stock of that approach to rural proofing reports and concluded that he wanted to come up with something that was more forward-looking. Rural proofing reports, as we have produced them previously, have tended to look back at a range of initiatives across Government and essentially assess how well Government did. Ministers were keen to give it more of a



forward-looking approach on how to target action to improve quality of life in rural communities.

Ministers set up a rural taskforce to formulate a range of ideas, chaired by our lead non-executive director Heather Hancock, which concluded towards the end of last year. We are working through the conclusions of that work, so there will be a more proactive, forward-looking rural report that we intend to bring forward as soon as we can. I fear that that is another one where I am saying, "As soon as we can."

Josh Newbury: It is another publication that we are waiting for.

David Hill: The important point is a shift of approach, to try to more directly draw in expertise from rural communities to shape what that approach should look like going forward.

Paul Kissack: I understand why you are asking questions about when we are going to publish stuff. I just want to make sure that as a Department we are focused on doing stuff, not just publishing documents. It is important from a public accountability perspective that we publish things, but there is a lot of work going on in the Department.

May I talk to your earlier point about engaging with different Departments of state where we have influence over policy statements from different Departments in the interest of rural communities? MHCLG leads on housing, and the national planning policy framework includes stronger support for rural, social and affordable housing; DEFRA would have been part of those conversations. Transport, which DFT leads, obviously has a big focus on buses and rural transport. Poverty, which is a DESNZ lead, is a particular issue in many rural communities. Regarding crime, there was a rural and wildlife crime strategy published towards the tail end of last year, which we were very involved in. We are getting on with helping to shape policy in all these areas in a way that works better for rural communities. I would not want you to see the absence of a document from DEFRA about rural communities as an absence of getting on with the job of supporting rural communities.

Q573 **Josh Newbury:** Absolutely. On that point, how effective do you feel DEFRA has been at influencing announcements from other Departments in the course of this Parliament so far? Do you think it is going well?

Paul Kissack: It is a very hard thing to judge.

Q574 **Josh Newbury:** You have given some good examples, but there are some examples of rural interests perhaps not being well considered in otherwise well-intentioned policy announcements.

I can give you an example: MHCLG's Pride in Place funding is a massive part of local growth from the Government. It used the community needs index, which many people have said disadvantages rural communities because they are typically very tight-knit. People are more reliant on each other, so they have more trust in their neighbours, so they come



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out quite well on the community needs index. The fact that rural communities with quite acute deprivation are missing out on funding is an example of rural proofing perhaps either not taking place or not being listened to.

We can all point to other examples. You mentioned the warm homes plan and the work that DESNZ is doing on decarbonising home heating. Again, many of us who represent rural parts of the country are really concerned about the wholesale push for heat pumps, because most of the properties where they are not appropriate are in rural areas in which insulation is much harder to do, for example. Although you have given some examples where it is working, there are other, quite major examples where billions of pounds are being spent and rural communities are perhaps not being thought about. Are those representations being made and not listened to, or are they not being made at all?

Paul Kissack: I do not know the answer in that specific case, but your general point that there are areas where we need to do more to make sure our voice is heard is reasonable.

David Hill: On your challenge around the evidence base used to make funding judgments going forward, we have done some work recently with MHCLG on the revisions to the index of multiple deprivation and have sought to make changes to remove some metrics that we would all recognise are perverse when applied to rural communities. Previously, car ownership was used as a metric, but frankly, disadvantaged people live in communities where having a car is often a necessity, so we sought to remove measures like that. While I take the challenge about the specific fund that you referred to, getting the underpinning evidence base and the metrics such as the IMD in a place that better reflects rural characteristics is an important step forward.

Q575 **Chair:** Paul, you piqued my interest with your reference to spatial squeeze in your interaction with DESNZ. As a Department that now wants to focus on outcomes, what outcomes should the fishing industry expect as a consequence of your management of the spatial squeeze issue?

Paul Kissack: As a Department, we have a set of different objectives from that, some of which are around nature restoration within the seas—

Chair: Do you mean things like MPAs?

Paul Kissack: Yes, and we want to see a thriving, profitable, productive fisheries industry in this country. An example of where we need to be really clever about what success looks like, how we define it and what policies and mechanisms we need to deliver it is the fund that we were talking about earlier. The design of the new fisheries management plans is a response to another challenge that we have had around the nature of regulation.

Chair: The starting point has to be that there is available sea for fishers to fish in.



Paul Kissack: Yes.

Q576 **Chair:** If you have closed it off because it is an MPA and you have closed another bit off because there is a wind farm, a fish farm or a cable line on the seabed, it feels as though it is always the catching sector that is left out and suffers as a consequence. What is your strategy to achieve an outcome that allows our fishermen to go to sea?

Paul Kissack: You are right. A bit like the land use framework is looking at how to prioritise—

Q577 **Chair:** How do you see this framework?

Paul Kissack: To some degree, we have the building blocks of a sea use framework in the way in which the combination of the Crown Estate and the DESNZ's work and the MSPri that we do. My understanding is that 80% of English seas are open for fishing in one form or another. That is not to say that there is not the squeeze and the challenge that you are describing, but our role is to make sure that we can balance these differences. We have energy needs, nature restoration needs and fishing needs, and our job is a bit like it is on land use: to work out how to balance them. They are not always trade-offs either, because you can do multiple things in one area, but our job is to try to work it out.

Q578 **Chair:** Is it a double whammy for the fishing industry if you have things like compensatory MPAs, where you are closing down water in one area because of a development you are doing in another?

Paul Kissack: I understand that point, but my understanding is that compensatory MPAs are going to be very small and will be a one-off, so there needs to be perspective on how big that problem is. On the broader problem that you are describing around the squeeze, making sure that our seas provide an area where we can have a thriving fishing industry is absolutely an objective of the Department.

Chair: We will judge that when the year comes to an end, eventually.

Q579 **Henry Tufnell:** Going back to data, and thinking about the sequencing discussions that we have been having with ELMS and the focus on public goods and developing those environmental outcomes, if you look at the metrics by which we are trying to decide how those will be delivered, there is a big void. There is no metric for soil health, and half the metrics that you have for the outcome indicators framework are not fully developed.

The wider assessment of your environmental assets with the natural capital and ecosystem assessment programme is not scheduled to come in until 2029. In the context of ELMS, first, why is it taking so long to get a clear picture? Secondly, how can you respond effectively that you are getting value for money in the first place in respect of your environmental outcomes from the environmental land management scheme?



Paul Kissack: That is a really good question, and one that we ask ourselves within the Department a lot. How do we know ELMS is going to be good value for money? There are three things to look at. First, what is the underlying evidence base that taking certain actions leads to environmental improvements? Secondly, are farmers responding to ELMS and doing those actions? The third is about the outcome metrics that you are describing.

We can be very confident on the first and second. The actions that we are encouraging farmers to take through ELMS are well evidenced, from decades of evidence base, around the potential economic benefits of certain activities in terms of improving soils and hedgerows and so on. We can then monitor the additionality: to what degree are farmers doing things as a result of ELMS that perhaps they would not have done before? It is tricky, but we definitely know how many farmers are taking up ELMS: about 40,000 at the moment. Almost half of all farmers are involved in SFI; we know what works through the evidence base and how many farmers are taking it up.

The more challenging bit is doing the environmental assessment of what has happened as a result. It is challenging in two ways, as it often is when we look at performance and outcomes in the world of DEFRA. First, can you actually measure it? That is really hard; as you say, we do not have a systematic national soil health evidence base, but the NCEA is our mechanism for doing that. It is a really big investment—£300 million—into strengthening the evidence base and the monitoring system that we have across our natural assets. You are right that some of it does not come online until 2029, but that is a work in progress and a really important piece of work for us to do.

Being able to measure it is one thing, but being able to attribute changes to specific policy interventions is arguably even harder. We might well see improvements—I hope we do—in our environmental natural assets that come through the NCEA over time. Being able to say, “We know what caused that: it was this” is more difficult. This is all, basically, to say that the question you are asking is a really good one, and a fundamental one to the whole organisation. We ask it a lot.

We have degrees of confidence in some aspects of the evidence base. We are very confident as we go out with our SFI offer in June that we are asking farmers to do things that we know have a very good evidence base in terms of environmental impact, and we will then see whether the farmers wish to do those things. Recent history suggests that they will. We are building the monitoring system we need, principally through NCEA, that will allow us to judge the impact on natural capital in this country over time.

Q580 **Henry Tufnell:** I am conscious of time, so I will have to move on, but that was helpful. David, the water White Paper says that you have to optimise the current monitoring framework for the water environment.



What would that look like?

David Hill: There has been a significant investment in recent years in monitoring against CSOs or storm overflows, and we are introducing monitoring coverage for emergency overflows as well. We are also looking to strengthen open monitoring, moving away from operator self-monitoring undertaken by water companies and towards something that makes much better use of open data, digitisation and automation. We are looking into continuous water quality monitoring—not just monitoring events such as discharges of sewage, but continuously monitoring the quality of rivers and so on. There are a range of things that we are trying to do in that programme.

Q581 **Henry Tufnell:** In the context of the resourcing point that we discussed earlier about the EA and Natural Resources Wales, there are significant monitoring gaps in the context of tighter resources. It is all very well having a piece of legislation, but if that legislation cannot be enforced on the ground, what steps are you taking to make sure that one can follow the other?

David Hill: With EA resourcing, one thing we have done and are doing is strengthening its ability to recover costs in relation to many aspects of water regulation. For context, the amount of charged income that the EA receives for its environmental protection budget in the round has increased by about £150 million since 2020. The plans that we have set out in the White Paper take a realistic view of the spending review settlement. I feel confident that the plans that we have set out to strengthen our monitoring arrangements are baked into our spending review plans and in the measures that we are taking to strengthen the EA's ability to raise revenue from other sources.

Q582 **Henry Tufnell:** I am jumping around a bit, but I come back to the Government's manifesto commitment that 50% of public sector food procurement is to be locally sourced. We have not really seen that much development on that policy, in terms of announcements. Is that due to an inability to collect data on the current sourcing patterns from the Department, or is it partly to do with that?

Paul Kissack: We are certainly spending time at the moment focused on the data question.

Q583 **Henry Tufnell:** You have spent £300 million to upgrade your IT systems between 2022 and 2025, but a report in 2023 said that you were one of the largest legacy IT burdens in central Government. Can you give an update on where you are with that?

Paul Kissack: I am very happy to. You are right: the 2023 NAO report said that we had the second-largest legacy IT. I have always wondered what has the largest, actually; we should work that out at some point.

Historically, it identified three barriers to change. One was investment, the second was skills, and the third was underlying data. We have made



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progress on all three. Where are we at, as we sit here? We had 300 legacy applications that were considered high-risk. We have remediated over 200 of those, and we expect to sort the rest in the next 18 months.

We have undertaken a lot of improvements in online services. GDS now reviews a number of our services as excellent and we have a number of common platforms under development. We have implemented a number of digital services in Emma's previous area around the circular economy, for example around packaging reforms and digital waste tracking; we are well on track with the underlying remediation. We are then transforming a number of services. I mentioned earlier some of the services in the digital infrastructure within ALBs, which is a big priority for the coming years from the SR settlement.

The final area is more about cutting-edge technologies and the use of AI. Coming into DEFRA, I have been surprised by the degree to which we are applying and testing AI in different areas. We have about 20 different pilots in which we are trying out AI at the moment. Some of them are about service delivery and trying to make services more frictionless; some of them are very specific to DEFRA, like using AI to look at satellite imagery of peatlands, which helps us with re-wetting peatlands.

That is the three-tier approach: the remediation of the challenges from the NEA report, the digital transformation of various in-house services, and then some more cutting-edge AI work that is going on.

I do not know whether Iain wants to come in, but we are in a much better place in terms of skills, which was the second barrier. We were in a world where we had an enormous amount of contingent labour as a proportion of our overall digital workforce. It is now much lower, and we have many more in-house digital skills. It is still a challenge for us and is one of the areas where we need to continue to upskill within the Department.

Very briefly, on data, we took a new approach from 2024 and recruited a new chief data officer who set out a strategic road map. For the first time, we have a DEFRA-wide data catalogue, shared data assets, data standards, a new data services platform, which has about 5.3 million hits, and, I think, 20-odd outward-facing apps. So over recent years there has been quite a change. It is a work in progress; there are big digital transformation challenges ahead over the next few years, particularly around some of the ALB services, but we are in a much better place now than at the time of the NAO report in 2023.

Q584 Chair: Just before we release you back out into Whitehall, Henry's point about ELMS and measuring outcomes and achievements sounds like a very resource-intensive piece of work. Minette Batters told us that the number of people in RPA administering the BPS was about 150, whereas those administering the SFI are already north of 900. That is a chunky increase already. How many more are we going to have administering schemes rather than actually getting money into the pockets of farmers?



Paul Kissack: That takes me right back to the point I made at the beginning about our becoming a more efficient Department over time, and it picks up the question about digital. In many areas, there is the opportunity through digital transformation—potentially through AI—to do things in a more frictionless and faster way for customers and reduce pressures on headcount within the organisation. It takes time, and we have to be careful that we get it right.

As I mentioned earlier, RPA is a great example where we have creaky IT. There are limits to what we can do about it. We have an excellent new chief executive, who comes from more of an IT background; he is champing at the bit to get on with the digital transformation of the organisation, but we have to tread through that carefully. But of course we always want to be moving as much money as we possibly can into frontline services or out to the people who are here to support them, rather than building up numbers of civil servants in the Department.

Q585 **Chair:** Have you any notion yet of where the 900 figure that Minette gave us for those administering SFI will go?

Paul Kissack: I confess that it is not a figure that I have in my head, so I am not quite sure what that captures. I certainly could not answer where it might go in future.

Chair: Thank you very much. There are other matters that we may raise in correspondence around some of the accounting figures that we have been given. Iain, that will be a joy for you to look forward to.

That concludes our session for today. Thank you very much for your attendance and your engagement. It has been exceptionally interesting. We will return to a lot of this at some future date, either with you or with your ministerial colleagues, but for the moment, thank you very much.