



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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**COMMITTEE FOR  
ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND  
INVESTMENT**

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**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

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**Renewable Energy Inquiry:  
Ulster Farmers' Union**

14 October 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND  
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Renewable Energy Inquiry: Ulster Farmers' Union

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Alban Maginness (Chairperson)  
Mr Paul Butler (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Leslie Cree  
Mr Paul Frew  
Mr Paul Givan  
Mr William Irwin  
Ms Jennifer McCann  
Dr Alasdair McDonnell  
Mrs Claire McGill  
Mr Gerry McHugh  
Mr Sean Neeson

**Witnesses:**

Mr Wesley Aston                    )  
Mr David McElrea                 )     Ulster Farmers' Union  
Mr Christopher Osbourne        )

**The Chairperson:**

I welcome Wesley Aston, David McElrea and Christopher Osborne from the Ulster Farmers' Union. We have received your written submission, which was helpful. An addendum to that has been tabled today. It would be helpful if colleagues looked at that addendum.

Gentlemen, you are welcome. Please provide a short introduction, and we will get into questions. We read your helpful document and the addendum to it.

**Mr Wesley Aston (Ulster Farmers' Union):**

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the Committee. I apologise on behalf of our deputy president, Harry Sinclair, who had a prior arrangement; we tried to rearrange that, but that could not be done. I am Wesley Aston, the UFU's policy director; David McElrea is the chairman of our rural enterprise committee; and Christopher Osborne is the policy officer of that committee. They are the experts on the issues that you wish to talk about.

Before we get into specifics, I will give a brief introduction on where the Ulster Farmers' Union sees itself. Mr Doran set the scene extremely well. As farmers and landowners, we see tremendous opportunities for renewable energy. Mr Doran explained timescale and oil prices well. Imports into Northern Ireland will be an increasing issue for energy security, as will keeping money in the Northern Ireland economy: given the opportunities, why should we pay for that money to leave Northern Ireland, particularly under present conditions?

Different types of renewable technology exist, not solely wind. Everyone seems to talk about wind, but there are other sources. We have talked already about wave technology, but, equally, there is land-mass production through biomass and anaerobic digestion. Those technologies have huge potential. As farmers and landowners, we have been extremely frustrated by the lack of progress on the issue. Several years ago, we identified that as an area in which farmers could get involved, yet, to date, nothing has happened.

The other key issue is that, in the food-supply chain, which is where the vast majority of our activity takes place, we are price takers; we do not want to be price takers in the energy industry. We see opportunities for being price makers as well as retaining money in the Northern Ireland economy and creating jobs. That is a brief and broad introduction. I hand over to the chairman of our rural enterprise committee.

**Mr David McElrea (Ulster Farmers' Union):**

Thank you for the invitation to present to you. We have a number of points for our oral submission, and I will detail those. On government support, we welcome the financial incentives for renewable energy; that is a better and more long-term route than capital grant schemes, which can add to the price of technology instead of cutting it. We welcome the longer term financial incentive on that front, whether on ROCs or feed-in tariffs. We do not have a clear opinion on what is the best option for the Northern Ireland economy. We may prefer a feed-in tariff because of its security of price for renewable energy; however, we do not have a defined policy on the whole system.

The Government should have a better energy policy — there is no primary legislation on

renewable energy policy for Northern Ireland. Mr Doran said that we do not have the Energy Act 2008, which applies to GB.

The wind sector is probably of most interest to farmers because of the change in tariffs since April 2009. We find that planning applications for that sector go to local offices and that junior planners refuse them because they have no experience. They are getting a tide of applications, and they do not know why. They refuse applications on any grounds because they are afraid of making a decision or a wrong decision.

If an application is deferred, it goes to the senior planners, whose approach has been totally inconsistent. For instance, in our area, a senior planner in Omagh who deals with wind turbines said that if they are visible within a three-mile distance from a road he will refuse an application; less than three miles, he will grant it. In Fermanagh, they had never heard of a policy of refusing turbines because of visual impact. Planners asked whether turbines could be put in a hollow rather than on a height. That is not a sensible approach to wind-turbine technology. *[Laughter.]* I am sorry to be flippant, but that is what people come up against.

There is a different approach among some consultees. For instance, one section of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) released a policy on visual impact that allows only two areas of Northern Ireland that have a low-to-medium visual immunity impact to place wind turbines on the scale that we require. We are not looking at large, externally financed wind farms, the money from which leaves the country; we are looking at installations that are owned by people from here whose profits will go to the local economy.

I go back to the point on visual immunity. The agency reckons that only two out of 52 areas can accommodate turbines because the rest of them are high visual impact areas. That does not leave much scope for turbines.

**Dr McDonnell:**

Where are the two areas?

**Mr McElrea:**

I am not sure. That section of the agency wants to integrate the turbines, with buildings and trees to shade them. However, another section of NIEA says that wind turbines cannot be put near hedges because of bats. One section of the agency says that turbines should be put near hedges and trees; another says that they should not. Not knowing which section rules, they go for blanket refusal. It is a mess.

I want to discuss communications between government and the public. More information needs to be put out to the public on why we are choosing renewable energy and what it costs. For instance, some members of the public assume that anaerobic digestion is a smelly technology; in fact, it is completely the opposite: putting slurry through an anaerobic digester removes the smell. It is more of a benefit than a disincentive, but we need to get that across to the public. There is no real information about that. The College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) has a role. However, in addressing farmers it, it is preaching to the converted. Nobody is putting that out to the wider public.

There needs to be investment in grid infrastructure. Much of the investment has been focused on bringing the larger-scale renewables, such as large wind farms, onto the grid rather than the smaller-scale projects. I am talking about plants that are under one megawatt rather than multi-megawatt wind farms. On that scale, an average grid connection below 50 kilowatts costs £20,000; above that, it is about £50,000 before the extra lines. That is the cost of the kit beside the renewable technology, never mind the strengthening of the lines. Evidence from Germany and other parts of the continent suggests that it costs between £5,000 and £15,000 for the same grid connection. That is slightly subsidised by the public purse, and the regulator can have it installed to allow more renewables. The cost of grid infrastructure stifles development.

The time that NIE takes to grid-connect people is another factor: the quickest time in which renewable technology can be grid-connected is nine months, and that is without planning permission. Nine months is required to buy the bit and stick it on the line. It is a slow, cumbersome process. We are told that NIE has only four staff dealing with grid connections for renewable energy for Northern Ireland. Considering the interest, technology and projects coming forward, four staff is not enough. Pressure on NIE from the regulator, this Committee and government to ramp up its delivery and to get more done would be beneficial.

We know that there is pressure on budgets, but we hope that support is directed to indigenous opportunities for Northern Ireland. Rather than help large multinationals and banks to invest here and see their profits leave Northern Ireland, we have to invest in our indigenous supply so that the money stays in our economy. There is no point importing gas from Russia or the Middle East or bringing large companies here if Middle Eastern companies take the profits. We are back to square one and a trade deficit for Northern Ireland.

When talking about the planning perspective, I mentioned government environmental versus rural policy. With regard to environmental policy, we want to ensure that we are helping to produce

indigenous biomass rather than importing. We do not want to get to the situation in which Europe has found itself: it has created a policy on having so much biofuel in diesel that it is importing palm oil from Indonesia and destroying rainforests. If we create a policy, it has to be sustainable here. If we build power stations at the docks to import material, we are back to square one.

We are concerned about local government's strategy on planning and environmental health policy. Since they do not have the expertise and do not know what they are doing and because they lack experience, they go for blanket refusal. That is not the way forward. In the previous presentation we heard that a central policy unit in planning is looking at larger projects. Smaller projects go to local planners and environmental health officers who do not have the knowledge or expertise to deal with what is coming at them. They need to be more clued up.

I move now to banks and financing. A couple of weeks ago, one of the local banks made a presentation on wind energy at Loughry campus. A practical on-farm renewable energy event will be held at CAFRE at Greenmount on 2 November, aimed at the rural community, particularly farmers. There has been a major focus on cluing the banks into the interest in renewables and the opportunities in them. In 2007, the Ulster Farmers' Union held an event on renewable energy in Limavady, which more than 300 people attended; 60 people attended an anaerobic digestion event at AFBI at Hillsborough earlier this month.

That same day 180 people attended an event at the CAFRE campus in Loughry. There is considerable interest in the agricultural community in being part of the solution of renewable energy. It is not happening at the moment; it is being held back by the planning process for grid connections, which is holding up finance, and by government support.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you for that succinct and comprehensive presentation. Gentlemen, if you want to answer questions, please feel free to do so. The jury seems to be out on ROCs versus feed-in tariffs. Have you not made up your minds which you prefer?

**Mr McElrea:**

We understand the argument for ROCs versus feed-in tariffs; however, the benefit of a feed-in tariff is that it gives a guaranteed price for renewable energy over a fixed period. That helps banks and finance. We understand that feed-in tariffs have to be paid for in Northern Ireland, whereas the NIROCs go into the central pot, which comes from the whole of the UK. We understand the argument for that. As long as they have financial parity, we are not too worried.

**The Chairperson:**

Do you agree with Mr Doran that with the ROCs the Department has tried to shadow the effect of the feed-in tariffs in Britain?

**Mr McElrea:**

We do not have as many bandings here as GB. I think that we may need more bandings in the ROCs. That may be related to the time available to introduce a policy, given the number of staff, so there are bigger bands. Last year, there was a change in the feed-in tariff for anaerobic digestion in the rest of the UK, but we did not get that here. The explanation was that the staff did not have time to make the change. I am not sure that that explanation is good enough.

There is a proposal in a consultation document to bring in a new tariff next April for anaerobic digestion. Hopefully, that will be introduced, as it would lead to a greater interest in anaerobic digestion in Northern Ireland. There is great potential for it here. Under-utilised land could be used to produce it. It could also be part of renewable transport and heating, which has not really been considered here. We are always looking at renewable electricity, but we could be part of the solution involving other sides of the renewables issue as well if the incentives were right. If the incentives are not right, the ideas will not come to fruition, no matter how good they are.

Germany has more than 4,300 anaerobic digesters; we have one. We expect a 700% increase in anaerobic digesters, as that number will rise to seven. We are starting off from a no base rather than a low base. The technology and the expertise are there. Farmers will know how to operate those things; they are not much different from operating on a cow. However, the incentives are not there to cover it.

**The Chairperson:**

Therefore anaerobic digestion is the coming thing for farmers.

**Mr Christopher Osborne (Ulster Farmers' Union):**

The UFU looks at it as part of the answer, not the whole solution. It is part of the overall scheme, and it needs to be given more consideration.

**The Chairperson:**

Is there considerable potential on farms in Northern Ireland?

**Mr Osborne:**

Definitely.

**The Chairperson:**

If there is an anaerobic digester on one farm or in one area, do farms from round about feed waste into it?

**Mr McElrea:**

There are many different examples of digesters; they range from small digesters on small farms to large, central digestion plants. There is any range of scales, but the incentives have to be right for them. The process does not have to be centralised.

**The Chairperson:**

Are you saying that the incentive is not right at the moment?

**Mr Aston:**

I spoke in my introduction about the concentration on wind power; however, the wind does not always blow. Wind is about electricity, not necessarily about heat. We see a need for a range of technologies to generate electricity and heat. There are opportunities across all technologies.

**Mr Butler:**

Thank you, gentlemen, for your presentation. I am trying to quantify what your sector can contribute to renewable energy. You say that you do not favour one scheme over another, but wind turbines seem to feature a great deal on farms, as do anaerobic digestion and biomass. What will you deliver and what incentive will be required? Given the hurdles that it faces, how will the agriculture sector meet those objectives? Where does it fit in?

**Mr Aston:**

The emphasis is on wind because the commercial sector is pushing wind. We are concerned that farmers are being led — and, in certain cases, misled — into those technologies. The figures need to stack up before you do that.

**Mr Butler:**

That is what I am getting at. The Committee hears from many witnesses. The commercial sector says that it has to be wind and only wind; someone else will tell us that it has to be waves. Agriculture is such a big sector.

**Mr McElrea:**

Exactly, and that is why we think that no one technology will be the winner. If you are on a hill, wind



may be for you; if you are on flatter, more productive, ground, anaerobic digestion may be the way forward.

Let us get down to economics: on the anaerobic digestion front, 1·4 acres will produce one kilowatt of electricity and 1·2 kilowatts of heat. Many farms are less than 100 acres and could easily supply a great deal of heat and electricity to the grid without large-scale grid infrastructure.

We do not need a great deal of extra power lines and large-scale connectors. We are talking about grid connections of new transformers on poles and new, small ground-mounted substations. We do not need a large line infrastructure for those projects. That is why they are deliverable more quickly than large infrastructure projects that require large lines.

**Mr Osborne:**

The dairy sector, which I represent, is an intensive user of electricity and heat on the farm. We also have huge potential to generate heat or electricity from what comes out of the other end of our dairy cows. We are in a unique and strong position.

**The Chairperson:**

That makes sense.

**Mr Cree:**

There is much talk about electricity. I am interested in the hemp experiment, which is a classic example of starting something without having everything else in place.

The witness in the previous evidence session talked about road energy, and the idea of using crops for biodiesel has got to make a lot of sense. Hemp is one, and rapeseed oil is another. In fact, I have seen plants that are used to produce diesel and to provide a feedstock for animals. What is the union's view on using a lot of land — you still have some set aside land — for those crops? On the other side of the coin, there are some fears that the food chain may be hit if a lot of ground is given over to fuel crops.

**Mr McElrea:**

Hemp and rapeseed oil, which you talked about planting, are part of the mix. Unfortunately, the first go at hemp production in Northern Ireland failed, but that was more down to the business model than the agricultural part of it. Farmers were very willing to grow the product and to adapt to it, and they will do so. On the food versus fuel debate, there is an underutilisation of land here, due to the economic returns that we have been getting from food. We can produce a lot more from the land area

that we have. We are a long way from having a food shortage debate here or changing over too much land for fuel to the detriment of the availability of land for food. We could produce a larger amount of energy here without affecting our output of food in any shape or form.

**Mr Aston:**

Northern Ireland is a small player on a European scale, never mind a world scale. In the agriculture industry, we have seen the level of production fall in areas such as suckler cows and sheep. Under-grazing in hills is now a problem. We do not see energy production as a problem as regards the impact on food production; we see it as an opportunity to make use of the land. If food prices were to start to rise again, it would be up to each landowner to decide what to do economically on their farm. Anaerobic digestion, for example, does not necessarily entail the use of land in its own right anyway. Other technologies do require the use of land, but anaerobic digestion makes use of slurries and what is effectively known as wastes. Anaerobic digestion is additional to the technologies that involve the use of land.

**Mrs McGill:**

David mentioned applying for planning permission in Fermanagh and Omagh, and Strabane is also part of that planning division. You are quite right to say that there are difficulties. I know that there was a laugh when you said that planners are now suggesting that windmills should go in hollows, but that is the reality. The hills, by and large, are in areas of outstanding natural beauty, and that is creating a problem. Obviously, there is a trend towards planning applications being made for individual wind turbines. Those applications, by and large, come from individual farmers. You said that farmers need to be careful about that, so do you have any views on what our approach should be when those applications come to us as councillors?

**Mr McElrea:**

As I said, they should not be given a blanket approval. We do not want the bungalow blight that perhaps there was before, but not allowing any applications through does not help either. PPS 18 is intended to help renewables, and DETI's policy is to provide incentives through ROCs. However, there are planners who find any excuse to rule something out. It is not even that they are risk averse; it is easier to say no than it is to let an application through the net.

**The Chairperson:**

Following on from what Mrs McGill said, is it the planners themselves or the Environment Agency that is the problem?

**Mr McElrea:**

It is a mixture of both. The NIEA puts forward evidence of issues that need to be considered. If the planner thinks that anything needs to be considered, it will be a refusal. The agency puts it forward as something that should be considered, and the planner refuses it.

**The Chairperson:**

Do you have any problems with PPS 18?

**Mr McElrea:**

Not as such, only with the understanding and application of it.

**Mrs McGill:**

You are absolutely right, David. Planners need to have a coherent and consistent approach to applications. I support you on that.

**Mr McElrea:**

We have highlighted wind because that is relevant and case studies are under way on that at the moment. However, we are not focusing on wind only. The same will be true of anaerobic digestion.

**Mr Osborne:**

It is worthwhile pointing out that it does not just extend to planning but goes further into local councils. We are hearing that environmental impact assessments are being carried out on smaller turbines and the targets that people must jump through, such as those on fees and visual impairment, are exactly the same as those for the larger wind turbines. Therefore, a bit more lateral thinking is called for on those matters.

**Mr McHugh:**

You are welcome, gentlemen. I listened to the discussion on planning, and so on. I have certain sympathy with planners' reluctance to have single turbines dotted around the whole place. I know the height of them, and that can be doubled. We have a tourism product here in the Mourne and in Fermanagh, and those turbines are not dotted all over the place in England and Scotland. Are you telling farmers that they should be pushing that door that will not open or should they invest in other areas such as anaerobic digestion or get together and invest in one larger farm? I do not expect some of those obstacles to be overcome. Why are there so many applications for single turbines? Surely that helps only the few. At least £400,000 is needed to invest in one. That will not help the larger number of farmers.

Some of the schemes in Europe are very heavily aimed towards the whole community, such as the biomass use of silage, municipal timber and mixes of that type in Sweden. For a continuation of farming here, given the need and dependence on heavy use of electricity, we will have to get to that competitive position in the future. If they have not planned for it, perhaps we will not be able to continue with the communities that we have in the future if we are still arguing with planners. Is discussion ongoing that maybe they should move towards working without waiting for incentives? How far on is that?

**Mr Aston:**

From our broad perspective, Mr McHugh is right to ask why those things are happening elsewhere and not here. Our view is that the market has not created the conditions to pull it through. We are not necessarily seeking grant aid because things will happen if the market justifies it, as is already happening to certain level. Wind energy has been a case in point. However, we are not there yet. People are thinking about those ideas, and, as I mentioned at the outset, we have had a huge amount of frustration given that we started to think about this six years ago. It has not come though, and it is still not there. We are still talking about planning issues, and so on.

It has to happen at some stage. Our concern is that, if we, as farmers, do not start to get together, by the time we get our act moving when things start to happen, other big companies will have come in to do it for us. We will supply them with raw material, and the money will go back out again. That is why the indigenous aspect and the need to retain money in the economy seem to be important. It is frustrating, and I hope that the Committee has sensed the frustration on our side of the table about the fact that things are not happening.

**The Chairperson:**

We certainly do.

**Mr McHugh:**

Have you been able to work with local companies? The Quinn Group, for example, and other small clusters of industry and small businesses need quite a lot of power in localised areas. Is there a possibility of using anaerobic or biomass in those areas, as that would make use of the land? Food is not really paying at the moment, and it may pay even less in the future if the changes are brought in after 2020, so that seems to be the direction that you should consider. Have you been able to bring the farmers along those lines?

**Mr Osborne:**

Our next committee meeting will take place in Cookstown Leisure Centre, where there is a biomass

boiler. We are aware of the opportunities that exist in Northern Ireland. For example, I have spoken to representatives from Moore Concrete and the University of Ulster. Although it is early days, we are aware that there are opportunities for our members in that regard.

**Mr Frew:**

I will be brief. Farms, generally, use single-phase electricity. Are milking parlours the same, or do they use three-phase electricity?

I know of a single wind turbine that was built 10 years ago but has never worked because of issues to do with single-phase and three-phase electrical connections. The people involved in its construction were misinformed and given the wrong advice. Although it has never worked and has produced absolutely nothing, it still had to be paid for. How much advice do you receive from government agencies and bodies such as Action Renewables, and how beneficial is that advice to you and the people whom you represent? As I see it, we have a whole army of people who could produce electricity and the fuel to produce energy, but the infrastructure is not yet in place, and it is moving slowly. What is the advice like? How are you being assisted in that role?

**Mr McElrea:**

The assistance that is given is very limited. From our perspective, we found that we were trying to answer a lot of the questions that farmers were asking when we were learning those answers ourselves. I am not sure what your question about single-phase versus three-phase electricity was.

**Mr Frew:**

Is it correct that most of the farm buildings and businesses in the Province use single-phase electricity?

**Mr Osborne:**

Many dairy farmers use three-phase electricity, due to their intensive use of electrical power.

**Mr Frew:**

That means that they could produce more electricity and feed it back to the grid.

**Mr Osborne:**

Yes.

**Mr McElrea:**

The farm connection may be for single-phase electricity, but there may be three cables running on a

pole near the farm, which is what gives them three-phase electricity. It is very simple for those farmers who are close to a line with three cables to upgrade to three-phase electricity, but the use of a transformer and the grid connection is very expensive in rural areas here compared to other areas.

**Mr Frew:**

It is very expensive for anybody, whether a household or a business, to convert from single-phase to three-phase electricity. However, that may have to be done in order to become beneficial and cost effective by putting electricity back into the grid. That was the rationale behind my question.

**Mr Irwin:**

I declare an interest as a member of the Ulster Farmers' Union. The representatives have made a number of good points.

I have been dealing with a case that involves the planning application for a wind farm, which has been in the system since 2006. Hopefully, we will get there in the end. In the eyes of the applicant and myself, the issues on which the application has been turned down are very minor, yet the process has been going on for four years.

You said that the average cost of grid connections in some parts of Europe was as low as €8,000, compared with an average of £50,000 here. Surely cost is a big impediment for people trying to connect to the grid, and it may turn people off going down that route?

I was involved with a couple of applications for biodigesters that were recently approved by planners. Therefore, planners seem to be working better on those, and perhaps that is because they do not have such a big impact on an area. In the main, biodigesters seem to be a very large investment of £1 million or more. Do you not accept that there will probably be only one or two in each county in Northern Ireland? There will not be a large number, because they are a very large investment.

**Mr McElrea:**

It is a very large investment for those going forward under the current economics. Much smaller plants could operate if the financial incentive was changed. The £1 million plants probably produce half a megawatt. Anaerobic digesters can go down to 20 kilowatts. However, nobody is looking at those because they do not make financial sense here at the moment. If financial incentives changed, the whole outlook would change.

People may see financial incentives as a subsidy. However, the fossil fuel sector is also subsidised. If we put in the large grid infrastructure needed for large wind farms, it will be subsidised

as well. We are not looking for anything that the other sectors are not getting.

**Dr McDonnell:**

Is the grid connection cost the cost of the equipment to make the connection or an arbitrary fee charged by the grid owner?

**Mr McElrea:**

They say that it is a price for the grid equipment. However, when we try to break down their cost of grid equipment, we find difficulty in their costs versus costs in other areas of Europe.

**Dr McDonnell:**

Therefore, it is an inflated charge for grid equipment.

**Mr McElrea:**

It is either an inflated charge or other areas have grid incentives. However, we do not know how their regulators work. The average person cannot buy or get prices for the sort of equipment that is required. Therefore, only they are in control of the prices for that equipment.

**Dr McDonnell:**

If you were to be given a wish list, what three recommendations would you want the Committee to make in its report to overcome the obstacles, logjam or frustrations?

**Mr Osborne:**

A new grid.

**Mr Aston:**

We talked about the marketplace delivering, so there has to be a clear and coherent energy policy that co-ordinates across Government Departments in order that we all know exactly where we are going. It is piecemeal at present. We know that things are starting to move, but we are not there yet. We need a clear policy as to where we are going. The impediments to establishing a renewable energy infrastructure, including planning, would have to go into the mix. Initial equivalent treatment is needed across all technologies, and communication with the public about the need for such schemes for energy security. That would be a big help in moving us forward. Those are three initial wishes off the top of my head. My colleagues may like to add something else.

**Mr Osborne:**

If money were no option, there should be a brand new grid. I would start again at the very beginning.

If the Committee had a magic wand, it could give us a perfectly working supply chain. The hemp example would not have happened, and the production of biomass from the ground would move forward. Cross-departmental support is also required, with Departments working efficiently with one other. To get a sustainable, renewable industry in Northern Ireland, every Department that is involved needs to work together, including DETI, the Department of Finance and Personnel, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, of course, and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I can think of those Departments off the top of my head. As I said, there is a certain element of fantasy and involvement of a magic wand, but that is where I am coming from.

**Dr McDonnell:**

So, we need another quango.

**Mr Osborne:**

No, that is not what we are saying.

**Dr McDonnell:**

Do we need another quango? I pose that question constructively. We could have a magic roundabout with someone from each Department turning up to a monthly meeting where they would have tea and buns and nice conversations but little output. How do we structure that? We need to tunnel down into that. Radical changes are needed and will be forced on us by economics and the absence of finance. We have to try to ensure that we do not end up with the wrong changes. In yours and the previous presentation, it has come through loudly that we will have to ensure that there is a robust energy strategy and team in spite of the fact that finances are going in the other direction. How do we achieve that? I know that I may be bouncing you, but how do we get a structure in DETI that drives renewable energy?

**Mr Osborne:**

Our chairman can answer that.

**Mr McElrea:**

We know of the example of what is happening in England, Scotland and Wales. A body called the National Non-Food Crops Centre has been set up. It was funded through the former Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). The National Non-Food Crops Centre provides the link between industry, agriculture and government, and it speaks to all three. For example, in the rest of the UK, it got together people who wanted to plant hemp with farmers and created an industry.



We have no such body here. We have no one who is talking to all levels of government. The National Non-Food Crops Centre is a quango, but it is impartial and can tell the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) and DEFRA that there is an issue in the supply chain and ask what those Departments can do to sort it out. It meets them on a level basis. Here, we have even more Departments that are looking at renewable energy, and that has created even more confusion because no one knows who is in charge of what and who is doing what.

**Dr McDonnell:**

They are all having grand thoughts with no product. How do we get a product?

**Mr McElrea:**

It will take industry to create the product, but the policy and infrastructure is needed to allow the product to be developed. The agriculture industry is crying out to go ahead with that. We need the financial incentives and the cross-departmental co-operation to allow that to go ahead. As we said, there is no point in promoting wind energy if a planner suggests sticking a windmill down a hollow and hiding it. That does not make sense.

**The Chairperson:**

I am going to call a halt to this session. I think that Dr McDonnell is finished, and I do not see any other questions. Thank you for your presentations, which have been extremely helpful to the Committee. You answered a lot of questions and stimulated a lot of interest. If you have any further ideas, particularly on the point that Dr McDonnell put about dealing at a governmental level with industry and on the whole issue of development, you could reflect on them and come back to us. That would be very helpful. Thank you for your submission, gentlemen; it has been extremely helpful.

**Mr Aston:**

If I may, I will conclude from our end, Chairman. We will reflect on what Dr McDonnell said. I have a final message, which is that, although our frustration has come out, I hope that our willingness to play our role has come out clearly as well. There are opportunities there.

**The Chairperson:**

That is very clear. Thank you very much, Mr Aston.