

Speech: Ulster Farmers' Union Annual Dinner Speech

I would like to begin by congratulating President Barclay Bell and guests for this celebration of all that is good with Northern Ireland food and farming.

And it is right that we take the time to promote and celebrate the success of the industry given its vital contribution to the economy of Northern Ireland – not least as we approach the UFU's centenary year in 2018.

I may not know the ins and outs of a stripper sow or a well sprung heifer, but I do understand how fundamental agriculture is to Northern Ireland.

With a 48,000 strong workforce, agriculture is one of Northern Ireland's most significant employers.

Its 25,000 farms cover over 1 million hectares, with its farmers, food producers and traditional food crafts NI produce is renowned at home and abroad.

And you also play a key role in contributing to the £4.5bn annual turnover of the agri-food industry as a whole, helping to deliver a stronger, more secure economy in Northern Ireland.

And as tonight reminds us it is not just an industry committed to growing the economy but a social and cultural force too.

One that supports rural communities and networks, investing in the next generation so it can thrive – with projects like the Next Generation Forum and the Land Mobility Project, which will help the industry realize its ambitious plan for the next 20 years.

So tonight is a welcome opportunity to showcase the best of the industry, and to set out the importance of working together to reinforce and strengthen its opportunities for growth.

But people in Northern Ireland also need to have a stable base from which to seize those opportunities. And that means stable government.

As a Government we are doing everything we can to secure the resumption of the Executive and end the ongoing uncertainty and disruption.

And I hope that all here today will underline the need for constructive engagement to reach a positive conclusion as quickly as possible in the critical weeks to come.

But coming back to tonight, I want to acknowledge the many innovative and creative farmers here in Northern Ireland who are at the forefront of their sectors.

Whether that be the well-trusted Wilson's Country Potato range; the Forest Feast portfolio that sells in 36 countries worldwide; the innovative apple juices and ciders of the McCann family of Co. Armagh; or diversification projects like the Hillstown farm shop on the Logan family farm in Randalstown – the agri-food industry here punches well above its weight.

And it is essential that the industry as a whole will continue to innovate and to capitalise on growth opportunities, as it reaches out to new and existing markets.

I will continue to engage with the industry to do just that – including by looking at how to leverage new opportunities as we leave the European Union.

And it is perhaps worth me pausing to say a few words on that subject, because I am keenly aware – from my Business Advisory Group engagements and remarks again here tonight – of the strong interest there is about our way forward, especially now that we have triggered the Article 50 process.

As the Prime Minister set out in her letter to President Tusk, we are clear in our intent in wanting to secure tariff-free and barrier-free trade. We want to agree a deep and special partnership between the UK and the EU, taking in both economic and security cooperation.

And as Secretary of State, I am fully committed to ensuring that the unique interests of Northern Ireland will be protected and advanced, and the UK's unique relationship with the Republic of Ireland recognised. It is notable that the Prime Minister included a specific reference to this unique relationship as a priority in the Article 50 letter which also set out the desire to avoid any return to a hard border.

Those here today can be assured that we are going to make the most of the opportunities that our departure presents to Northern Ireland.

In particular we will prioritise an outcome that means the land border remains as seamless and frictionless as possible, recognising the particular issues for businesses, like many of those represented here tonight, with complex cross-border supply chains and distinct animal and plant health regimes.

Earlier this week we published the Great Repeal Bill White Paper to provide clarity and certainty for businesses, workers and consumers across the United Kingdom on the day we leave the EU.

As powers return from the EU, we have an opportunity to determine the level best placed to take decisions on these issues, ensuring power sits closer to the people of the United Kingdom than ever before.

In some areas, this will require common UK frameworks. Decisions will be required about where a common framework is needed and, if it is, how it might be established. The devolved administrations also acknowledge the importance of common UK frameworks. We will work closely to deliver an approach that works for the whole of the United Kingdom and reflects the needs and individual circumstances of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

And working together, we can deliver our vision for a world-leading, secure agri-food industry and a cleaner, healthier environment, benefiting people and the economy alike.

I know the Environment Secretary Andrea Leadsom enjoyed her visit to Northern Ireland at the end of last year. I have had the opportunity to meet some representatives of the agri-food sector in Northern Ireland.

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State Lord Dunlop has also taken a keen interest in the local sector. I know many of you will have spoken to him in recent weeks.

At the recent National Farmers' Union Conference the Environment Secretary set out her priorities for building world-leading food and farming industries.

She is very clear that we have a significant opportunity to design new, better and more efficient policies for delivering sustainable and productive farming, land management and rural communities.

I am also pleased that the Treasury has provided a guarantee to the agricultural sector that it will receive the same level of funding that it would have received under Pillar 1 of CAP until the end of the MFF (Multiannual Financial Framework) in 2020.

It provides certainty and continuity while we develop a new approach to supporting agriculture and protecting our precious countryside.

Mr President, there is much to acknowledge, much to be positive about, and much to celebrate this evening.

I would like to once again thank President Bell and guests for the hospitality extended to me, and look forward to continuing to celebrate the many successes of the industry now and in the years to come.

[Smoking at all time low as Wales marks 10th anniversary of ban](#)

The percentage of adults smoking is now at a record low. The Welsh Health Survey 2015 showed that 19% of adults smoke, a significant decrease from 25% in 2005/6. This has exceeded the Welsh Government target of reducing smoking rates to 20% by 2016.

The Minister marked the occasion by visiting Malpas Court Primary School in Newport. The school has recently achieved the National Quality Award as part of the Welsh Network of Healthy School Schemes (WNHSS) and is the 130th

School in Wales to do so. Tobacco use is one of the topics covered under the scheme. Pupils talked to the Minister about smoking and shared their thoughts on what a smokefree Wales means to them.

Clare Harvey, Health and Wellbeing Coordinator at Malpas Court Primary School said:

“As a smokefree school, we provide an environment that protects and promotes the health and wellbeing of the entire school community.

Through our PSE curriculum pupils learn how smoking is addictive, expensive and could have a detrimental effect on their health. As a Healthy School, we are invested in educating our pupils about such issues which protects them and our future generations. We are proud to be one of a small number of schools in Newport to be awarded the Healthy Schools NQA and we encourage our pupils to embrace this in daily school life.”

To help continue this success, the Minister has today announced funding of £417,000 over three years to ASH Wales, the leading third sector organisation working for a smokefree Wales. The funding will contribute to the delivery of the Welsh Government’s Tobacco Control Action Plan, which aims to reduce the prevalence of adult smoking to 16% by 2020.

Chief Executive of the tobacco control campaign group ASH Wales Cymru, Suzanne Cass, said:

“The smoking ban is one of the most important steps forward our nation has taken to protect our health. Since the ban was implemented in 2007, we have seen an incredible change in attitudes towards smoking which has resulted in 5% less people and 94,000 fewer adults still smoking.

“Thanks to this incredible funding from Welsh Government, we can continue to work together to support the remaining 19% of those still addicted to tobacco to choose smokefree and lead a healthier, happier life for themselves and their families.”

The Minister said:

“The ban on smoking in indoor public places has been a huge success. The percentage of adults smoking is now at a record low. This will improve people’s health and life expectancy, and will reduce pressures on the NHS.

“It also means that future generations are protected from the effects of smoking, and do not grow up seeing it as a normal activity.

“We are continuing our efforts to support smokers to quit by signposting them to free NHS cessation services. If passed, the Public Health Bill will ban smoking in playgrounds, schools and hospital grounds, to continue the remarkable culture-change we have seen around smoking in Wales in recent years. I want everyone in Wales to ‘Choose Smokefree’.”

[News story: UK and US continue collaborative nuclear agreement](#)

On March 8 2017, the 16th Standing Committee Meeting was held on the fringes of the annual Waste Management Conference in Phoenix, Arizona.

The meeting included members of the US Department of Energy (DOE) Environmental Management (EM), Savannah River National Laboratory (SRNL), UK’s Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA) and its subsidiaries RWM and Sellafield Ltd along with the UK National Nuclear Laboratory (NNL) and the UK Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. They discussed the current collaborative activities between the organisations under the DOE/NDA/NNL trilateral Statement of Intent (SOI).

The SOI has been in place since 2007 and was recently renewed for a further 5 years through to March 2022. Since its inception, numerous information and lessons learned exchanges have taken place under the auspices of the SOI on a wide variety of topics ranging from contracting strategies to plutonium management. Current activities are focused on start-up and commissioning, aging infrastructure management and robotics/remote technology development and implementation.

All participants agreed that, going forward, they will focus more effort on developing tangible collaborative projects to better leverage the excellent long term relationships that have been formed and maximise the financial and technical benefit of the arrangement on both sides of the Atlantic.

Adrian Simper, Director of Technology and Strategy at the NDA, said:

The intangible benefits of this relationship have been excellent in terms of the sharing of know-how and lessons learned but to get the greatest value out of the partnership, we need to identify some tangible projects where we can pool our resources and expertise.

Ana Han, Head of US Department of Energy (DOE) Environmental Management’s International Program said:

The US/UK collaboration continues to set the benchmark for other government-to-government collaborative efforts but we both know that we can do better and that will be the focus of effort over the next 5 years.

The 17th Standing Committee Meeting is planned to take place in Manchester in November in the margins of the NDA Estate Supply Chain Event.

[News story: HMRC launches a new way to report income and expenses online](#)

HM Revenue and Customs' (HMRC) ambition for most businesses to keep records digitally and send quarterly summary updates moves a step closer with the launch of the Making Tax Digital for Business (MTDfB) pilot.

In April, HMRC will invite some customers, both businesses and their agents to sign up for a new way to report income and expenses online. At different stages of the pilot customers will help HMRC develop and improve the new service by:

- using accounting software to record their business income and expenses
- sending summary reports of their income and expenses direct from their digital records quarterly or more often if they choose
- signing up to go paperless

Based on the information they report, customers will get an estimated tax calculation.

As soon as the new service has been tested with the first group of businesses and agents, other customers will be able to join the pilot. These customers will be able to report their income and expenses for the quarter they join as well as any previous quarters.

Customers who aren't invited to take part in the pilot at the beginning won't be able to start sending quarterly reports to HMRC immediately, but they can:

- start to use accounting software to keep their records if they don't already
- check with their software supplier, or agent, that any software they use, including spreadsheets, is compatible with quarterly reporting

HMRC will publish a list of software suppliers who've developed compatible software and registered with them later in the year. Some of this software is free.

In a recent [agents blog](#) HMRC explains how it's working with tax agents to

bring about this major change.

Find out more about [making tax digital for business](#).

Press release: Innovative moveable weirs now in place

The first phase of the Leeds Flood Alleviation Scheme has reached a major milestone as all three moveable weir gates have now been successfully put in place at Knostrop Weir on the River Aire.

Costing in the region of £50million, the scheme is being led by Leeds City Council in partnership with the Environment Agency.

The final stages of the work at Knostrop include the removal of the remaining cofferdam ahead of it becoming a fully operational flood defence later in May.

The three gates have been constructed as part of an innovative approach using moveable weirs, which can be lowered in flood conditions to reduce river levels and the threat of flooding. This is the first time that moveable weirs are being used in the UK for a flood defence.

The weirs can be lowered, and raised, by deflating and inflating 'bladders' fabricated from a bullet proof neoprene material under each gate, which act like giant air filled pillows.

The first of the weir gates at Knostrop Weir has already been tested. Later this month the cofferdam structure, which was installed to allow a dry working area in the river for the construction of the weir gate, will be flooded with water and the sheet piles then removed.

New fish and eel passes are also being constructed at Knostrop. The structures consist of a number of shallow trays which the fish and eels can swim and jump up, allowing them to migrate upstream. The previous stone weir was approximately three metres high and a barrier to fish and eels moving up the River Aire.

Moveable weirs are also being constructed further upstream at Crown Point in the city centre, where the installation of the first of two weir gates has been completed. Last month, reinforced concrete works were finished which meant the bladders and gates could be fixed in place prior to testing.

Now this gate has been installed and tested, the cofferdam has been flooded and the sheet piles are being removed to allow for work to begin on the final weir gate adjacent to Fearn's Island.

The Leader of Leeds City Council, Cllr Judith Blake, recently visited both sites to see first hand how the weirs will be reducing the risk of flooding to the city.

Leader of Leeds City Council Councillor Judith Blake said:

It was fascinating to see the new flood scheme up close and especially to see the amazing technology and engineering involved in putting these moveable weirs in place to control the flow of the River Aire.

It is such a simple idea but it is fantastic to see Leeds at the cutting-edge of the field using the latest technology in this way.

The value of the Leeds Flood Alleviation Scheme in terms of the reassurance it will offer residents and businesses over the coming years and decades is incalculable, so we very much look forward to seeing phase one complete later this year while we continue to make the strongest possible case for further significant measures to help protect all our communities threatened by flood-risk across the city as soon as possible.

Work on flood defence walls in the Holbeck area are also still underway. Temporary traffic management remains in place and will do so until September 2017. The traffic management has been coordinated with the Bridgewater Place wind baffle scheme in an effort to minimise disruption.

The site works for Phase 1 of the Leeds Flood Alleviation scheme commenced in January 2015 and are due to be completed this summer. It is one of the largest river flood defences in the country. When complete, it will provide an increased level of protection from flooding from the River Aire and Hol Beck for residents and businesses in the city centre. The scheme also includes defences at Woodlesford.

Further information on Phase 1 of the scheme can be found at www.leeds.gov.uk/fas.

Work on phase 2 of the project is currently underway to develop a proposal for how to increase the standard of protection in Leeds including areas such as Kirkstall and Stourton.