

Possible Opening Statement

I appreciate the opportunity to appear before the committee today together with all relevant officers of the department.

I hope today's hearing will provide a good opportunity to put a number of matters to rest.

At the committee's hearing Monday last week, evidence was provided in relation to the handling of a FOI request concerning alterations that had been made to Hansard in October 2014.

At that time, the department acknowledged openly that there had been flaws in its processes.

Today's hearing could allow the committee to consider the issues in fuller context.

In saying this, there is no question that there were errors within the department in the way in which it assisted the Minister's Office in the processing of an FOI request to the Minister for Agriculture.

Following last Monday's hearing there were suggestions that the department may not have adequately dealt with the hearing – presumably partly because there was only partial evidence available.

When there are suggestions that a department has not adequately dealt with a matter, one available approach is to provide as much transparency as possible.

In particular, that includes recognising the areas where the department's systems and processes could be improved.

I believe that all key witnesses necessary to address relevant questions from the committee are here today.

On all the facts that I am aware of, the officers concerned have acted to the best of their ability in good faith. They are all good public servants; in fact, they are excellent public servants who have big futures ahead of them serving the government of the day.

The department has an excellent track record for its professional handling of FOI requests. However, unlike some departments, the Department of

Agriculture does not have the experience of managing a significant number of FOI requests addressed solely and directly to the Minister.

It is in this specific area that the errors have occurred and improvements will need to be made to our systems so that they function more effectively in the future.

No one relishes the prospect of being part of a "learning experience".

However, it is my sincere hope that evidence today will help draw out some of the lessons that we have learnt through this experience.

Moreover, I hope that lessons from this experience may have longer term benefits for this department and possibly for other departments.