

Date: Wednesday 17 April 2002
Time: 2.00pm to 5.20pm
Venue: Committee Room 1, National Assembly Building

Background

1. On 27 February and 13 March 2002, the Agriculture & Rural Development Committee considered the handling of the foot and mouth outbreak by Ministers in the Assembly. Attached are draft findings from these two scrutiny sessions.

Action for the Committee

2. Members are invited to agree the Committee's findings, which will then be forwarded, along with the transcripts of the two meetings, to the UK 'Lessons learned' inquiry team Chaired by Dr Iain Anderson.

Committee Secretariat

April 2002

Committee investigation into the handling of foot & mouth - draft findings

Devolution of animal health powers

The nature of the modern livestock industry means that steps taken to control a contagious disease such as Foot and Mouth must be coherent at a UK level. Nonetheless, the 2001 outbreak demonstrated the

need for government actions to reflect regional and local circumstances. The distinctive topography of Wales, the structure and patterns of its agricultural industry, and the existence of the National Assembly meant that, in several key areas, policy could have been tailored, and decisions taken more quickly, had the National Assembly had greater legislative responsibility. Devolution of animal health powers would also have aided public understanding of governmental accountability in Wales and provided a clearer and more efficient decision-making structure. For example:

- contingency plans could have better reflected particular Welsh circumstances. In the future, the closer relationship the Assembly enjoys with key stakeholders in Wales would enable these to be more easily updated and improved;
- operational decision taking proved to be quicker and clearer when taken at a local level using local advisors. Greater legislative flexibility for the National Assembly would also allow decisions to reflect particular local needs and circumstances without prejudicing national policy;
- the constitutional contradiction that existed in Wales, where Assembly Ministers were often seen as accountable for decisions for which they were not responsible, would have been avoided.

Recommendation: The definition of ‘Minister’ in the Animal Health Act 1981 should be amended by Order in Council to give the National Assembly for Wales the same powers in Wales as are currently exercised by DEFRA

Recommendation: Appropriate resources should be transferred to the National Assembly for Wales to ensure that these new powers can be fully exercised.

Contingency planning

Existing contingency plans were inadequate to cope with an outbreak of Foot and Mouth disease on the scale seen in 2001. Given that the disease had not been seen in the UK since 1967, and never on such a scale, this is unsurprising. However, given the risk of importation of contaminated produce and the potential for rapid spread in today’s livestock industry, it is essential that robust contingency plans are now put in place.

Recommendation: Contingency plans should:

- be developed coherently at a European, UK, regional and local level;
- cover the roles of all tiers of government and a wide range of partner organisations;
- specify clear lines of responsibility and accountability applicable from the very start of an outbreak as well as more narrowly defined operational matters. In Wales the National Assembly should play the key role in managing an outbreak at the operational level;
- be finalised after full consultation with appropriate stakeholders;
- be updated annually to reflect changing legislative, organisational, scientific and industrial

factors.

- be used as a basis for regular training exercises involving all organisations and agencies needed to contribute to disease management activities.

Livestock movement ban

The initial spread of FMD could have been lessened had a ban on livestock movements been implemented sooner. This was the responsibility of MAFF/DEFRA during the 2001 outbreak but future decisions over a movement ban in Wales would be for the National Assembly for Wales following the devolution of animal health powers recommended above.

Recommendation: In the event of any future outbreak, all livestock movements should be halted with immediate effect. Contingency plans should specify this requirement and the definition of immediacy.

Communication and information provision

During a crisis such as that seen in 2001, the importance of communication between tiers of government, public agencies, industry groups and the general public cannot be overstated. The scale of the outbreak and the speed of developments made some delay and confusion inevitable. Nonetheless, the handling of any future outbreak must take account of the need for government to communicate clearly, consistently and rapidly with all affected parties. In part, this is addressed by previous recommendations for contingency plans to clarify lines of responsibility and accountability and the devolution of animal health powers to the National Assembly for Wales.

As the bodies required to implement and enforce much of the relevant legislation, local authorities play a key role on the handling of an animal disease outbreaks. **Recommendation:** The National Assembly should, therefore, develop an agreed communications strategy with local and National Park authorities in Wales, industry representatives and other key bodies such as the RSPCA to ensure speed, clarity and consistency of message and guidance in the event of any future outbreak.

The National Assembly's Minister for Rural Affairs developed a public communications strategy during the outbreak involving factsheets, mailshots, information centres, press advertisements, news broadcasts and daily press conferences. In addition, the public was able to access information via helplines and the internet. **Recommendation:** In the event of a future outbreak, similarly wide ranging measures should be taken to communicate with farmers and the general public again to ensure that key information is disseminated rapidly, clearly and consistently.

Vaccination

Given prevailing international rules and the lack of scientific certainty on sero-testing, the policy of control by culling was the only effective option available to respond to FMD in Wales. This policy, however, proved to be extremely expensive and we believe that both ‘suppressive’ and ‘protective’ vaccination could have roles to play in any future outbreak. **Recommendation:** Continued attention should be given to improving vaccine production, developing rapid response pen-side tests and ensuring that internationally validated differentiation test for vaccinated animals are available and recognised in the rules governing international trade.

Import control

The scope for the National Assembly for Wales alone to tighten controls over the illegal importation of meat products is clearly limited. Indeed, as a member of the European Union, it is beyond the powers of the UK government to limit the free movement of goods from other Members States. Nonetheless, we urge the Minister for Rural Affairs to do all that he can to minimise the risk of a further outbreak arising from illegal imports.

Recommendation: To this end the Welsh Assembly Government should take all reasonable steps to improve security and information at sea and air ports in Wales. The Minister for Rural Affairs should continue to press for strict enforcement at all UK ports of entry, controls at an EU level to minimise the risk of illegal importation and for the EU to assist third countries where Foot and Mouth is endemic.

Access

The outbreak highlighted the importance of walking and gaining access to the countryside to the economy of Wales. Although there is no proven case of a walker spreading the disease, the government should take all reasonable measures to minimise any risk of transmission, including the closure of footpaths. It is vital, though, to communicate clearly the nature of the risks involved and the justification for restricting access to the countryside.

Recommendation: contingency plans should incorporate risk assessment models to enable decisions over the closure and re-opening of footpaths to be taken swiftly, coherently and in a manner clearly understood by local authorities and the general public.

Disposal

Disposal of animal carcasses proved to be one of the most difficult issues handled during the outbreak. Rendering was the preferred method of disposal but much of the UK's rendering capacity was taken up by the disposal needs of disease hot-spot areas such as Devon and Cumbria. Although some rendering capacity was secured for Welsh animals, this was insufficient to deal with the scale of the outbreak and so National Assembly officials and decision-makers across Wales were left with the almost impossible task of identifying suitable alternatives. On-farm burial was not possible due to geological constraints, the use of landfill sites was unpopular with local authorities and residents, leaving only on-farm pyres and mass disposal sites as options. In the future, such decisions should be taken on the basis of an agreed disposal strategy, not at short notice in the pressurised atmosphere of outbreak management.

Recommendation: contingency plans should, with the agreement of local authorities and communities, identify a hierarchy of disposal methods and sites for use in any future outbreak, focussing on rendering, incineration and managed landfill. Sites to be used should be identified subject to environmental risk assessment.

Economic recovery

The 2001 outbreak demonstrated the fragile and integrated nature of the rural economy. Farm businesses were obviously affected but the consequential effects on the rural economy as a whole were serious. In the future, this wider economic impact should be recognised from the start and taken into account in the implementation of our earlier recommendations and the management of the outbreak.

Although public aid will always be limited, the scale and speed of the recovery package put in place was largely welcomed by rural businesses. The formula used to distribute assistance did, though, generate some criticism for not targeting funding on those areas worst affected, though it is recognised the impact went beyond those areas directly concerned.

Recommendation: the wider impact on the rural economy should be taken into account when drawing up contingency plans and in the management of any future outbreak.

Recommendation: in the event of any similar outbreak, any economic support packages should be delivered as quickly as possible and targeted as far as possible on those areas most affected.

Committee Secretariat

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