

Lesley Griffiths AM  
Cabinet Secretary for Energy, Planning and Rural Affairs  
Welsh Government

19 December 2017

Dear Lesley,

### **Bovine TB**

The Committee published the report of its inquiry into Bovine TB in May 2017. In that report, the Committee endorsed the Welsh Government's proposed refreshed approach, set within a new regionalised framework. We were pleased that you accepted 10 of out 12 of our recommendations, and the other 2 in principle.

The Committee welcomes your written statement of 12 December, in which you referred to the Committee's report and announced a national Bovine TB eradication target for Wales. The Committee looks forward to discussing this, along with the proposed interim milestones, with you in due course.

At our meeting on 22 November we heard a presentation from Dr Gareth Enticott, School of Geography and Planning, Cardiff University, who undertook some detailed work on this topic on behalf of the Assembly's Research Service<sup>1</sup>. As a result, it was agreed that I should write to you about several issues raised in our discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> We understand that the Research Service will shortly be publishing two documents associated with this research work: 'Bovine TB in Wales: governance and risk' and 'Brexit implications for Bovine TB in Wales'.



## **Bovine TB Testing**

In its report, the Committee recommended that the Welsh Government:

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...should maintain a watching brief on the latest scientific evidence for bovine TB testing and explore all options for an effective testing regime which is proportional to the risks identified. (Recommendation 4).

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There have been recent reports of alternative tests being trialled in the UK, including a trial of a new phage test in Devon. Are you keeping this trial under review, and are you considering trialling alternative tests (other than SICCT and gamma interferon blood test) as additional measure for supporting the eradication of Bovine TB in Wales?

In relation to this matter, the Committee would be grateful for an update on any consideration you have given to whether there is sufficient flexibility within the current testing regime. There could be, for example, opportunities to use different tests at different stages of the Eradication Programme. This would accord with the Committee's recommendation in relation to a regime that is proportional to the risks identified. Of course, this would require additional work to ensure that farmers fully understand why such flexibility might be necessary and why different approaches might be taken, depending on the circumstances.

There are health and safety risks arising from the current testing regime, as there will always be when working closely with livestock. What arrangements are in place to monitor and record health and safety incidents relating to Bovine TB testing of cattle? Has any consideration been given to how testing for Bovine TB can be made safer for both vets and farmers?

## **Risk Based Trading**

In its report, the Committee expressed support for the Welsh Government's proposal to encourage Informed Purchasing, also known as Risk Based Trading. The Committee recommended:



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... a system of Risk Based Trading should be taken forward voluntarily in the first instance with the industry and livestock markets. This should be kept under review and, if necessary, introduced on a mandatory basis. (Recommendation 6).

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The Committee would be grateful for clarification of how you will assess whether and when a mandatory scheme is necessary. What conditions do you believe will need to be met to require a mandatory approach? The Committee would be grateful for any further information you have on the likely impact of a mandatory Risk Based Trading system, and how that compares to a voluntary system. We would also be grateful for an update on how activity under existing voluntary schemes, such as the ibTB mapping tool and CHeCS, is being monitored and reported. We are aware that in 2015, the Welsh Government provided grant funding to allow livestock markets to upgrade information facilities. Do you have any plans to do so again, or to undertake other market-related initiatives that encourage sellers to show information relating to the TB status of their cattle for sale and therefore, aid farmers to visualise the risk of cattle they are looking to buy.

Finally, what consideration has been given to reporting arrangements in the context of the regionalised framework of the refreshed approach? Such as reporting on 'risky' cattle movements at a regional level to help promote a culture of biosecurity, or years Bovine TB free in High Risk Area.

## **Governance**

The Committee made several recommendations in relation to governance in its report. Good governance arrangements, such as the involvement and participation of farmers and vets in policy making can be effective in increasing compliance, draws upon the expertise of those who are working in this area on a day to day basis and can ultimately encourage leadership in management of the disease. The Committee is aware of experiences of Bovine TB governance systems in Australia and New Zealand. These highlight the direct involvement of members of



the farming industry to introduce changes to the way the government managed Bovine TB. This involvement resulted in greater participation in policy making, financial contributions from all beneficiaries of Bovine TB eradication programmes, e.g. farmers and government, and the implementation of successful interventions, such as the development of Risk Based Trading.

The Committee is aware of the TB Eradication Programme Board and the three regional Delivery Boards. The Committee is interested in how governance arrangements can be developed in Wales to support eradication. In particular, we would be interested in your views on the extent and effectiveness of partnership working to take this agenda forward.

The Committee is also interested in whether you consider there is an appetite amongst the farming community, veterinary professionals and representative organisations to take a stronger leadership role. What improvements or changes in existing governance arrangements would need to take place to encourage such an approach?

Finally, what do you see as the role of vets, farmers and farming organisations? What types of decisions should stakeholders be empowered to take?

## **Brexit**

Figures provided to the Committee, at our meeting on 22 November, suggest that the proportion of Overseas Qualified Vets in Wales has risen from 19% in 2007 to 26% in 2017. Also, that 80% of the Animal and Plant Health Agency's veterinary labour force is from overseas. A reduction in the number of overseas vets conducting TB testing as a result of leaving the European Union could, therefore, have a considerable impact on the ability to deliver the Welsh Government's Bovine TB Eradication Programme.

What assessment has been made of the potential impact of Brexit on those in the veterinary workforce involved in Bovine TB-related functions? Are arrangements in



place to monitor the number of overseas vets working in Wales and what plans do you have to mitigate against any potential negative impact?

One potential approach could be through encouraging the retention or return of Welsh vets to rural communities. The Committee would be grateful if you could provide information on any assessment you have made of the potential of initiatives such as a bond scheme.

### **Reporting on progress**

The Wales TB Eradication Programme Delivery Plan states:

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This Delivery Plan will be subject to review and updates will be undertaken as and when necessary. As time goes on, the boundaries for the TB Areas will also be reviewed and changes will be made when it is appropriate to do so.

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There has been some discussion in the Assembly Chamber about the reporting process relating to this matter. The Committee would be grateful if you would consider reporting to the Committee in October 2018 on progress and, henceforth, on an annual basis. The Committee would be grateful if your report could address progress at a programme level and on the efficacy of specific measures, such as the voluntary approach to Informed Purchasing and the regionalised approach to disease management.

This would not, of course, preclude you from reporting to the Assembly as a whole. In fact, the Committee's preferred approach would be for the annual report on progress to be discussed in Government time in Plenary. The Committee also looks forward to receiving your report on progress after the first 12 months of the targeted badger removal programme (recommendation 8 of the Committee's report.)



I would be grateful if you could respond to this request for information by **5 February 2018**. I look forward to receiving your response and having the opportunity to discuss this and related matters with you in due course.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mike Hedges". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'M'.

**Mike Hedges AM**

**Chair of Climate Change, Rural Affairs and Environment Committee**

