

Lesley Griffiths AM
Minister for Environment, Energy and Rural Affairs

16 December 2019

Dear Lesley

Thank you for attending our meeting on 20 November to give evidence in connection with the Welsh Government's Bovine TB Eradication Programme and other key policy areas within your portfolio.

Following the meeting, the Committee agreed that I should write to you to request further clarification and/or information on the issues below.

Bovine Tuberculosis

Informed Purchasing

During the evidence session, we raised with you reports that limited TB information is displayed at sales to assist farmers in making Informed Purchasing decisions. This is despite grant funding for livestock markets to improve their equipment and facilities, in order to prominently display TB information. **We would like you to provide details on the criteria attached to this grant funding. We would also like you to provide details of any work undertaken to assess whether this funding has led to improvements in the display of TB information in livestock markets.**

In Plenary in April 2019, you expressed a preference for a voluntary Informed Purchasing system, but explained you were "looking at whether we need to bring forward a mandatory scheme". In giving evidence, you told us that you were "developing proposals for a mandatory system", alongside DEFRA, and that this was "a top priority".



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We would like you to report back on the findings of any evaluation of the voluntary Informed Purchasing system, and to explain how these have informed your decision to introduce a mandatory system.

We would like you to update us, in six months, on progress in developing proposals for a mandatory scheme, including the timescales you are working towards. In addition, we would like you to clarify whether the legislative changes needed to introduce a mandatory system would require primary legislation.

It is clear that proposals for a mandatory system are in the early stages of development. It is essential that the Welsh Government maintains efforts to encourage Informed Purchasing until such time as a mandatory system is in place. Given this, we welcome your commitment to revisit existing voluntary measures, to identify areas for improvement, and to consider developing a code of practice, in conjunction with the industry. **We would like you to update us, in six months, on progress in taking forward this work.**

Compensating farmers

We note that approximately £14.5 million in compensation was paid to Welsh farmers between 2018-19, which is a significant increase on previous years. You have made clear that spending at this level is “unsustainable”. However, you told us that the current compensation system was “fair”, particularly compared with systems elsewhere.

We note that you have begun work on identifying options for changing the current system. We reiterate the need for any new system, or iteration of the current system, to be fair, and to provide reasonable compensation for cattle slaughtered.

We would like you to provide further details on the purpose and objectives of the review of the current TB compensation system. We would also like you to update us on the timescale for completion of the review when it becomes clearer.

We are disappointed that the UK Government has yet to commit to address any shortfall in funding for Wales’ Bovine TB Eradication Programme arising from the UK’s departure from the European Union. **We expect you to pursue this matter with the incoming UK Government and to report back to us on the outcome of future discussions at the first available opportunity.**



Agriculture

Farm support

In giving evidence, you told us that your priority is to ensure the continuation of farm support in the event that the UK exits the EU. The UK Agriculture Bill included powers for the Welsh Ministers to provide for the continuation of the Basic Payment Scheme beyond 2020. The UK Bill did not complete its passage through Parliament before it was dissolved. Given this, and your decision not to introduce a Welsh Agriculture Bill until the next Assembly, it is unclear which legislative mechanism you intend to use to extend the Basic Payment Scheme to 2021, as announced in the Winter Fair. **We would like you to clarify this as a matter of urgency.**

Use of antibiotics

During the evidence session, we raised with you the potential public health risks associated with the overuse of antibiotics in the agriculture industry. We are encouraged to hear that “the farming industry and the veterinary profession are leading the way in the responsible use of antibiotics”, and that the 2020 targets to reduce the use of antibiotics has already been met. Notwithstanding this, **we would like you to set out the Welsh Government’s policy on the use of antibiotics of the strongest kind, the last resort for human health. This should include the circumstances under which this type of antibiotics are used and data on usage.**

The use of antibiotics in agriculture is governed by EU regulations. We are concerned about a potential reduction in regulatory standards in the event that the UK exits the EU, and the increased risk to human health by encouraging the development of resistant bacteria.

We would like you to report back to us on the outcome of any discussions you have had with your counterparts in the other UK nations on upholding current standards on antibiotic use in farming in the event that the UK exits the EU.

Common Frameworks

In giving evidence, you told us there are 10 non-legislative common frameworks within your portfolio, and that these “would be in place by the end of the transition period in 2020”. **We would like further details of these non-legislative common frameworks, including an update on progress in their development.**



Rural Development Plan

We note that, at the end of August 2019, the Welsh Government had spent 41 percent of its total allocation for delivery of the Rural Development Plan. **We would like you to explain the reason for this, and to set out how you intend to ensure that the total allocation is committed by the end of 2020.**

Fisheries

We would like you to clarify how many stocks in Welsh waters are currently being exploited at levels consistent with achieving Maximum Sustainable Yield.

We would like you to set out the steps you are taking, or intend to take, to address the problem of abandoned, lost or otherwise discarded fishing gear, including options for potting intensity management (e.g. licensing) and ghost fishing prevention (e.g. pot tagging and escape mechanisms).

Biodiversity

In answering a question in relation to statutory targets for biodiversity, which had been included in the UK Environment Bill, you told us you were not in favour of such targets because “they’d undermine the main objective of enhancing biodiversity in the round”.

Given that biodiversity is one of the Welsh Government’s priority areas, and its commitment to the Convention on Biological Diversity Aichi targets, we would like you to clarify your position on biodiversity targets.

Dog Breeding

We welcome your swift response to the recent damning media reports about welfare standards in some dog breeding establishments, which includes an “urgent and immediate” review of the Animal Welfare (Breeding of Dogs) (Wales) Regulations 2014 (‘the 2014 Regulations’). You told us that you are expecting the task and finish group undertaking the review to report back “by the end of this year”.

We would like you to report back on the findings of the review as soon as reasonably practicable. In doing so, we would like you to clarify whether it is your intention to revise the 2014 Regulations following the review, and to provide a timescale for the introduction of revised regulations.



In taking forward this work, we would like you to consider introducing an assurance scheme and/or an inspection rating system for dog breeding establishments akin to those used in the farming and food industry.

We seek a commitment from you to consider increasing the minimum staff requirement in relation to the staff to dog ratio. The revised minimum staff requirement must take account of the number of puppies, as well as adult dogs, kept in dog breeding establishments.

More stringent licensing requirements may go some way in improving animal welfare in dog breeding establishments. But, these must be accompanied by an effective inspection and enforcement regime. We are encouraged to hear that discussions have already taken place with local authority representatives to identify barriers to enforcement. **As part of this work, we would like you to consider introducing a limit on the number of licensed dog breeding establishments relative to the number of inspectors within the local authority area.**

We would like you to report back on progress made in addressing barriers to enforcement. This should include details of any proposals aimed at ensuring that local authorities have effective, and adequately resourced, inspection and enforcement arrangements in place.

We would like you to provide details of any specific measures you are taking, or intend to take, to help tackle unlicensed dog breeders.

Fireworks

We would like you to outline any steps you are taking, or intend to take, to mitigate the risks to animal welfare associated with the use of fireworks.

Fuel poverty

As you know, the Committee is undertaking an inquiry into fuel poverty in Wales. In order to help us plan our work, we would welcome an update on the timing of the publication of the Welsh Government's new fuel poverty plan. The Welsh Government's consultation, *The Clean Air Plan for Wales Healthy Air, Healthy Wales* states that it has already consulted on a new plan to tackle fuel poverty and expects this plan to be published by April 2020. We are not aware that the draft plan has been subject to consultation.



We would like you to clarify when consultation on the Welsh Government's new fuel poverty plan took place and to confirm the timing of the publication of the plan.

I look forward to receiving a response from you.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mike Hedges". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned on a light grey rectangular background.

Mike Hedges AM
Chair of Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg.

We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.

