

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Moving animals across borders, HC 79

Tuesday 8 June 2021

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Members present: Neil Parish (Chair); Ian Byrne; Geraint Davies; Dave Doogan; Rosie Duffield; Dr Neil Hudson; Robbie Moore; Mrs Sheryll Murray.

Questions 124 – 188

Witnesses

I: Professor Christine Middlemiss, UK Chief Veterinary Officer; Ian Hewett, Interim Chief Executive, Animal and Plant Health Agency; Steve Dann, Director, National Operational Headquarters, Border Force.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Christine Middlemiss, Ian Hewett and Steve Dann.

Q124 **Chair:** Welcome to the EFRA Select Committee's continuing inquiry on moving animals across borders. We are delighted to have with us today Professor Christine Middlemiss, chief veterinary officer; Ian Hewett, interim chief executive of the Animal and Plant Health Agency; and Steve Dann, director of National Operational Headquarters from the Border Force. Could Christine, Ian and Steve say a little bit about themselves, and then we will get into the first question?

Professor Middlemiss: I am Christine Middlemiss. I am the UK chief veterinary officer and the England chief veterinary officer. I have been in post three years now. I lead on veterinary and SPS technical advice to senior officials and Ministers. I am the face of what we call the central competent authority, which is UK Government's assurance and verification to trade partners that what we are trading meets their requirements, is what it says is and has the health status that it says it has. Likewise, for imports, I give advice to Ministers on animal-related biosecurity risks and how we mitigate against those.

Ian Hewett: I am Ian Hewett. I am currently service delivery director of the Animal and Plant Health Agency, and I start as interim chief executive officer on Friday of this week. The responsibilities at present involve operational delivery across APHA's set of responsibilities, which is across England, Scotland and Wales, with different activities in each, including, from this perspective, animals and products of animal origin in terms of certification but also covers plant health, plant exports and trade as well. I am moving into a wider role with effect from Friday, picking up the scientific responsibilities as well.

Steve Dann: Good afternoon. I am the director for national operations in Border Force. It is a central role that oversees the national responsibilities, contingency resourcing and the national operations centre, the 24/7 command and control unit. Regionally, the regional directors have responsibility for delivery of operational responses at the ports and airports. There are five regional directors, and I influence and support them from a central position, but I also own the tasking co-ordination process that sits within Border Force.

Q125 **Chair:** Thank you very much to all three of you for joining us this afternoon. The first questions are targeted particularly to Ian and Steve, but, Christine, if you want to make some comments regarding the veterinary side of it and what-have-you, please do. When it comes to the movement of animals across Britain's borders and the prevention of pet smuggling, can you explain APHA and Border Force's responsibilities? Who wants to go first?

Ian Hewett: I am happy to lead on this and bring in Steve as appropriate, if that is acceptable. In terms of our respective



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responsibilities, APHA has a lead role in terms of servicing both live animals at border control posts, where they are established, but also in terms of movements through other ports, working in close liaison with the Border Force and wider agencies.

At the strategic level, there is a national co-operation agreement with Defra colleagues and Border Force colleagues. That leads into strategic co-ordination groups, at which Defra policy colleagues are represented, and then APHA colleagues will come in at a local level to work with Border Force colleagues in relation to individual notifications and referrals to APHA, of which there are many hundreds during specific periods. Since November, APHA has been referred nearly 100 cases involving 700 animals. We also receive referrals from a number of other sources, including the police and carriers, et cetera. In the same corresponding period, we had over 100 referrals involving 350 animals.

We work with various agencies in relation to sharing data. This involves local relationships between our inspectors and the formal routes that I have just mentioned. Information is maintained on databases that are shared across Government agency intelligence networks to ensure that we focus on all aspects of the illegal movements of animals.

Q126 Chair: Before I bring Steve in, the second part of my question is about the fact that Lord Goldsmith told us that the APHA and others were developing an intelligence-led approach to work with partners such as HMRC and Border Force. Is this really being developed? We have taken a lot of evidence from various charities and NGOs that there are far too many puppies in particular getting through our borders. How good is your intelligence, putting it bluntly?

Ian Hewett: We do capture intelligence, both from Border Force colleagues and from wider groups, which we then analyse and share. I have a team of people that looks at that intelligence, maintains the database and shares it as appropriate with the different agencies. We react to the referrals that we get in from the likes of Border Force and make a number of visits and interceptions as a result.

Q127 Chair: If I can bring in Steve, how are you as Border Force working? As far as I can see, there appear to be, dare I say it, a lot of boxes being ticked, but are we actually stopping these puppies and other pets coming through illegally? The puppies are worth a lot of money at the moment, and there are lots of organised gangs out there doing this. Are you confident that we are stopping some of them, all of them or what? Where do you think it is?

Steve Dann: Ian captured the end-to-end process, but we need to be clear that Border Force's role is really the detection, detention and referral aspects of this. The actual intelligence and prosecution responsibilities lie with APHA. Our role is very much, as I say, on detection, detaining people and then referring very closely.



What is very reassuring for me and a part of my preparation for this is how good the relationships are with our colleagues in Defra and other agencies. We have very regular meetings that take place. We also touched on the strategic threat assessment, which we develop annually in consultation with all key partners, including Defra. The prioritisation of activity takes place from that and then we have regular tasking co-ordination group meetings, which again Defra attends, at that operational level to determine activity.

In answer to your question, there is information and intelligence that is passed on. Ian touched on the 100 different cases. The 659 puppies that I have from Dover that have been referred to APHA is an example of the activity that we undertake. As always with these things, I am sure there is more we could do and develop as well.

Q128 Chair: We can work out that probably between 7,000 and 8,000 puppies are needed a year. We do not breed anywhere near that number in this country. It would be interesting to be able to work out the figures of puppies that are legitimately being brought through and how many there are in this gap. I think the 659 will be a very small proportion of those that are getting through. I suggest to you that it is in the thousands. This is where the problem is. We are at the tip of the iceberg.

I will not go into out-of-hours and things, because that is the next question, but—I am sorry—we will need to up our game. I am just not convinced that the game is being upped enough. Are you all conscious that you really do need to up your game? I am not criticising you just for the sake of it. I am just saying that there are a lot of people getting through, and they are not being detected. What are you putting in place to try to get to grips with the sheer scale? There is big scale. It could be £2,000, £3,000 or £4,000 a puppy. It is big money, basically, and there are a lot of gangs out there. What are you really doing to up it?

Ian Hewett: In terms of referrals from Border Force, I mentioned other sources. Recognising what you said in terms of scale, to give you context, in 2020 APHA detained 1,350 cats and dogs, many of which were puppies under six months of age. We have seen a corresponding figure for 2021 thus far. That is in terms of what we are doing at the moment.

In terms of the future, we know about the challenges, which I am sure the Committee will want to come on to, in relation to the kept animals legislation but also in terms of training. Of course, the other factor—I mentioned this right at the start—is that we already undertake checks of live animals at border control posts. The expectation is that we will be doing more of that once additional BCPs come on stream in 2022.

Steve Dann: Clearly, Border Force has massive competing priorities in various areas as well. We are very much driven by the strategic threat assessments and the control strategy that comes out of that. We are obviously very dependent on the intelligence that is provided on this. The regular meetings that take place—the monthly meetings, the quarterly



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meetings and the annual threat assessments—are where we want that intelligence and information. If there is intelligence and information that allows us to take proactive action, we will work with our partners in doing that.

Again, I would just highlight that this is not an assigned matter for Border Force at this moment in time. We do not have those powers of prosecution. It is very much about detect, detain and then refer to our partners.

Q129 **Chair:** Ian gave us the figure of 1,350. You could at least add another nought to that—13,500. I am not sure you could not actually add two noughts to it. We are really only at the tip of the iceberg.

Christine, we are now trying to make sure, are we not, that puppies have to be 15 weeks old when they come through? You are a vet. Various breeds will have different types of teeth and what-have-you. Do we have the expertise at the borders to be able to know whether these puppies are 15 weeks old or not?

Professor Middlemiss: We have the expertise as good as we can have, in recognition of the fact that, as you said, with 15-week-old puppies that are still growing rapidly and with different breeds, it is not easy. That is why I am pleased to see the kept animals Bill being introduced today, which will give us enabling powers to change the minimum age at which dogs can be brought in. It is an enabling power so there will be consultation, but the current intention, and my advice, is that we move it to six months. That will have lots of benefits, one of which will be in terms of the ageing. It will be much easier to clearly see how old the animals are at that stage.

Q130 **Chair:** That is a very sensible idea. Most laypeople would be able to work out if a puppy was quite young or if it was six months old.

Professor Middlemiss: Yes, absolutely.

Q131 **Chair:** It is not an easy job that you are all doing on the borders. I know I am being quite tough on you, but, like I said, we have to try to make it to a place where you can actually enforce the law and not just make more laws that you cannot then enforce or that you do not have the resources to enforce. I accept all of that.

Professor Middlemiss: Can I just add that it is particularly hard with some of the newer crosses and things—I am not sure we would call them “breeds”—that we are seeing nowadays? It is not a poodle or a cocker spaniel but a mix of the two, which means that trying to age it gets even more complicated. The Bill will really make a difference to us in this space.

Chair: I agree with you. I hope we can get that enacted fairly quickly. It would be really good to bring in the six-month rule.

Q132 **Geraint Davies:** Ian Hewett, we heard from witnesses that there are



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virtually no checks done on animals over the weekend and out-of-hours. Therefore, there is a fear that tens of thousands of puppies are being smuggled, in essence. Lord Goldsmith has told us that out-of-hours coverage was improving. What have you been doing with Border Force to improve out-of-hours coverage in terms of checks for illegally smuggled puppies?

Ian Hewett: The first point is that we do not operate a 24/7 service at present, although I know there is a consideration of that in relation to new border control posts. That is part of the service offer that is being finalised and confirmed back to us. What we do operate are shifts at particular locations, particularly around the south-east ports. Those shifts can vary depending on which locations we are talking about. There are either two shifts or three shifts, but broadly they run on weekdays up until 10 pm and not overnight.

What we do is we have an on-call out-of-hours facility. That facility has been operational since March last year. That is manned 24/7, and we have received something like 1,150 out-of-hours responses in that period. That could be either overnight or at weekends. Where we can, we will seek to address those in real time or we will visit those as quickly as possible thereafter. That means that, in some cases, where we have a stated end time at, say, 10 pm, we are still working at 2 am, 3 am or 4 am, just to do those checks.

We do have that capability of moving outside of what is seen as a standard working day, or what used to be seen as a standard working day, to cover some of those shipments that would fall outside of those set hours. What we are trying to do is to make best use of resources, particularly around specific teams either located at ports or close to ports, to try to make that as effective as possible.

Q133 **Geraint Davies:** We have been told that it is quite easy for smugglers to bring over puppies at the weekend, for example, partly because trading standards and local authorities are not working either, and that the physical checks are done by the carriers, not by you.

Ian Hewett: Physical checks can be done by carriers in transit in any event, and then of course there is also the possibility of undertaking checks at the final point of destination, if required, through the post-import check notifications that we receive. We have both options. In terms of those referrals that I mentioned earlier that have come outside of standard hours or weekdays, we can and do follow up in real time.

Q134 **Geraint Davies:** Would you accept the figures that have been mentioned? You are saying that thousands of puppies and smugglers are being apprehended, but it has been suggested to us that tens of thousands of puppies are getting through the net. Does that sound completely unrealistic to you, or does it sound realistic?

Ian Hewett: What I am saying is that we responded to well over 1,000 out-of-hours notifications or referrals. We responded to those, and that



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can involve either an inspection at port or a follow-up inspection at point of destination. Clearly, there is always the opportunity for animals to move through the port without being identified and therefore brought to our attention.

Q135 Geraint Davies: The carriers are the ones that have to do the identification. Is that right? They just report it to you.

Ian Hewett: If the carriers have any suspicions, they will provide that report through to us, yes.

Q136 Geraint Davies: Steve Dunn, there has been some suggestion that there is more joined-up work between the agency and yourselves. Is that happening? You mentioned earlier that you are having lots of meetings, but are you actually taking action? You also mentioned that you do not have powers to prosecute. Is that something you think would help? Finally, you mentioned that you have other priorities. If this was a greater priority, could more apprehension happen?

Steve Dann: There were a number of questions there. First of all, it is safe to say that we uncover and detect illegal puppy smuggling. A number of the referrals Ian referred to came from detections by our officers. I do not see the issue around weekend cover and so on. We put resources out there.

As you are probably aware, due to the Covid issue, at the moment we do 100% checks of people coming into the country. Our detections are quite high, and I get a daily update of all the detections across the country. It is fascinating when you look at the different types of detections we have. In terms of the relationship and the referrals that take place out-of-hours, we have that opportunity. We do not have the power to seize live animals, but, if there is a challenge around getting hold of APHA, the Dover police can move in and help and support us as well. Those relationships exist.

The challenge for us is again around the prioritisation. Where does puppy smuggling sit alongside this? We have the threat assessment, and puppy smuggling is not an assigned matter but CITES activity is, and that sits at what we call priority B alongside cannabis, for example. It is treated seriously; we will respond to it, we will deal with it and we will refer where necessary.

You asked whether more is getting through. We do not know what we do not know, but clearly there must be if we are detecting, just through the checks that are taking place at the border, illegal smuggling-type activity and uncovering puppy smuggling as part of that.

Q137 Geraint Davies: Would it be easier to move a puppy worth £2,000 and not get apprehended by Border Force than to move £2,000 worth of cannabis?



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Steve Dann: I am just trying to picture what £2,000 worth of cannabis is.

Geraint Davies: It is like a small puppy.

Steve Dann: Mr Davies, I do not know. I will rely on your knowledge of that. You could argue a live animal moving about would attract attention. Our Border Force officers are trained to be aware of this activity, hence all the referrals that I talked about before and the complimentary commendations we have had back from APHA on those referrals.

You could argue that there is more likelihood to uncover a puppy or an animal and to ask questions and get a reasonable suspicion that would lead to a referral to the APHA. It is a balance with the prioritisation of the work that we do.

Q138 **Geraint Davies:** Finally, if someone was going through one of your checks with four puppies, for argument's sake, they could be their own puppies, could they not? If they were carrying cannabis, they would be acting illegally. You would not automatically apprehend them; you would just notice that they had puppies. A lot of these would get through, and some of them may be smuggled. Is that right?

Steve Dann: I would suggest that, if somebody has four puppies, the Border Force officers, given the training they have had and the awareness they have of this, would ask a number of questions of the driver of the vehicle, for example, as to the origins and where they have come from. If suspicion was sufficient there, that is when those referrals take place. A number of the referrals that have happened have been small numbers. They are not big numbers. I can give you an example of 21 puppies in a BMW, but I can also give you lots of examples of single-digit numbers of puppies that have been referred to APHA as well.

Q139 **Geraint Davies:** Finally, do you have enough resources in the middle of the night, on a weekend and that type of thing to apprehend people who are dedicated smugglers?

Steve Dann: Yes, we do. That is what our job is on a day-to-day basis. I own a contingent resource, which I flex to the various ports around the country to support the regional directors and the regional colleagues in their activities. Yes, we do. We have to. It is part of our job. The best way to describe it is that we stop bad things and bad people coming in, and we support good things and good people going out. That is what we do as Border Force. Yes, we do.

Q140 **Chair:** Before I bring in Neil Hudson for a supplementary, I think it was you, Ian, who said that the carriers can contact you if they are concerned about there being illegal puppies or whatever coming through. Can you put on record that, if a carrier is coming through at night or at weekends, there is somebody that the carriers are physically able to contact so that message gets through? I am still concerned that people are slipping through unnoticed. Can you put on record that there is a number and



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that the carriers will actually get hold of somebody to deal with it?

Ian Hewett: Rather than me give you that positive confirmation and then have to backtrack, let me take that away and double-check it. I know we have that out-of-hours capability with Border Force colleagues. I am not sure whether it extends to carriers, but we do get confirmation from carriers. I would need to double-check whether that is during the night, out-of-hours or during the working day.

Q141 **Chair:** Will you please supply that to us in writing?

Ian Hewett: Yes.

Q142 **Chair:** If it is not in place, would you try to do your best to get it in place? Even if you need more resources, you can come back to us and we can put that in our report. Steve, did you want to say something?

Steve Dann: The only thing to add is that we have a 24/7 national command and control unit, which is in contact with all the regions and ports. That sits under me. That is where I get all the reporting of all the incidents that occur in order to be able to brief up to DG and Ministers. The ability is there. Yes, we have that contact direct into APHA.

Q143 **Dr Hudson:** I do not want to tread on Sheryll's toes for her question on the physical checks for animals. There is, quite rightly, a lot of focus on puppy smuggling. A lot of the dialogue today has been on that. Steve and Ian, we have heard some very harrowing reports of heavily pregnant dogs being transported in very, very bad circumstances, sometimes with fresh abdominal wounds from having had a caesarean section, et cetera. Again, I do not want to tread on Sheryll's toes, but are you confident that your teams are looking for and would pick up heavily pregnant animals that are potentially being smuggled in?

Steve Dann: I can give you an example from December last year of exactly that. It was a horrific case—a heavily pregnant animal, dogs that were deceased in the car and puppies with broken limbs. That is just one case. We all have to recognise that our officers are trained to a level but are not experts. The chief veterinary officer touched on that a second ago. There is an element of common sense; there is an element of awareness training that we do with our colleagues in Defra as well.

I would suggest that there is an element of common sense and tenacity in our Border Force officers in terms of what they encounter and what they refer. If there are any suspicions or any concerns, I have no doubt—most of us are animal lovers—that they would refer and take advice from the experts.

Ian Hewett: If I can just come in on the back of Steve, yes, I am confident. I am aware of some of those cases that have been referred to. I have also seen cases where we have erred on the side of caution and we have been challenged as a result. We have stuck to our guns and said, "No, based on what we have seen this is an underage animal", or,



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“This is a heavily pregnant animal”, et cetera. We have trained people to do that.

We are looking at our training regimes to ensure that people who are new into the agency or new into a portal role are mentored to ensure that they are competent in all aspects of the role, including enforcement and animal-handling training, and to ensure that they are encouraged to go further in terms of Better Training for Safer Food, working with our operational partners such as Border Force colleagues, et cetera, to ensure we have covered off all those welfare concerns.

Q144 **Dr Hudson:** It is a very tough area. Coming back to what you were saying, Chair, about dentition and ageing, it is currently illegal in the last 10% of the pregnancy. That is quite hard to ascertain. There have been calls to make that a longer period and make that maybe the last 50%. Christine, do you have any comment on that before we go on to the next question?

Professor Middlemiss: Again, that is one part of the enabling legislation that we would like to bring in under the new kept animals Bill. We want to change the age for heavily pregnant bitches or change the gestation period. We will consult on whether it is a third or a half or whatever, but, yes, it is absolutely in our sights.

Dr Hudson: Thank you. It is good to get that on record.

Q145 **Mrs Murray:** This very much focuses on the responsibilities of carriers and whether that is the best place to carry out these checks. We have been told that border checks on pets are not fit for purpose, because no one physically checks the animal. What is your response to this? Can I first ask you, Steve, and then you, Ian, before I move on to the second part of my question?

Steve Dann: From a Border Force perspective, it is not a role we have. It is not our responsibility. We rely on the carriers in that role. That is their responsibility.

Q146 **Mrs Murray:** Can I just point out that I have asked about what your response to this is? Do you think that is the right place for the responsibility to be? Could things improve? The way things are working at the moment, we have been told, is not fit for purpose.

Steve Dann: If I am being honest, that is not a question for me to answer. That is really one for our colleagues on this call. What I will say, on the broader carrier position, is that we engage on wider immigration matters and we have a good relationship with carriers. We rely on them to carry out their roles in what they do, including the current health measure issues. In relation to our relationships and what carriers do, I have no issues or concerns in those areas. The animal side of things is probably for other people on this call to have a better, stronger and more informed view than I can give.



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Q147 **Mrs Murray:** Before I move on to Ian, perhaps I can frame the question a little differently. Have you seen any examples where carriers have carried out checks that have perhaps caused you to have concerns?

Steve Dann: I am not aware of any at all. I can do some more checks and establish whether anything has happened. I would hope that would have gone into our intelligence system, but I will check for you and report back with either a negative or a positive on that.

Q148 **Mrs Murray:** Thank you very much. Ian, could I ask you the same question, please?

Ian Hewett: I am confident that the carriers are doing a good job. They undertake 100% checks, whereas the sort of checks that are undertaken by our own folks, other than referrals, will be less than that.

Q149 **Mrs Murray:** You said they carry out 100% checks. Are these physical checks, to your knowledge?

Ian Hewett: They undertake the checks as part of their carrying responsibilities. My understanding is that they would certainly do a documentary check and then the—

Q150 **Mrs Murray:** Do you know how these checks are carried out? Are they carried out by somebody who is professional or who is employed by the carrier?

Ian Hewett: That is what I was going to go on to explain. We have regular liaison and engagement with the carriers, highlighting trends and adding value to those checks. Some of these people have over 20 years' experience of undertaking this work. They are good at spotting the things that need to be picked up. Each carrier receives training prior to their approval, including identifying non-compliance, and then they are subject to quality assurance checks, including audits to ensure that compliance is achieved. We record that in required methods of operation. They receive refresher training and they are encouraged to liaise with their contacts. They have contact points within APHA.

Q151 **Mrs Murray:** Who gives this training? Who provides the training? Who carries out the refresher courses, please?

Ian Hewett: Some of our own staff would do that, or indeed we would then go to third parties. I can double-check just to confirm that. My understanding is that some of our own staff do that.

Q152 **Mrs Murray:** Some of our evidence suggests that shifting the responsibility for border checks on pets from carriers to a Government agency or independent checkers would be the best move. What do you think about that? Would it perhaps be a good idea if somebody with some expertise in the veterinary field were to be asked to carry this out as part of a Government agency?

Ian Hewett: There are different ways of looking at this particular issue. You mentioned the word "independent". Clearly, the carriers are there



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doing a job on behalf of us, ensuring that they actually deliver those checks and therefore pass on any concerns that they have so that we can then follow up as appropriate. If you had a Government agency undertaking this work, clearly that would require some resource and obviously it would come at a cost, unless that service was provided at a cost to the importer. That would need to be weighed off against the respective use of that resource, particularly if you are talking about veterinary resource. I will leave that to the chief vet to explain, but clearly veterinary resources have a highly prized set of skills and experience that we want to use wisely. We use a combination of vets and animal health officers at the moment within APHA. If it were a different or separate organisation, you would need to have that level of specialism built in as well.

Q153 Mrs Murray: You said that you follow up on any concerns that the carriers report to you. Can you give me some idea as to how many that is? That could be a percentage of the number that you follow up where there have been concerns that have resulted in you taking the case forward.

Ian Hewett: I mentioned earlier that we had a number of referrals from Border Force, but we also get them from other sources. In addition to the notifications we have from BF colleagues, we have over 100 since last November that have come from various sources, including carriers. I would need to break that down to say how many specifically came from carriers and provide that, if you would find that helpful.

Q154 Mrs Murray: Yes, if you could. That is 100 out of how many? How many did you find it necessary to take forward to prosecution out of that number?

Ian Hewett: That would be done in accordance with the local authority, because we do not actually prosecute ourselves.

Q155 Mrs Murray: Yes. How many have you taken forward? Do you have that information? Could you supply it to us?

Ian Hewett: I will have to supply it, because I will have to disaggregate the figures that we have in relation to the non-Border Force referrals and then work out which of those come from carriers and then work out which of those went forward to prosecution.

Q156 Mrs Murray: If you could give us a breakdown of all of those things that you have mentioned, that would be very useful. Christine or Steve, do you have anything to add to that?

Professor Middlemiss: Inevitably, if you were using veterinary resource to do these checks, you could have more informed physical examination, because we do not expect carriers to carry out examinations and things, but there is an opportunity cost to it. We have a limited number of vets, a shortage of vets in this country and a finite budget. We have to be able to prioritise according to biosecurity and welfare risks.



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Currently, my preference, within that context and envelope, is that we have the best trained carriers with the best support system and that they are able to access that expertise and knowledge that we have.

Q157 **Mrs Murray:** Steve, do you have anything to add to that from a Border Force perspective?

Steve Dann: No, I do not. It has all been covered. I covered my comments about carriers earlier. The biggest issue for me is trying to picture the numbers of what this would look like. I am not au fait with the numbers that pass through or the number of resources that would be needed. Bear in mind that we cover 140 ports and airports around the country. Who has the responsibility for those resources? Then we are into the conversation around 24/7 coverage as well. I can see the benefits of where the question is going, but I can also see lots of challenges accompanying that as well.

Q158 **Chair:** Before we leave this question, some of these criminal gangs may well be people who have the best paperwork in the world. As far as I can see, most if not all of these checks are just checking the paperwork and nobody really physically checks what is in the van or wherever, because there is nobody there to do it. What can we do about this? At the end of the day, we are just not checking physically. We are just relying on the paperwork.

The other part of my question is about, if you do find anything, what resources you have at the ports to impound these puppies or whatever. What is the situation in terms of how we are going to make sure it is not just a paper trail? If you find them, what do you do with them?

Ian Hewett: In terms of physical checks, clearly, the fact that we have intercepted animals suggests that we have done it not just on the strength of paperwork but that there is a physical check associated with that. In terms of what we do with the animal once it is intercepted, it will depend on what we find, but, clearly, we would seek to hold on to that animal until it is proved that we have all of the compliance to allow it to continue. If we cannot allow that, there could be, through the local authority and trading standards, some further action such as prosecutions. Unfortunately, if there are really serious cases, we have to consider whether or not, on veterinary advice, there are medical reasons that mean the animal may have to be euthanised, which is clearly not an area we would want to get into but we have to think about to make sure we are looking after the welfare of the animal concerned.

We work with organisations such as some of those that I am sure will have given evidence to the Committee in relation to the Dogs Trust in terms of how and where we intercept animals and how we work with organisations to quarantine animals to make sure that we are satisfied that the animal can move on its way. Indeed, that also applies where an animal is abandoned, and some are.



Steve Dann: The only thing I could add is that Border Force do not have powers to seize live animals. We do not have the facilities or infrastructure to manage that as well in the 140 ports and airports. We very much rely on our relationships with other agencies, including the RSPCA and local policing as well, if it came to it. We are a bit limited on that.

Chair: To both of you, do you have any written or documentary evidence around an estimate of what is coming through, for how many of those the paperwork is checked and how many physical checks there are? I suspect that there are only 1% or 2% physical checks. This is the problem. I do not necessarily blame you, because of resourcing and other things, but we have to do better than we are doing at the moment. These puppies and others are getting through. There is no two ways about it. Anything you could supply us in writing would be very useful, please, further to the questions that Sheryll put to you as well. Thank you for that.

Q159 **Dr Hudson:** Thank you to our witnesses for being before us today. The focus of the discussion so far has been on the movement of small animals, but our inquiry covers small animals, horses and farm animals and livestock. I wanted to shift this next question into the equine world. In our previous evidence session, we were told that there is evidence and anecdotal reports of significant illegal movements of horses across borders, certainly from the UK over to the continent. These are horses that are being moved potentially under the guise of pleasure horses or competition when actually they are being shipped for slaughter on the continent. Do you have a feel for how many horses we are talking about in terms of this illicit movement of horses across borders?

Professor Middlemiss: "No" is the short answer, because, as your previous witnesses have described, they go on certificates but not necessarily the correct certificates. They go on certificates for breeding or sporting horses and not as slaughter production animals. It is difficult to ascertain what number it is, but we are working very closely with World Horse Welfare and others to understand that better.

In terms of the requirements, we are no longer a member state. We are required to certify horses rather than moving under the TPA, the Tripartite Agreement, which was a high health status recognition, previously. It had been tightened up, so there were few slaughter horses moving under that. Yes, we are looking at this and working with the organisations to understand that better. As we bring in the legislation around there being no live export for slaughter, that will become even more important to us.

Q160 **Dr Hudson:** Thank you; that is really helpful, Christine. Ian and Steve, would you be in agreement that we do not know the number of horses that are being travelled in this way?

Steve Dann: Mr Hudson, we have no idea at all. Interestingly, in my preparation for this meeting, I reached out to our intelligence cell, and we



have nothing about horse smuggling at all. When I looked into the terms of reference and what we were looking at, I was surprised that we do not have anything. That information and that intelligence does not exist from a Border Force perspective. It is very difficult, then, to assign resources or even form part of an intelligence assessment as to any activity that may or may not be required. I would probably agree with the chief veterinary officer: we just do not know.

Ian Hewett: I just have a couple of quick points. Where we do get referrals—this is on imported animals—we would undertake checks. My suspicion is that is not looking in the direction you are going.

In terms of exports, particularly live animals, Christine has already mentioned the intention to terminate live animal exports for slaughter. Clearly, if animals are destined to go for export for other purposes but then ultimately end up going for slaughter, that is an area where it will be difficult to follow through and detect.

The only other point to make is around the potential destination for live animal exports into Europe at the moment, because of the need to go through border control posts.

Q161 **Dr Hudson:** If I can come back to Christine, as we are moving forward with new legislation in terms of changing the rules on live export for slaughter, do you feel that there is the opportunity to close this loophole to protect the significant equine welfare situation of horses being transported like this? Can that be shut down to protect the horses?

Professor Middlemiss: I wanted to make a point here and reflect that there is a balance here. As we know as vets, Neil, the issue is about these animals being transported and the welfare conditions of the transport, not specifically slaughter. If we stopped horses at the end of their life, where there is no other outlet for them, we can get welfare issues from that as well. People will not necessarily call out vets to euthanise old horses, and that is a welfare issue that needs to be dealt with. While some people might not like the idea of it, it is not necessarily, per se, the slaughter of horses that is the welfare issue; it is the transport of them. They are worth a lot less than performance horses or breeding horses, so the inference is that they are not transported in such good conditions and they are not stopped and watered and all these sorts of things.

Yes, banning being able to export for slaughter in effect means that the certificate will not be available so they will not be able to certify. Currently, as our official veterinarians are certifying, they should be asking questions about, "Is this really a performance horse you are sending? Are you not sending it for slaughter?" There is a professional obligation on all of us at that point to ask those questions. Removal of the certificate because we will not be exporting for those purposes will enable those questions to be more overtly asked.



Q162 Dr Hudson: As a follow-up, we were also told in a previous session that, with the movement of horses there is a significant element of potential for fraud when it is related to equine passports. Do you feel that a joined-up digital identification system would make it easier to control the process in terms of the movement of animals and keeping track of disease status but also the movement in general? What are your comments on a joined-up digital system? That is what our previous witnesses were flagging to us, and we wanted to ask you, on the front line, what your thoughts are on that.

Professor Middlemiss: Yes, absolutely. At the moment, it is a paper-based system and we have a very large number of passport-issuing authorities. Although they are all approved, it is really difficult to keep track of them. We saw that when we had our EIA outbreaks and things. When you are tracing horses and things, you are very reliant on the owner giving you the correct information. Digitalising it and centralising it further would be really helpful. Centralising it across Europe would be ideal, but it would be very difficult now we are no longer a member state and things. Being able to continue to share that sort of information, yes, would be really helpful. I would be supportive of that.

Ian Hewett: It would make a lot of sense. Clearly, there would be a lead time and a cost associated with it, but the outcome would probably be a far sight better.

Steve Dann: I cannot argue with that. The outbound activity is the responsibility of the owners and carriers. It is not a Border Force issue. I am sure that anything where we can digitise and move away from the paperwork and spreadsheets that we seem to rely on would be a benefit and, ultimately, could lead to the identification of some organised criminality and serious crime that would probably be dealt with by the police and the National Crime Agency.

Q163 Dr Hudson: Thank you; that is really helpful. Finally, just before I hand back, Chair, Christine, you mentioned the Tripartite Agreement between the UK, Ireland and France that is now obviously in abeyance. This was about the high health status movement of horses. Are you confident that we will get something in place that might well replace that? Where are we at with that? There are a lot of people in the equine sectors in those three countries who are concerned about it. What can we do?

Professor Middlemiss: We have an agreement between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Although they are in the single market, those horses would still have to travel under TRACES with what is called an ITAHC. The chief veterinary officers of the three Administrations have recognised an ability for those horses to move.

I would like to see progress on a form of agreement for all high health status horses, not necessarily just about specific countries and not necessarily about member states or third countries. There is a lot of appetite for that from industry. It has been discussed with the OIE, the



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World Organisation for Animal Health, in terms of how that could be achieved. FEI are supportive of it. There would be a lot of administration and standards-setting to get those common parameters and things, but, absolutely, it would be really beneficial given the way that sporting horses and breeding horses move.

It is absolutely in the best interests of these industries for those organisations to have that high health status so you can safely compete. We made it work in the Tripartite Agreement, and I do not have any question that we could not make it work in a different form if all parties are up for it.

Q164 **Chair:** Christine, before we leave this question, you talked about the issuing of passports by many organisations. It is something like 70, is it not, if not more? Of course, a lot of these lower-value horses, not so much your event or higher-end horses, probably have more than one passport. Not only is it an animal welfare issue but it is a human health issue, because some of these horses may well have been injected with things that mean the meat should not be used for human consumption. It is quite serious. Are you considering taking away the rights of various organisations to issue passports? At the moment, they are largely fictitious, as far as I can see. The horses may well have several passports on which they may travel. They can have one without any medicines on it and one with medicines on it. How on earth do we sort this out?

Professor Middlemiss: Yes, you are right. It is really good to remind ourselves that the passports were brought about to be able to identify individual horses and to notify or record what drugs they may have had that may make them unfit to go into the food chain. It is not just about travelling and disease control specifically. I would like to see a much more streamlined system for passport issuing that feeds into the centralised database we have talked about within a digital system. If you have that centralised digital system, you would have to question why you would need so many different authorities issuing them.

We recognise that we have quite a unique breed situation in the UK, where we have many longstanding breeds recognised under zootechnic legislation and things. That is one of the reasons why it came about that we had so many issuing authorities, so they could do it as part of their recording and breeding process. If we move into a more digitalised form, I can see that there could still be ways that they could, as breed societies, have that information and access that information while we centralise it and bring it down to single numbers in terms of who is issuing the passports.

Q165 **Chair:** Christine, I understand the sensitivity of this, but it is probably 10 years or more since we have had all of these passporting authorities. Can you give us any idea of when you might grapple with this thorny issue? I know it is thorny, because I know some of the individuals issuing passports. That does not mean to say it does not need sorting.



Professor Middlemiss: No, I cannot explicitly give you an idea of timeline. It is something that we are aware of. We brought in the centralised equine database. That helps us review exactly what is going on, but we do not have a timeline yet for considering it further, no.

Chair: Perhaps in our report, dare I say it, we may be suggesting some sort of timeline, though I must not second-guess what we might be putting in our report.

Q166 **Rosie Duffield:** This one is mostly aimed at Steve. I get a huge number of letters and people signing petitions about puppy smuggling. I probably get more about puppy smuggling than anything else apart from Brexit, maybe because I am a Kent MP. Is the prevention of animal smuggling a priority within Border Force?

Steve Dann: Earlier I touched on the process that exists under the National Intelligence Model, which is a process that is there to have a strategic assessment looking at the various risks and threats to inform systemically the risk, threat and harm we face. It is broken down using what we call the MoRiLE scoring process to then identify how we tackle those different threats and what resources we put into those threats.

We then band that into four bands: priority A, priority B, priority C and priority D. You would not be surprised to hear that in priority A are things like class A drugs, firearms and clandestine entry. Clearly, small boats in Kent are very close to what you encounter, I am sure, every day in your correspondence. Priority B is knives, tobacco and cigarettes. Priority C is where we have more of the issues that we are talking about here, but also in priority C are things like cannabis.

It is still treated as a serious issue, but clearly with all of the balancing of the competing priorities. Through an informed intelligence-led process, we developed this structure that every law enforcement agency in the UK uses: the National Intelligence Model and the MoRiLE scoring. The MoRiLE scoring is very focused on threats and harm to people as opposed to threats and harms around animals, so the scoring would take us to a position of having more of a focus on firearms, illegal immigration and that activity that takes place.

Yes, we do treat it seriously, but there are competing priorities, as you can imagine, in the breadth of what Border Force deals with.

Q167 **Rosie Duffield:** Steve and Ian, we have touched on resources and finances. Christine said that there is a finite budget, which everyone will understand. Do you have the funding and facilities, as well as the resources, to properly manage all this? You have mentioned out-of-hours services and things. Is that an issue for you?

Ian Hewett: I will chip in and let Steve follow from a Border Force perspective. We have a fairly large number of resources that undertake a variety of animal health and welfare activities, with a relatively small number of people dedicated to portal activities. We have trained a



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significant proportion of our remaining what we call field staff, who can undertake those portal works where required. That gives us some flexibility.

You mentioned facilities. Clearly, we make use of, or we share, facilities where we can, at specific ports and locations. I mentioned border control posts a couple of times. There are a number that currently service live animals. The expectation is more will come on stream to assist with European live animal imports during the course of next year.

At the moment, we are doing checks on European animals at the point of destination, particularly based on a risk analysis. Those points of destination for animals, certainly for bovines and ovines, would tend to be farms. For puppies and the like, it could be a private dwelling. Those were impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic because of the safety and the two-metre social distancing rule, needing two officers plus the owner of the pet in close proximity. That certainly constrained us, but we found ways of starting that.

There is always a desire to have more people and better facilities, or greater facilities. The creation of additional border control posts will allow us to service live animal imports far greater moving forward, particularly those that are coming in from Europe, as opposed to doing it at points of destination.

Q168 Rosie Duffield: This one is for anyone who wants to chip in. What assessments have you made of the introduction of the new rules on importing dogs in the kept animals Bill. What assessment have you made of how that will affect your workforce and your workload?

Ian Hewett: It depends on the shape of the final legalisation, of course. The expectation is that there are positive developments, which we have already discussed in the Committee hearing today. My expectation is it will enable us to have more focused and quality physical checks, where required, on those animals that are potentially still on the borderline between the age limits that we talked about earlier.

It will also probably increase the number of desk-based checks that we have to undertake, but that is probably a good trade-off, in terms of veterinary and animal health officer expertise against additional administrative checks that that will enable us to target. We are certainly looking to ensure that we have those resources in post. I do not think that will be an issue, in terms of additional administrative resources. We will simply repurpose our field teams to ensure we are providing that most qualitative input through targeted checks where required.

Looking at it from an exports perspective, at the moment we do checks on live animal exports, where they take place. They could still take place in the future for purposes other than human consumption and slaughter. The expectation is there will be less of a need to do those physical



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checks, but we will do more administrative checks to make sure the journey logs are appropriate.

Q169 **Rosie Duffield:** Steve, do you think you will need more officers in place?

Steve Dann: I do not think we have really assessed the impact at all. I would probably fall back on the intelligence development process that exists, the various meetings and the sharing of intelligence. If our partners came forward to those strategic assessment discussions and suggested that activity was needed in those areas, we would then have to reassess and reprioritise that activity. It is the only way I could really answer that question. I do not think it impacts directly on us at this moment in time, but we would be reliant on our partners to point out where that is.

One area I want to touch on is something around financial asset recovery. My previous role was immigration enforcement on illegal organised immigration crime. We hurt the criminals more with the financial aspects and taking money out of their pockets, illegally gained money and assets. Something that we thought about as part of preparation for this meeting is if there is more we can do in this. If there is an organised criminality behind it, do we have that ability to tackle the criminality aspect of it as well?

There is a real focus on outbound cash and seizing assets of organised crime networks. Within this space, there are potentially some opportunities as well with financial investigations, taking that opportunity. That is something I want to take forward following this meeting, to explore those opportunities. If the kept animals Bill provides those opportunities and that intelligence and information to us, that might be a way to really hurt those people involved in this heinous crime.

Rosie Duffield: That is really useful for us to know as a Committee: that we need to try to make sure that that is involved in the Bill. That is really useful.

Professor Middlemiss: I agree with both Ian and Steve. As I have described, it will make it more obvious if the rules have been broken, because we are increasing the age of puppies. We are reducing the number of animals that can come, so it is not per person. It will move to per vehicle inbound, so instead of 20 it will probably be five and so on per vehicle. Therefore, those who want to undertake genuinely criminal activity are going to have to work harder at it. That is where we need to focus our resource and use the intel, absolutely. They are more likely, I guess, to be part of organised crime, looking at those things. It will give us much more focus.

Q170 **Robbie Moore:** My question is following on on the topic of biosecurity and disease surveillance. Maybe I could direct the question to Ian and Christine, coming to Ian first. How has the APHA's ability to effectively recognise, monitor and prevent disease been impacted by the loss of



access to the EU's animal disease notification system?

Ian Hewett: The loss of that system has not helped. We still have access to elements of the EU TRACES system. We use that as far as we can to try to ascertain import notifications. We have also set out a requirement for European imported animals to have a notification to the GB system that we set up, called the Import of Products, Animals, Food and Feed System. We are in the process of seeking to further reinforce the importance of providing that data to us, so that we get the right information with the appropriate documentation attached.

Over the first few months of this calendar year, since the UK left the EU, we have seen that we receive some notifications correctly through IPAFFS with the relevant documentation, notifications through IPAFFS but without the appropriate documentation and notifications through TRACES. We are trying to marry those together. We are using Christine's good offices to try to increase the focus around getting the right information through. I think it is fair to say, and I am sure Christine will say the same, that the loss of ADNS has not helped us in terms of our ability to track. We have alternative solutions in place and under development.

Q171 **Robbie Moore:** Following on from that, Ian, assuming we still had access to the EU animal disease notification system, what would you be doing differently?

Ian Hewett: It would mean that we have that holistic source, rather than having to go to disparate sources and trying to marry it up. It takes time and effort to try to do so, and speed is of the essence. The key point is our ability to first identify movements that are of particular interest to us and make sure we can take action appropriately. That is where I would focus the attention, but I am sure Christine will be able to put her view on it

Professor Middlemiss: For me, the difference is about how quickly we get the information. We are getting the same information through direct reports from the Commission to me and other chief veterinary officers, the reports of SCoPAFF and the updates that are circulated to third countries. Additionally, member states, like us, have to report disease outbreaks to the OIE, the World Organisation for Animal Health.

We are still getting the information and pretty much getting the same information, but we do not get it in one system and we do not get it necessarily with quite the speed that we previously would. At technical level, there is an ongoing dialogue and relationship with the Commission. They have been proactively sharing. When there are changes in disease status and even influenza outbreaks on the continent, like we have, they have been informing us of those so we can take appropriate action as necessary. For me, it is more about the administration use and how quickly we use them than the actual detail of the information.

Q172 **Robbie Moore:** You have both mentioned speed there. Christine, what



sort of timeframes of delay are we averagely talking about?

Professor Middlemiss: This is in the animal health space. I have not mentioned RASFF, which is the food notification one, because that really sits with the FSA. We are probably talking, very roughly, approximately 24 hours.

Q173 **Robbie Moore:** Christine, the BVA explained to us that you are currently the main conduit for bipartite discussions on disease risk between the EU and UK. How sustainable do you feel this is?

Professor Middlemiss: I am for all of our third-country, rest-of-the-world trade partners. Because, as I explained at the beginning, the chief veterinary officer has this role about the assurance and verification of our disease status and our consignments, it is usual that updates would go through me and my office. We have put in place what we call the SPS trade and assurance office, which is supporting that function. It is taking on the function that the EU did for us with the rest of the world and informing them. Our new office now does that. I work very closely with the office, so they will be drafting the communications and things; my office agrees and checks them, signs them and sends them off.

Q174 **Dr Hudson:** As a vet asking another vet a question, I declare an interest as a vet. We are talking about biosecurity and disease surveillance. Christine, you said that a lot of measures are going to come in with the new legislation, but that may well take a bit of time. There are perhaps some pressing health issues. You have written to the veterinary profession in the UK in February about *Brucella canis*. Now that we have left the EU and there is significant movement of animals coming in, there are some urgent that we need to see what we can do about, such as doing health checks for *Brucella canis*, tightening up the rabies monitoring and perhaps reinstating the mandatory tick and tapeworm treatment to protect the UK animal population, but also, indirectly, the UK human population as well. There are some things that we need to get done urgently, but legislation is going to be a bit slower. Christine, how can we do this? What is your take on that, so that we can make some changes to help the situation quickly?

Professor Middlemiss: For others, *Brucella canis* is what we call a zoonotic disease. It is a pathogen that can be in dogs and may cause them to abort. If people come into contact with the fluids, it can cause brucella and respiratory-type illness and things in people. We would usually have a very low number of those, but there has been an increase in the last 18 months. We have been working closely with public health colleagues on that. This is not what we would call a listed or notifiable disease in the EU and previously, so the first step we have taken is to make it reportable. If anybody detects it, they need to inform us, so we can work with that dog owner and their local public health to take appropriate action.



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As regards import controls, we have a big project underway about making all our import controls risk-based, so based on the risk posed by the country they are coming from and the type of commodity it is, building on our international disease monitoring system that we have. Our intention will be to roll that out in 2022. It will need to align with the building of our border control posts and things as well. We are very actively looking at, as I say, making our imports regime more risk-based and prescriptive than it necessarily has been and being able to make it flexible to new and emerging threats.

Interestingly with *Brucella canis*, I see Canada is also reporting that it has had an increased number of cases. It is interesting that something more global is going on. We will look at that with other colleagues.

Q175 **Dr Hudson:** Thank you for that; that is really helpful. How quickly could we bring back things like the tick treatment and the mandatory tapeworm treatment?

Professor Middlemiss: There are two dependencies. One is legislation and the legislative timetable to put legislation in place. The second is the resource to administrate, as well as compliance checks and enforcement and things, which fits, as we have discussed already, into finite budget priorities and so on. That is why we need to do that systematic thinking about risk-based checks across the piece. While these checks on puppies and diseases are really important, so are things for African swine fever, which we are at medium risk of incursion for. We need to have a balanced, systematic approach to it.

Q176 **Chair:** Before we leave that, if we need it, can we bring this legislation in by statutory instrument and secondary legislation?

Professor Middlemiss: My understanding is no. We would need to make the main piece of legislation as primary legislation and then thereafter you could have statutory instruments. I am a vet, not a legal expert, but that is my understanding of it.

Chair: You seem to have a pretty good idea of what we have to do. We must get on with it.

Q177 **Ian Byrne:** My question follows on from what Neil has just been going into. I will start with Christine first. Physical checks on live animal imports at the border will not begin until March 2022. The National Sheep Association and Dogs Trust are concerned that this delay in checks is a risk to disease control in the UK. An infected animal could be moved to a location with other animals, which it may then infect. What risk does this delay pose to animal health in the UK?

Professor Middlemiss: That is a really good question. It is important to remember that the destination checks are for animals coming from the EU. They are not for animals coming from the rest of the world. They currently go through border control posts, as they did before the transition. Before the transition, animals coming from the EU were always



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checked at destination, other than the pets, which were checked by the carriers.

If you were importing dairy heifers from the Netherlands, they would go to the farm they arrived on. We would have that notification. Ian would send out vets or animal health officers to inspect and sample them. In effect, we are running the same regime now as we did at the end of transition. We are okay with that—I speak because all four chief veterinary officers of the UK have discussed this—because we are constantly aware of the risk status and disease status of the EU. It has remained reasonably the same, as has its legislation on how it controls it.

That risk status is not static and we need to plan for if and when it changes. That is why there are border control posts and moving the checks from destination to being done at border control posts. We are prioritising the checks at destination. That is a really important thing to say. Our highest priority ones are livestock and livestock from countries where there are potential disease issues, so bluetongue, for example, from France, where it is now endemic, and associated countries. We detected one earlier this year in an imported animal, because it had its routine blood test. It was positive. Actually, the animal had met with an unfortunate accident and had been euthanised for other reasons, so there was no risk of spread.

At the moment, the risk has not changed from what it was before transition. By building the border control posts and putting the checks in there, we will be prepared for if and when that risk status changes. We will be able to check animals as they come in and not wait until they have arrived on farm.

Q178 Ian Byrne: That is a brilliantly comprehensive answer. Ian and Steve, would you like to add anything to that?

Ian Hewett: I had several things, and they were being ticked off one by one by Christine. We are working very closely with our policy colleagues and those policy colleagues, in turn, are working with other Government Departments associated with the BCP builds to make sure that we understand what service model we are required to provide, so if it is 24/7 or something less than that. We have two or three different variants that might apply. That may be species-driven.

If you look at the exports, I understand that there are certain time limits prescribed on some European BCPs. We are looking at that angle and also making sure that we have the resources to service those BCPs once up and running for European imports, alongside the BCPs for rest-of-the-world imports that we continue to service.

Professor Middlemiss: I cannot emphasise enough how closely I, policy colleagues across all the Administrations and APHA work together. Hopefully that comes across. It is an integrated system, and that is really important for us to be able to carry out effective controls.



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Q179 **Ian Byrne:** Steve, would you like to add anything?

Steve Dann: There is nothing from a Border Force perspective, although I learned quite a bit from the response from the chief veterinary officer, so I am very grateful for that.

Q180 **Dave Doogan:** Christine, there has been a lot of dialogue and concern, from different elements of stakeholders within this broader dynamic, about whether we will have enough official veterinarians to fulfil the checks on imports at the border when these are introduced next year. What is your professional assessment, as somebody who is very close to this, about the likelihood of having enough physical vets?

Professor Middlemiss: There is context, for awareness. Across the profession, so not just Government vets, we have a shortage of vets, which is estimated to be about 12%. That is for various different reasons, and we could have a whole separate inquiry on that.

We have put in a lot of measures around increasing the number of official vets we have. We have vets who work directly for APHA, for port health authorities, for the FSA. We also have official vets, who are in private companies or in practice but are authorised by Government to carry out certification or specific checks and things. We have gone from having less than 1,000 of those able to certify exports—not pets, which is separate, but products of animal origin and things. We currently have over 1,800 of them, so we have increased that greatly. That has partly been through measures that we have taken by free training and so on. Also, it has been as the market itself has developed. Salaries for these vets have increased. It has drawn more people into that work.

We understand that approximately half of that number, roughly, have actually been certifying, so there is capacity in the system at the moment. Yes, there have been some localised shortages, but that is usually about specific commodity types and specific places on certain timelines.

We are not resting on our laurels for needing these additional vets for import checks and things. We did some market survey work to understand more from vets about what drives them or what detracts from them doing this sort of work. There are things like not having to do it full-time. If you have to do administrative and paperwork checks as your full veterinary job, it is not necessarily what you set out as a new graduate to do. When you can do it combined with other practice work and things, people are much more willing to take it up. We are looking at models and things about how we put that sort of provision in place.

Where there is a pinch-point is with OV's in slaughterhouses. Because of the market adjustment and the salaries increasing for certifying OV's, it is pulling vets out of abattoirs, where salaries are generally lower. The FSA is looking at this. It is looking at its contracting model and at other ways, with this market survey work, to help better understand how we attract



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more vets into that work and support the pipeline all the way across, not just focus on vets doing one task for Government. They are all part of the food chain and the safety chain. We need to support them at all the different points. I could talk a lot longer, but I will stop there, because you may have more questions.

Q181 Dave Doogan: You have literally answered my next question during that answer, which was about the disruptive effect of the increased salaries and the effect on abattoirs. I have a little tangent to that point. My understanding certainly has been that traditionally, over recent years, the proportion of OV's in abattoirs drawn from eastern Europe, or elsewhere in Europe as well, was very high. There was a high proportion of EU nationals working as OV's in abattoirs. Have you seen a significant change in that as a consequence of Brexit? Is that compounding the pressure on capacity?

Professor Middlemiss: Yes. It is quite difficult at the moment to disaggregate the movement of these vets because of EU exit from Covid impacts and not being able to move, and also getting visas. Yes, people now require visas to come in to work. The administration process is greater than it was for them. That has been compounded by centres being shut because of Covid and things. We know there is still appetite for people to come. They want to come, I suppose partly because of the Covid impact and economics, for vets and everybody, across all countries and things. There is still a pipeline there, but it is more administratively burdensome for them to be able to move through that.

Dave Doogan: Thank you; that is very helpful.

Chair: I do not think you said, Christine, that vets were poor, did you?

Professor Middlemiss: It is all relative.

Chair: I am only teasing you; it is alright. Farmers always tease vets about being overpaid.

Q182 Ian Byrne: Christine, I want to touch on the Northern Ireland protocol, because Dave did not touch on it. I want to read something else and get your views on it. The Ulster Farmers' Union has warned the Committee about the impact of the Northern Ireland protocol: "Our chief vet says that 20% of Europe's certificates may need to take place at these two crossings, from Belfast and Larne, and it is just crazy. There is no way that there are enough vets in place to do that certification work". Can I have your thoughts on that?

Professor Middlemiss: It is correct that the number of certificates and what we call CHEDs, so the warning that a consignment is coming with a certificate, is huge. I cannot remember the actual figure, but I can ask for it and supply it. It is one of the biggest in Europe now. We have gone from not having to do them to having to do a large number of them. There is a requirement to do 100% documentary checks and 100% ID checks. They do not all have to be done by vets, but yes, the strain on



the system of resourcing to do that is very difficult. That is compounded by all the things I have described about a shortage of vets overall, the EU pipeline and so on. It is fair to say that it is a fragile situation in terms of having the adequate resource to carry out all those checks necessary.

Q183 Chair: Christine, on the issue of Northern Ireland, we took evidence from, I think, the Ulster Farmers' Union, which talked about sheep in Scotland that farmers from Northern Ireland bought. They are unable to get them to Northern Ireland. Are they ever going to get those breeding sheep to Northern Ireland? What is going to happen? This is buying them from Scotland.

Professor Middlemiss: Northern Ireland sources a lot of its breeding sheep from Scotland particularly, some from Wales and the north of England. The requirement is that sheep going for breeding have to be part of the Scrapie Monitoring Scheme for a minimum of three years. There was previously no need for them to be a member of that scheme. As I say, it takes three years minimum and they did not have time to build up that minimum period during the transition period. That means that they cannot be certified to go.

We are in continuing dialogue with the Commission about flexibilities that would enable those sheep to go and finding if there are ways where, through commonalities of the Scrapie Monitoring Scheme, we can make that possible. It continues to be a discussion we have. We have made the Commission very aware of the situation and we continue to discuss if and how it might be resolved.

Q184 Chair: I understand that these are young breeding ewes. I would have thought that the health status of these ewes is high. I would suggest that the European Commission is being amazingly awkward. You probably do not want to answer that question. Surely there should be a way of getting these sheep into Northern Ireland.

Professor Middlemiss: As with many of these things, the certificate requirements are actually in the EU legislation. The certificate requirements detail that they have to be a member of the scheme. In effect, its legislation has to be changed to allow it, which is difficult for it, as it has said publicly in this instance. We cannot ask vets to sign the certificates with animals that have not met the requirements, because that would be fraudulent certification. It is that level of detail that makes it all very difficult.

As I say, at technical level there is an ongoing discussion with the Commission about how we could find ways to make this work. We appreciate exactly, as does the Commission, that it is young animals; it is about breeding stock. There are specific environmental, geography and breed reasons that it impacts specific sheep from Scotland and things. We continue to discuss, and we have a listening ear to discuss it too, about how it might be resolved



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Q185 **Chair:** The genetics of sheep breeding are essential to keep good genetics in Northern Ireland.

Professor Middlemiss: Yes. They are essential and they are quite unique in the UK as well.

Q186 **Chair:** That is causing even more grief with the Commission, is it? Again, I am leading the witness too much, am I, Christine?

Professor Middlemiss: I will just say that there is an ongoing discussion. It knows there is an issue. It appreciates the issue. We appreciate that it requires legislative changes or flexibilities on its side to make it work. That all ends up having political connotations to it, so at technical level we continue to discuss.

Q187 **Chair:** Your application for the Foreign Office is being forwarded. There is a final question from me. Defra brought forward some legislation on animal transport and some of this legislation, with minimum temperatures and others in trailers, was very difficult to implement, because it was outside temperature, not inside temperature. There would have been periods in this last winter where you would not have been able to move any animals to slaughter or whatever. It is being reviewed. When is it coming back, and, dare I say it, will it be in a more sensible form when it reappears?

Professor Middlemiss: I do not know specifically when it is coming back. I will come back to you with that in writing. It is being looked at. It was a consultation, so all the views, and there were lots of them, were heard loudly and have been taken into consideration. It is one of my regrets that I get copied into lots of emails and it may have been one I could have picked up and read the actual detail of it more thoroughly. Inevitably, outside temperatures and temperatures on transport vehicles are different. The comments have been taken on board, absolutely, and I will come back to you with the date for when we are likely to see that again.

Q188 **Chair:** The problem was that there is a real issue over transporting old laying hens. I would be the first to accept that. They appear to take all livestock in a similar vein and I cannot understand quite how we got there. I do not want to give you too hard a time over it. It is one of those things where we really ought to try to learn the lessons that we do not go down, we do it species by species and we make sure we have practical legislation so farmers can work from both a good animal welfare point of view and from the point of view of getting animals to market and to feed the nation.

Professor Middlemiss: Absolutely, yes. I agree.

Chair: I will park that one there; I will not make it more difficult for you this afternoon. Thank you very much, all three of you, for a very good evidence session. As far as Border Force, what came over is we have to prioritise smuggling of puppies and pets through our borders more. As far



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as I can see at the moment, you are doing the best within the resources you have. Unless we make it more of a priority, I am not sure we are going to stamp it out in the way we would like. We are probably going to need more resources; I accept that. Again, unless we make it a priority, I do not think it is going to happen.

We thank you for your evidence. We have asked you for quite a lot more written evidence, please. Can we make sure we have that as quickly as possible? Like I said, we look forward to putting our report together and we appreciate you all very much for your evidence this afternoon. Thank you very much.