

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Moving animals across borders, HC 79

Tuesday 29 June 2021

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Members present: Neil Parish (Chair); Ian Byrne; Geraint Davies; Dave Doogan; Rosie Duffield; Barry Gardiner; Dr Neil Hudson; Mrs Sheryll Murray; Derek Thomas.

Questions 189 - 254

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Lord Benyon, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Rural Affairs and Biosecurity), Defra; Gareth Baynham-Hughes, Director of Animal and Plant Health, Defra.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs](#)



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon Lord Benyon and Gareth Baynham-Hughes.

Chair: Welcome to our Select Committee inquiry on moving animals across borders. We are fortunate this afternoon to have the Rt Hon Lord Benyon here as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and Gareth Baynham-Hughes, Director of Animal and Plant Health at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. First of all, Richard, do you mind if I refer to you as Richard rather than Lord Benyon? If you prefer Lord Benyon, I will do either. Which would you prefer?

Lord Benyon: I would be very offended if you called me anything other than Richard.

Q189 **Chair:** Do you want to say just a few words before we start?

Lord Benyon: It is a great pleasure to be back on this side of the table. I am looking forward to your questions. I have been in post about three weeks—maybe four—so this is a very good opportunity to get my head around this very important part of my brief. I am looking forward to answering your questions. I may refer to Gareth on some of the technicalities.

Q190 **Chair:** Richard, I have no problems in thinking that a man of your calibre will be able to master the brief very quickly. You have been near it once or twice before, dare I say. Gareth, you are director of animal and plant health. Can you just say a little bit more about that, please?

Gareth Baynham-Hughes: Thank you very much, Mr Chairman. That is exactly right. I am the director for animal and plant health and welfare. That means that I lead the team that is responsible for not quite at all but most of the policy areas that are within the remit of your inquiry—domestic and international animal and plant health issues. I work very closely with the Chief Vet and colleagues in APHA, who I know have already given evidence to your Committee.

Q191 **Chair:** Thank you very much. It is great that you are both joining us this afternoon, because we have had a very good inquiry on moving animals across borders. One of the issues we have been looking at is the importation of puppies and pregnant bitches. The first question is why the Kept Animals Bill does not include a ban on importing animals younger than six months or pregnant bitches. I understand that it is said to be coming in under secondary legislation, but the straight question to you, Richard, is why the Government do not include it on the face of the Kept Animals Bill.

Lord Benyon: As you say, it may well come into force as a result of this enabling legislation. We are going to consult, in the next few weeks, on precisely the issues you raise, and the six-month figure will be in that consultation. This is the right way of doing this legislation. I have just



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come to it, but things change. Science and intelligence on illegal trade changes, and we want to give future Ministers the opportunities to amend legislation to reflect that. This is a good example of enabling legislation that will be able to do precisely the things you said on the basis of good evidence and consultation.

Q192 **Chair:** I appreciate your answer. The one thing I would say to you is: please can you make sure that the consultation is good but not too long, and that you act on it quickly? There is no doubt that there are a lot of puppies in particular coming through. There are pregnant bitches coming through. We had Border Force here giving evidence, and they are slightly out of their depth, really. Virtually any layperson can work out the difference between a puppy and a dog that is six months old. A lot of the gangs that are bringing in these illegal puppies are looking to bring in a very cuddly young puppy, so that they can make the most of it. On both counts, this would really improve the situation.

Lord Benyon: I absolutely agree with you. We want to make sure that we do this as quickly as possible. We do not want to over-consult, but it is right to talk to organisations. Border Force's comments came out of the fact that any one of us who may have bought a puppy or acquired a dog in recent months will know that the value of them has gone up considerably. On the back of increased demand and higher values, you get criminality, and we want our laws to reflect that threat and to give Ministers now and in the future the flexibility and ability to amend legislation to reflect changing criminal activity.

Q193 **Chair:** Thank you for that. Also, will you ban the import of animals subject to low-welfare practices such as ear-cropping? There are a number of practices going on across the continent and elsewhere that we really do not want to bring in here. It is so bad for the animals themselves. I see you are madly looking up your notes there.

Lord Benyon: I know that I have been given statistics on concerns raised by the Dogs Trust and others about an increased number of animals, and particularly what are sometimes referred to as status dogs or fighting dogs, where they have their ears removed, which is a repulsive activity. We definitely want to limit those coming in. I can remember lengthy debates on the floor of the House of Commons about tail-docking, but the law is quite clear on these issues. We not only want to make sure that our experts understand the problem, but we are also training carriers responsible for a number of pets coming onto their means of transport, so that they are trained, up-to-date with the law and able to influence the law by saying, "We are seeing more of this. We think Government should act", and then we will respond. Gareth, I do not know whether you have anything to add on that.

Gareth Baynham-Hughes: Not especially, but we could add that we work quite closely with veterinary organisations and others to educate the public and make sure that people are making informed decisions



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when buying animals, including in relation to these kinds of mutilations that can sometimes be applied.

Q194 **Chair:** It is not just the public either. Very often, if you have Border Force there, which may not be expert in animal welfare and may not be that interested in animals, they may not always spot what is happening. We can have as many laws as we like but it is about making sure that you can enforce them. This is a real issue for us. There will be more detailed questions in a minute on how you work with Border Force, but that is a plea that I would make.

Lord Benyon: Can I just respond on that? I am quite impressed by what I have discovered on Petfished, which you may have heard about from others. Part of the important activity that we need to do to cut down on criminality is to inform the public not to feed the demand that creates the problem. This is a really good platform to inform people about the very basic measures that they can take to make sure that the animal that they are buying is properly sourced and that they are not feeding the trade and lining the pockets of traffickers in animals and this illegal trade.

Q195 **Chair:** One of the interesting points is that we probably need about 700,000 or 800,000 puppies a year to replace the nine million to 10 million dogs that we have, who live for about 12 years on average, so you can do the arithmetic. The trouble is that we do not breed anywhere near that amount in this country, so you are quite right that it is not only about educating the public but also about, perhaps in the future, being able to get scaled breeding that is done on a good basis. That is also going to be a challenge for Defra.

Lord Benyon: It is. Feeding that market and being able to provide for that market domestically, with the highest welfare standards, is absolutely vital. By closing off one element of illegal trade, we do not want to boost another, so we must not take our eye off the ball with regard to the domestic breeding industry.

Q196 **Chair:** The trouble is that, naturally, the puppies are extremely valuable. That is where the six-month rule would really help on imports. The final part of my question, before I hand on to Sheryll, is why you are limiting the number of pets that you can bring in on foot to three but allowing five in a car. I am not convinced. If there are two people in a car, if they are related to one another, why do they need five dogs? If they are not related to one another, are they bringing these puppies or dogs in illegally? I just wonder whether we are not being a little too generous on the three on foot and five in a car. Where do you stand on this?

Lord Benyon: I have looked at this with fresh eyes, if you like. The figure that sticks in my head is that 96% of dog movements into this country are for three or fewer dogs. Currently, the law is that five people in a van could each have five dogs. It almost sounds ridiculous, but you could conceivably within the law, have 25 dogs coming in on one vehicle, and so this is quite a change. We will see how it goes and see if trends



require us to relook at this. At the moment, that figure will deal with the vast majority of problem cases. It has not been plucked out of the blue, but has been decided by talking to other stakeholders, particularly third-sector organisations. I hope that we have this right, but we will be interested to see what you say in your report.

Q197 **Chair:** Thank you for that answer. One of the benefits that we should have from leaving the European Union is to be able to act fast if we do not get it exactly right. The plea to you is: bring this in as you have it at the moment, but if it is not tight enough, can we then tighten it up afterwards? I suspect we will be doing another report into it, if there is a problem, so I suspect you will be back before us anyway. If it works, we will probably not see you on this subject; if it does not, I suspect you will be back again, so we will park that one there.

Lord Benyon: If I am still here.

Chair: I am sure you will be. You are now a thing of great permanence. That is probably fatal for you, Richard. I am going to hand over to Sheryll now for question number two.

Q198 **Mrs Murray:** Thank you very much, chair. Lord Benyon, welcome. I am going to call you Richard. It is fantastic to see you back in Defra, from a personal perspective anyway, and I look forward to working with you. We have been told that the current border controls for pets are not fit for purpose because they do not carry out physical checks on the animal. How do you respond to that?

Lord Benyon: Any APHA staff checking an animal will do a physical check of the animal. The documentation check by anybody who is checking it is important, but they also have to check the microchipping, which you cannot do without inspecting the animal. I was struck by information that I heard that one of the ways in which people try to get around it is by putting a bogus chip into the collar or some other part of the animal in order to try to get around the system. In nearly every case, there is some sort of contact with the animal. We should not escape the importance of making sure that the documentation stacks up with the nature of the animal as well. Gareth, do I have that right?

Gareth Baynham-Hughes: That is absolutely right. For non-commercial movements, a lot of these checks will be conducted by authorised pet-checkers employed by the carriers. The carriers are typically large companies, and the pet-checkers are trained by APHA staff. When checking a microchip, it should be with the animal, and the owner should not be able to do that microchip check in any way.

Q199 **Mrs Murray:** It was very apparent from evidence that we had that, with the responsibility falling to the carriers to carry out the checks, there is perceived to be a real lack of physical checks on the animals. Do you have any figures to show how many physical checks are carried out by qualified people compared to the number carried out by carriers? I do not



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expect you to have this now, but is it information that you could provide us with?

Lord Benyon: There is a protocol that is disseminated as part of the training to carriers such as Brittany Ferries, Eurotunnel and P&O, and they receive ongoing training on this. If there are gaps emerging or failures to act, APHA hears about it and action can be taken. I do not want to sound complacent, but that is not something that I have heard in the few weeks that I have been doing this job. I do not know whether Gareth has any data.

Gareth Baynham-Hughes: I do not have data to hand. I do know that the Dogs Trust provided some evidence of weaknesses in the system, going back a few years, and it is a good example of what the Minister just talked about in terms of the systems being about continual improvement. That feedback was provided to APHA, and I think the systems have been improved since then, so it is absolutely right that it is included in the operation manual for these people. Then there is an annual audit for all carriers, which is a way in which we can check their compliance and understanding of the whole purpose and contents of those protocols.

Q200 **Mrs Murray:** Finally, could you just reassure me that the checks that are carried out on dogs and puppies also apply to other pets, like kittens and cats?

Lord Benyon: This covers dogs, cats and ferrets. I do not know how many ferrets are imported into this country, but that is the bracket of pets that I am talking about. Are there any others, Gareth, that I have forgotten?

Gareth Baynham-Hughes: That is right. For non-commercial pets under the Pet Travel Scheme types of rules, it is cats, dogs and ferrets. There are other regulations for other types of animals.

Mrs Murray: Thank you very much. Richard, I look forward to seeing you again.

Q201 **Chair:** Before we move on from this question, could you just drop us a line on APHA auditing and how often? I think you said once a year. You do not have to name the carriers, but please tell us how those checks are carried out and how often. Hopefully, the carriers are fine, but we would like to know where the situation needs tightening up. That would be useful. I do not know if you could provide that to us in writing.

Lord Benyon: I am sure we could.

Q202 **Ian Byrne:** Lord Benyon, you are introducing new rules to prevent pet smuggling. In May, Steve Dann, a Border Force official, said that when it comes to enforcing the rules on pet smuggling, the challenge for them is "prioritisation" and that they have "massive competing priorities in various areas". Will you provide APHA and Border Force with more resources to enforce the new rules?



Lord Benyon: We can always make the case for more resources. It is important that we are proportionate in the amount of funding that we allocate and that it very much reflects the demand that you quite rightly point out. Ian Hewitt gave evidence to the Committee and, if he was here, he would say that he is making sure that the most effective use is made of the resources that we have. We have made more available, including for live animal checks at BCPs, which is a really important one.

I would be interested in your Committee's thoughts, because we are coming up to our bid in the Comprehensive Spending Review. We are having these discussions with all sorts of different organisations that we are working with, to make sure that we do have the right resources and are using them in the right way.

Q203 **Ian Byrne:** Just to follow on from that, Steve Dann said, "I do not think we have really assessed the impact at all". Have we had an impact assessment on the new rules and whether we need additional funding and resources? Has the department done that?

Lord Benyon: We talk regularly to Border Force and other agencies. If they are banging on our door saying that they need more help and certain directions to deal with a rising problem, we try to reflect it. We are there either physically on the ground in the form of APHA or available, if there is something that requires our or APHA's expertise. They have a great many different threats to deal with, not least terrorism and other forms of lawlessness, so their resource requirements are across a much wider group of threats. I hope that we are getting this right. From my read of this, I think that we are. Gareth, are there specific issues that have been raised by Border Force?

Gareth Baynham-Hughes: I was not going to pick that up particularly. The collaboration between APHA and Border Force is strong. What we do not know from the measures on puppies, if we are thinking about the Kept Animals Bill, for example, is how dissuasive those measures will be and what impact there will be on the volume of this trade. It is difficult to test by nature, since some of this trade is illicit, but our assumption is that the new rules would make it much harder and, therefore, make it easier to do the enforcement.

You have this combination of a magic solution—perhaps "magic" is the wrong word—of thinking about the consumer end, the demand that comes from buyers; the processes and rules in place that make it difficult for people to engage in illegal activity; and the enforcement of those rules. It is that combination of things that we feel will be a good balance. Inevitably, as the Minister says, if it turns out that the enforcement is the weak link in that chain, we would either make the case to improve the way in which we or colleagues target resources, or make the case for further investment.

Ian Byrne: That was a comprehensive answer, but you boxed yourself in there with "magic solution", which is a high bar that might come back



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and haunt you. Lord Benyon, I would like to touch on another point that has come to light from the evidence sessions: "Kent Trading Standards does not operate an out of hours attendance policy and therefore no enforcement activities will take place between Friday evening and Monday morning, or after normal working hours Monday to Friday". That is an example of one agency. The RSPCA suggests that smugglers adapt their business accordingly when they will meet "reduced checks", so there are no surprises there. Will you provide out-of-hours coverage at ports?

Lord Benyon: We do provide out-of-hours coverage at ports and can mount operations. If there is evidence and intelligence that particular time periods are being used because our normal hours are being avoided, we can do that. We do have a 24-hour response, so if Border Force say that they have a problem, APHA staff can be tasked.

Chair: There is no doubt that some of these gangs will naturally go on Saturday evenings, perhaps target some of the smaller ports, and probably vary where they are coming in all the time. You could have spot checks and a roving group of people who are going to pounce on various ports from time to time. I know you need intelligence but you also need some spot checks, because we have to send the message through to these gangs. Rosie has a question on gangs, so I will not take her question away, but spot checks would really help, if they did not know when or where they were going to happen, if you see what I mean.

Lord Benyon: I totally agree, and they do and will continue to happen.

Chair: We look forward to it being effective.

Q204 **Rosie Duffield:** What are the Government doing to tackle the organised crime groups responsible for pet smuggling, especially given those extra pressures and conflicting priorities that we have heard about for Border Force? We all get a huge amount of mail on this, and constituents are really concerned about organised crime, which is a multi-level crime. It is not just animal cruelty, but bringing illegally gotten money and things into the country. Can you explain to us how you are dealing with that particular issue?

Lord Benyon: I entirely remember those kinds of emails coming to me as an MP. It is something that is of real concern to people. Our job is to provide the expertise that can allow organisations like Border Force to catch people in the act of a crime, as well as the police and their intelligence units in trying to make life as difficult as possible for criminals, recognising that this is not just the speculative actions of one man in a van. This can also be criminality on a very large scale. You need only look at the value of dogs, as I mentioned earlier, and how that value has increased for particular breeds, to see the opportunities and the lightbulbs that are popping up in criminals' heads as the opportunities arise. That is only part of it.



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The other thing is, as I mentioned earlier—and I will try not to repeat myself—to try to educate the customer or the demander. I spoke about the Petfished campaign and how successful it has been. It has been the most incredible penetration into the group of people we are trying to reach. There are also other ways. The idea of buying a dog in a pub car park should be as unacceptable as so many other things that are now unacceptable but which used to be the way of doing things.

“Educating” sounds rather patronising, because, for the vast majority of people who buy an animal, it is a major part of their life and not something that they take lightly. I am afraid that too many people will try to cut corners, will not look at the provenance of the animal—how it was bred, how it was brought into the country and under what circumstances—and perhaps have not heard of the horrendous stories that you and I have of animals being brought in under terrible welfare conditions. This is all part of major criminal activity.

We will continue to do our bit, but the point of the spear is an international police effort to catch these people, prosecute them and put them away. That is a massive deterrent. If we can tackle this both in the port and at source, with the purchaser of the dog, we will be doing a huge amount to make this crime much less of a feature.

Q205 Rosie Duffield: Might that involve a new advertising push or something, just to get those messages out there to the public?

Lord Benyon: I will defer to Gareth on this, because he has been more involved with Petfished and other things. We are renewing this every now and again, are we not?

Gareth Baynham-Hughes: My understanding is that Petfished has been extended for a while—perhaps another year or so. We tend to keep it under review, based on its impact, but we do really close evaluation of the impact of those schemes and I understand that funding is in place for Petfished to continue. We can confirm that, if that is not right.

Barry Gardiner: Lord Benyon, it is lovely to see you back in the department. There is a long history there and I am looking forward to our communications over the next few months.

Lord Benyon: It is very good to see you, Barry.

Q206 Barry Gardiner: Last November, Lord Goldsmith told us that taking a dog to Northern Ireland from England would be no different from taking it to any other country in the United Kingdom, but that is not the case, is it? What are the Government doing to secure free movement of pets between mainland Britain and Northern Ireland?

Lord Benyon: I suspect he said that in the belief that we were going to, as we all hoped, continue with Part 1 status. Of course, we are a Part 2 status country, which means that it is not quite as straightforward, but



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we have good reason to believe that we will get it at some point in the future.

Q207 **Barry Gardiner:** That is not what the RSPCA has said. It said that it does not think that it is likely any time soon.

Lord Benyon: This requires both sides to agree. We are in discussions with the Commission about trying to resolve this. DAERA is also involved. This is a matter that we desperately want to resolve and we want to keep the public informed as much as possible.

Q208 **Barry Gardiner:** That leads me nicely on to the next part of what I wanted to ask you. One of the strong criticisms that has been made by the Kennel Club and the RSPCA is that the communication with the public around this matter has been extremely poor, not just from the mainland to Northern Ireland but from the UK to other parts of Europe. They are really concerned that public do not understand.

Given the exigencies of time to get the animal health certificate—you have to do it within 10 days of travel—and the cost of that, which is between £100 and £150, what is clear to both of those organisations is that pet owners do not understand these rules. They are not aware of them. They are deeply concerned that, because of the lack of communication from the Government, people are going to be turning up at the borders with their pets, carrying their pet passport and thinking that we are a Part 1 country and that it is all going to be fine and as was, but finding that they are turned back at the border. What is being done on the communications side to sort this out?

Lord Benyon: There was slight confusion over some information that was put up on a website. Our information on websites is now absolutely accurate and easy to disseminate. We have tested this, and the polling that we have done suggests that the public do understand it. It is not just us, but it is important that we are working with Northern Ireland authorities. We are seeking to make this as simple as possible, and the most obvious way for that to happen would be for the EU to give us Part 1 status. In animal welfare terms, we are absolutely in the right place to be like other countries which have Part 1 status, such as Norway. That is an ongoing conversation.

Q209 **Barry Gardiner:** I do not demur from what you are saying. The simplest thing would be for us to have Part 1 status. The fact is that we are being treated as a third country and we do not have it. By all means, tell me what steps the UK is taking in order to try to secure Part 1 status, which would be helpful, but what is really important and what the RSPCA and the Kennel Club are deeply concerned about is that the Government need to do more to communicate the current status and the problems that it may create for people taking their pets abroad.

So it is in two parts. The first is: what are you doing to get the Part 1? The second part of the question is: how are you ensuring that the public are not confused about this matter, given that the Government, at



various times, have said that there will be no difference?

Lord Benyon: Ongoing discussions with the Commission through channels you will be well aware of in order to achieve Part 1 status will continue. We also have the SPS Committee, which is meeting in the autumn. This is a forum where we can raise the fact that we have all the sanitary and phytosanitary regulations and rules in order and that we should be given this status. In terms of how we are continuing to communicate current issues, perhaps Gareth could come in here.

Gareth Baynham-Hughes: The main communications device is the website, and there is a good website on gov.uk on taking your pet abroad, which has all the information. We have run a two-year campaign on this. There was, as it were, a sticky moment at the back of end last year, when the final negotiations were taking place, which cemented which specific rules would be in place, but we have been working for a long period now on awareness. That has included, for example, working with vets and veterinary associations.

One of the things about my job is that it sometimes intersects with my private life. I got a letter from my vet just a few weeks ago, saying, "If you are thinking of going abroad this summer, this is what you need to do". That information is out there and is accessible, both to vets who would need to sign certificates in the first place and to animal owners. We conduct surveys on this, and the most recent suggests that a very high proportion of those surveyed who may travel to the EU with pets are aware that they need to plan ahead. I can get the specific figures and provide those to the Committee, if that is helpful.

Q210 **Barry Gardiner:** Thank you. Would it also be possible to tell us whether the department is taking out advertisements in whatever dog or cat magazines there might be? I do not know what the journals are, but I have no doubt that the department does. Are you trying to disseminate the information in that way?

Gareth Baynham-Hughes: I am sure that we can provide further information. There is a lot of social media and other media work that we do. To the extent that it is a programme that has been defined in writing, I am very happy to share that information with the Committee.

Q211 **Dr Hudson:** Thank you, Richard and Gareth, for being before us today. I should declare that I have a very strong professional interest in animal health and welfare, so forgive me if my line of questioning delves into that a little bit. I wanted to now move on to some bigger animals. We have taken a lot of evidence in this inquiry about the movement of horses. There are two types of movements: the more formal, legal side, and the undercover, illegal movement. I want to start on the above-board way of moving animals. A very important agreement that now is not in force since we left the European Union is the tripartite agreement between France, the United Kingdom and Ireland regarding the free movement of high-health-status horses. That is a significant part of that



sector's movement.

What progress has been made in agreeing a replacement for this important tripartite agreement on horses, whether that is something similar or something perhaps including other partner countries? It is something really important. Where are we with getting a replacement?

Lord Benyon: You raise a really important, thorny issue. The tripartite arrangement still exists for Northern Ireland. It is just GB that is not part of it, as I think you are aware. The high-health-status approach is one that we can see a resolution to in time. We have been supporting industry lobbying, which has done a really good job, from my examination of it. It has managed to get hard evidence to the Commission and has had a very favourable response, right from the top.

I understand that this is an issue that has been discussed with Ursula von der Leyen and Michel Barnier, and there have been favourable verbal responses, but we are yet to get a change of position from the Commission. It is something that we would like to raise at the SPS Committee in its forthcoming inaugural meeting, but we have to get it onto the agenda. As you will be aware, equine ID is devolved, so we have to work with the Welsh and Scottish Governments as well, to make sure that we are singing with one voice and can find a solution to this. Some sort of TPA 2.0 could emerge.

Q212 **Dr Hudson:** Are you optimistic that you could get it onto the agenda of these high-level meetings quickly? There is an intention to put it on the agenda. It is in everyone's interests, so can you get it on the agenda?

Lord Benyon: I totally agree with you. Gareth, do you think we can get it on the agenda?

Gareth Baynham-Hughes: The first meeting will happen in the autumn. The agenda is something that we have to agree between the parties. Inevitably, there will be a choice of issues, but I cannot see any major obstacle. It is just a question of which meeting and when.

Q213 **Dr Hudson:** Surely, you will be able to talk to your French and Irish counterparts, because it is in their interests to get it high up on the agenda.

Gareth Baynham-Hughes: That dialogue has been continuing for some time. Countries that have remained part of the European Union continue to take a steer from the Commission on the extent to which they should engage with us on that conversation, but to the extent that we can push at doors, we will continue to do so.

Q214 **Dr Hudson:** That is helpful. I now want to move on to the illicit movement of horses. We have taken evidence that many hundreds, if not thousands, of horses are shipped to the European continent under the guise of horses for pleasure or athletic purposes, when they are intended for slaughter. It raises significant welfare issues in terms of how those



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horses are transported. Do you have any comments from your department? Now that we have left the European Union, that is something that we really could tighten up on in order to help improve the welfare of these poor animals that are being shipped in this way.

Lord Benyon: It sounds bizarre in a way, but the export of horses for slaughter is not currently illegal. However, because we wish to discourage the trade, in the absence of a ban, no slaughter-related export health certificates are available or have been issued. As you say, that has been circumvented by people who are alleging that a horse is being exported for breeding or some elite sport purposes, and then, through a criminal act, are going to slaughter.

What we want to push for is to have every single horse in the country microchipped, and huge progress has been made on that in recent years. We want to move to more modern forms of passporting. Breed societies are the issuers of horse passports and there are 81 of them around the country. We can digitise everything on this side of the Channel, but if the other side of the Channel still require paper we are not really dealing with the problem. I can assure you that this is something that we really want to crack.

The final point is that in the Kept Animals Bill, we will be banning the export of animals for slaughter. What is currently an anomaly, in that horses can be taken for slaughter, will be prevented even more.

Gareth Baynham-Hughes: Just to add to the last point that the Minister made, we are considering how to implement that provision, which might include, for example, requiring journey logs. That is the sort of administrative measure that would enable us to keep a much closer eye on why animals are being moved and what the ultimate purpose of that is. It is a question of, on the one hand, making clear that it is illegal and, on the other, thinking about how you implement that in practice as an alternative to this reliance at the moment on EHCs.

Q215 **Dr Hudson:** That is really helpful. As you say, Richard, the key will be in the identification of these animals being shipped for slaughter, because none of them are formally being shipped under the guise of being shipped for slaughter. If we are able to identify, track and trace these animals, that will be the way forward.

You have kind of answered the final part of my question, in that you sound like you are very supportive of the Chief Vet and the APHA, which have said that a digital system in terms of recognising these animals through microchips, and having a central database, would be the way forward in tracking them. Where are we with that? Is that ongoing or being consulted on? Will that be able to bear fruit soon?

Lord Benyon: I will say something first and then ask Gareth to put flesh on the bones. As I said, the breed societies manage this, because they want control over the studbook, and we entirely support that. In order to make this happen, there is an enormous amount of work that needs to be



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done in the spirit of the willing. It is in everyone's interests that it is done. It also needs a bilateral agreement with the EU to make sure that digitisation happens across the board. Otherwise, we are going to have to have a digital record, which presumably can almost be done on your iPhone, and then the usual wad of papers, if you were taking a horse to an elite event or to a breeding establishment in the EU.

Q216 Dr Hudson: Gareth, do you have any final points on that?

Gareth Baynham-Hughes: I have nothing particular to add. The Minister is spot on. Those are exactly some of the tools that might become available with digitisation, although it depends on the whole system and, as the Minister said, we are only one part of that. In terms of timing, it is also clear, just from the scope of your inquiry, that there is a lot going on in the animal health and animal welfare space at the moment. It is making sure that we are doing all the right things in the right order that prevents us from being really clear about our timetable sometimes. The review of the equine ID traceability regime will definitely be an increasing priority later in the year.

Q217 Chair: Before we leave this one, Minister, as far as I am aware, the equestrian and horse-racing and horse-breeding sector is ready to go with an equine base, and there is one that is workable. Are we in a position to be able to go to Europe with that? We no longer have the tripartite agreement, so there is a real interest in France and Ireland to have a system that works. I believe that there is a digital system that we have ready here. Are you ready to go to Europe with that and say, "We have this system; we can offer it to you if you would agree"? Surely, there is a real, mutual interest in the horse-breeding world across the continent, as well as in the United Kingdom, to make this work.

Lord Benyon: In one sense, I am just a pawn in this game of chess, and there are more important pieces on the board that can make this happen. I used to represent one of the key racing constituencies in the country, the home of National Hunt racing. I am aware of the impact that changes have had not just to racing establishments but to studs and to the bloodstock industry. I want to make sure, in my job here, that we are speaking for those very important businesses. In the constituency that I used to represent, it was worth £80 million and employed over 1,000 people, so these are industries that thrive on the international nature of their trade, and the racing events and other elite equestrian events that take place. I absolutely want to do everything I can to try to resolve this, not just for racing but for the wider equestrian world.

Q218 Chair: You certainly understand the point I am making to you. In order to get Europe to see some real advantages in a system, we have to have that system working and up and running. Do we have it, so that we can negotiate with the European Union? You are quite right about Newbury and the surrounding area—I have been there a few times, and the amount of stables, economic growth and benefits there is amazing.



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Are we, as a Government, pushing hard enough to get this system in place and offer it to the European Union? I know that it has to negotiate, but if we had something on the table, with which we could say, "There you are. This will make the situation a lot better", are we in that position to do it and are we going to do it?

Lord Benyon: You are absolutely right that it is a two-way advantage here, so that has to be a good starting point. The second point is that governments should not always be the main player here. We should be supporting the sectors to do this. There is no point in going to have a conversation with the Commission without having some details of what we are talking about, which means that we want the breed societies, the British horse-racing industry, show-jumping and every other kind of activity to be willing participants in something that will make their lives easier and cheaper, but which will also benefit business in Europe. This has to be done right and we will support the industry in every way we can and play our part where we can.

Q219 **Chair:** I will leave this at this stage, but the point that has been made to me within the industry—and at the top end in particular—is that they are ready with this system. They are ready to offer it to Europe. If they are, will Government negotiate it? I know it is perhaps further up the pay grade, but are we going to do it? That is the point that I want to make to you.

Lord Benyon: It is a point well made. I might have to give you more details about how we are precisely going to do that, unless Gareth has something on the tip of his tongue. This is something that is being dealt with at the highest levels of Government and we want to make sure that we are part of that conversation.

Chair: We will park it there. If there is anything that you can add in writing to that, we would be delighted to have it for our report.

Q220 **Dave Doogan:** Lord Benyon, how are you working with the EU to ensure that it builds live animal border control posts in northern European ports? We require this to enable UK exporters to transfer and sell live agricultural animals to the EU. How is that work progressing?

Lord Benyon: There is a commercial side to this. The NFU has been pushing very hard to try to get BCPs in place at these northern ports. The work is ongoing. It is to their advantage, as well as ours, that those exist, in the same way that we are rolling out border control points here. Gareth, can you give any more details?

Gareth Baynam-Hughes: The sort of support that we have been providing to the NFU is information about data flow and the value of these sectors, so that it can precisely land that commercial point with potential BCPs. There is additional work. We are in conversations with a number of member states, including on this issue of BCP availability.

Q221 **Dave Doogan:** I hear what you are saying in terms of the ongoing work,



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but it is right to say that, for the time being, UK exporters cannot export live animals to the EU, while, at the same time, the EU can merrily continue exporting live animals to the UK.

Lord Benyon: We can export some animals, but it will be easier in the future when these BCPs are up and running.

Gareth Baynham-Hughes: That is right. There is no BCP for traditional livestock at the moment. Poultry and equines are able to move, but not livestock.

Q222 **Dave Doogan:** If you want to export cattle, sheep or pigs to the EU, you cannot do it.

Gareth Baynham-Hughes: Yes. In the future, that would need to be for breeding anyway, because of the proposed ban on live exports for fattening and slaughter. That important trade in valuable genetics, essentially, relies on BCPs, so those commercial decisions will be important, and that is why we are supporting the NFU and speaking bilaterally, where possible, with member states.

Q223 **Dave Doogan:** Sticking with that asymmetry that faces European Union exporters compared to UK exporters, will the construction of BCPs for live animal imports into the UK be completed by March 2022?

Lord Benyon: I have not heard that they will not.

Q224 **Dave Doogan:** Have you heard that they will?

Lord Benyon: I am assuming that they will. Gareth, can you confirm that they will be finished, even if you have to go and finish them yourself?

Gareth Baynham-Hughes: I do not think I would be the right person to do that, but I am pleased to say, Minister, that your brief does say that we should say that we are absolutely on track to deliver the BCPs.

Q225 **Dave Doogan:** The concern, of course, is that the £100 million Port Infrastructure Fund was grossly oversubscribed to the tune of £430 million from ports looking to create BCPs. The Government have allocated only £194 million, which creates a gap. How do you see that panning out?

Lord Benyon: That is absolutely right. There is another competition fund that will shortly be going out to ports. I know that there are gaps. For example, Portsmouth is one that we would very much like to see being included. It was unsuccessful and this may be an opportunity for it, with other ports, to try to apply for this competition funding. We will get there, but it has been a challenge.

Q226 **Dave Doogan:** Can you assure the Committee that the correct amount of urgency and pace is being applied to this project? It does feel a little bit open-ended and like a fingers-crossed-type enterprise.



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Lord Benyon: It is absolutely an urgency, and that was made apparent to me from the moment I walked into this building. As Gareth says, a lot has been going on in terms of Brexit and Covid, notwithstanding all the other complications. I am not making any excuse because we are on track to do a lot here. We want to do more and we have secured some funding, which I hope will fill a gap or gaps.

Gareth Baynham-Hughes: It is worth saying that this is an area just outside my bailiwick. There is another directorate that leads the delivery of border infrastructure and so on. It is a large undertaking, and a large amount of staff resource and leadership time is being spent on delivering this package. The money is the best part of £1 billion, by the time you add it all together, for all the different border infrastructure, so there is plenty of backing from the Treasury for this work as well.

Q227 **Chair:** Before we leave this question, Richard, we have done other inquiries in this Committee as to problems with getting agriculture and fish into the European market. The Europeans are busy stopping and inspecting our lorries. They have posts and they do this all the time. We are busy waving in all our imports from the EU, and my view is that, until we get a little bit tougher ourselves and have these border posts in place, where we can check something coming in from the EU, why would they relax any of what they are doing? We are just giving everything away at the moment.

It is not entirely your responsibility, but you can understand the point that I am making. You and I voted the same way, I think, in the referendum, but I am really disappointed with the way the European Union has behaved. It is behaving very badly, in my view. Until we can get tougher ourselves, it is not going to negotiate with us. Why is it that we are taking so long with all of this? As Dave said to you, it is a little bit hopeful all the time as to whether these posts are going to be up and running. All the time, the dates are being pushed back, and I just do not think that it is any way going to bring pressure on getting our exports moving better than they are at the moment.

Lord Benyon: I could not agree with you more. This is definitely an urgent responsibility of ours to get this work completed. It is an enormous amount of taxpayers' money that is being splashed here, and we want to make sure it is spent properly, but not delayed. There are many areas in which, like you, I am disappointed with the way we have been treated. The channels are open and we may well find that some of the things that are sticking in our relationship with the EU will start to ease. A bit of carrot-and-stick on both sides can sometimes be the right way forward, and making sure that our border control posts are in place is a very important part of our future trading relationship.

Q228 **Chair:** The trouble at the moment, Richard, is that we are offering the carrots and they are using the sticks. Until we get a few sticks of our own, I am not sure that they are going to negotiate with us. I am sorry. We just let everything roll through in case we get a hold-up and we do



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not get our imports in as quickly as we can, whereas the EU stops our imports whenever it has the opportunity, as far as I can see. Carrot-and-stick is right, but I am afraid there are too many carrots on our side and too few sticks to use on them. Are you going to produce a few more sticks? What are you going to do?

Lord Benyon: I had better be careful here because much of this is way out of my pay grade. I hear what you say and I do understand the views that are expressed on this right across your House and in my mailbox. I know that the Secretary of State is really keen to see this resolved. We do have a very complex just-in-time food-supply system in this country and we want to keep it going through all the difficulties we have faced. It is a requirement and what your constituents expect of us, but they also expect a fair deal when it comes to exports and imports. That is what we are striving for.

Chair: We will park it there, but you can imagine, with perishable goods, like fish in particular and many dairy products and others, we do need to get them into the European Union. Many businesses are being affected by it. I am sure that Sheryll will come in with one of her questions in a minute. She may want to elaborate a bit more on that.

Lord Benyon: I have spent many hours in this Committee talking about fish.

Mrs Murray: Chairman, I am just nodding in agreement with you. Richard, if there is anything that you can do to perhaps help ease the trade, you have the message strongly.

Lord Benyon: About 12 yards away, on the other side of that wall, is Victoria Prentis, and we talk regularly about this, so I can promise you.

Chair: We are looking forward to you, Victoria and others getting on the warpath, if you can, and sorting some of this out.

Lord Benyon: I think she already is.

Q229 **Derek Thomas:** Welcome, Lord Benyon. I hope you do not regret the wisdom of coming back into this place. I want to pick up on the issue of show and sale animals returning to Northern Ireland. What is Defra's long-term solution to the EU's residency requirements that prevent show and sale animals returning to Northern Ireland after visiting Great Britain?

Lord Benyon: I understand that there is a real issue in Northern Ireland and I saw the evidence that your Committee has taken on this. This is, again, something that we will be wanting to raise at the SPS Committee. This does not affect equines. It is a standstill rule that they have to be held for a certain amount of time. I am sure that this is causing great difficulty in terms of the way that trade used to happen. For example, when Northern Ireland sent sheep to Stirling sales, if they did not fetch the price or did not sell, they could be brought back. Now they have to



stay in situ somewhere, which costs. This is an anomaly that is an inevitability of the Northern Ireland Protocol and one that we want to see resolved, so that farmers can trade as easily as possible the animals that you described. Gareth, am I right that this is the sort of thing that the SPS Committee can—

Gareth Baynham-Hughes: That is right. It is fundamentally a position where the EU legislation does not really envisage this kind of short-term circular move between third countries and the EU. We are in a position where we have identified the issue and the legal obstacles, and it is then a question of whether the Commission has the wherewithal to consider changing its own legislation and what reassurance it would need around these movements and their biosecurity. These rules exist for animal disease control purposes and are not really amenable to the position we are in. The Minister is absolutely right that things like technical conversations on the SPS Committee are the basis for taking this forward.

Q230 **Derek Thomas:** Thank you, but you can understand the problem. If you have pedigree animals that just cannot return to where they came from, it is causing huge upset and problems for people who would have done it without giving it much thought previously. So other than further conversations, there is no real, concrete response that you can give to us that at the moment.

Gareth Baynham-Hughes: It is not just a question of saying, “Please change your law”. We need to help come up with ideas. There are ideas around designating GB as an export assembly centre—technical things that my team would understand and be able to get into. We will bring the creative thinking to it, but we would then absolutely need the forum for it to be agreed and for the European Union to take forward its legislation, if that needs to be amended as we expect.

Q231 **Derek Thomas:** I will not get drawn into beating up the EU, as the Chair was encouraging me to, but this is definitely an area where common sense and a bit of pragmatic thinking would help.

We understand that you sought a seven-year derogation from the EU’s scrapie monitoring system for sheep moving to Northern Ireland, but this was turned down. What alternatives does Defra have to work with in relation to sheep movements?

Lord Benyon: This is one that we hope we can resolve. The Scrapie Monitoring Scheme is something that has been relied on by farmers and is causing real difficulties. The Commission is quite sympathetic here, so we want to work with it, which may not suit your Chairman’s state of mind at the moment. Where the door is open, we want to work with it. We are continuing to discuss options. Gareth, give us some examples of the options.

Gareth Baynham-Hughes: Essentially, it would be a derogation of some form. The problem is that you have to build up a track record that



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farmers simply did not have the opportunity to do before EU exit, so it will be considering whether there are alternatives to that. Like the issue around standstill, there is a question here for the EU needing to amend its legislation. As the Minister says, there is a sympathetic ear. Its rules are designed for animal disease control purposes. Scrapie is a TSE, so it is an important disease. As I say, a sympathetic hearing is being given, and you took give evidence on this from the CVO a few weeks ago.

Q232 Derek Thomas: Traceability and animal welfare are things that we take really seriously in the UK. I am a representative of the far west of Cornwall and I know how seriously tagging is taken. It is a legal requirement. The practice of having to retag animals when they move from Great Britain to Northern Ireland potentially breaks down the traceability of that animal. Also, the animal welfare aspect is quite significant. It is no fun being tagged and retagged every time you go across a border. How are going to address that issue, so that we get to the point where we no longer need to retag animals every time they move between Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Lord Benyon: When we were in the EU, there was one ear tag. Now we are outside it, we need a GB as opposed to an EU one, and you understand the problem. There is no way to avoid that. What I could not understand from reading the transcript is that, while I entirely accept the Northern Ireland NFU witness you had is dealing with this on a daily basis and I am not, he was saying that you have to take out the GB tag and put in an EU tag. That sounds bonkers to me. He used the word "crazy", and it does sound crazy. I have had discussions here about seeing if we can just change the existing tag, so that it has the GB and the EU number on it. Gareth, can you tell me if that is possible?

Gareth Baynham-Hughes: This does feel like a "computer says no" issue or a bureaucratic nightmare invented by bureaucrats, but it is just one of those things that have fallen out of the legislative setup. There are two things. There is something around the UK legislation, which requires an ear tag that has, at the moment, "UK" as the country code, and an EU requirement for us to use internationally recognised codes, which means "GB". There is an option to think about the UK legislation that requires "UK", which would then mean that you could have "GB".

There is also then a question about what you do for moves within GB and Northern Ireland. At the moment, when animals move to Northern Ireland, they need to be retagged and re-identified, but if they are only ever going to stay in Northern Ireland, maybe we could avoid that requirement—for example, if they were not going to move further into the Republic or elsewhere in Europe. This issue is one of those that is being worked through.

My view, if I might share it with the Committee, is that there are hundreds of things that we were able to work through and resolve, and we are left, in a way, with a legacy of the more intractable issues. We are seized of them and we have been working as far as possible on them. It



is then just a question of going through the processes in the right way, understanding the problem on the one hand and working through our own legislative constraints and with the EU on each of these.

Q233 Derek Thomas: I do not want to be rude or unhelpful to you, Richard, or Gareth, but you recognise and acknowledge that there is a problem. I hear that as, Gareth says, these are the odd few that need to be resolved, but what are the barriers to getting it sorted out? It just makes no sense. The ear-tagging bit is ludicrous, as you said, Lord Benyon. How enthusiastic and what capacity does Defra has to get to grips with these and start putting together really clear proposals that can be arguments that can be won?

Lord Benyon: I am grateful to your Committee. In preparing for today, I read the transcript of the evidence you took from a variety of different people, and it has educated me enormously. I would just underline what Gareth said. I walked here at a point where an enormous number of officials had resolved huge numbers of problems, and we are left with these. You are right that this is solvable and we will do everything we can, as urgently as we can, to find a solution. It may be, as Gareth says, separating out what an animal is going to do. If it has come back to be fattened and slaughtered in Northern Ireland, that is a relatively simple issue. If it has gone there to breed and then come back to GB, that might be more complicated, but we can and must find a solution.

Derek Thomas: We need to make sure that it is not such a labour-intensive process for those doing the work, because they will just stop doing it and we will lose that trade.

Q234 Chair: I am not going to let you off the hook that easily on this one, Richard, because, being a practical sheep farmer in my time, it is one thing putting a tag in a sheep but it is another thing cutting out a tag and putting in another one. There is a real animal welfare issue there, so this does need to be sorted. You can remember foot-and-mouth back in 2001. These sheep that have been going from Scotland to Northern Ireland have been roaming around the island of Ireland for many years, so this idea that, all of a sudden, we have to identify all of these sheep because they may or may not have scrapie is, again, the EU now deciding, because we have left the single market, that it can use this third-country status and bring in scrapie regulations. Those sheep have mixed on the island of Ireland since time immemorial. This is crazy stuff.

Not only have I had the Ulster Farmers Union here giving evidence to this Committee, but I also had a private call with them yesterday. They are having huge problems in Northern Ireland. Their dairy products are going to the south to be processed, and the EU is trying to say that they are now mixed dairy products. The whole idea of having this difficult situation going into Northern Ireland is trying to make sure that you can process things on the island of Ireland. The whole thing is a damn good mess and I am afraid it is Northern Irish farmers who are paying the price.



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I am sorry to be so belligerent this afternoon, but letting the EU off on this one is crazy. This is nothing to do with animal health. This is nothing other than bureaucracy gone mad and Europe wanting to get its own back on us because we left the EU. I am going to be that blunt this afternoon. Why can we not do something on cutting out those tags on the animal welfare issue alone? What are we going to do about it other than wringing our hands? I am sorry to be so hard on you, but what more are you going to do?

Lord Benyon: You are not being hard on me. I have tagged sheep and I know that there are so many things to do over the life of a sheep in your care as a farmer, whether it is drenching, injecting, shearing or dagging. Tagging just adds another level of bureaucracy to their lives and is just not acceptable. You are entirely right that there is no animal welfare issue here. We do not suddenly have an outbreak of some disease that we are trying to contain. This is the same type of farming that has continued on the island of Ireland and in GB countries and, therefore, we can solve this perfectly easily. It does take two to tango, and we will try to make that happen. I have a strong theme from you today, Chair, and I will respect it. I share it.

Q235 **Chair:** I look forward to you doing the tango, Richard, but it is time we got on with the music and got it going, because this is crazy. Like I said, to be serious, Northern Irish farmers really are suffering, so it is time we tried to sort this. It is not all your problem, but you are the one in front of us today, so you are getting it.

Lord Benyon: Message received.

Q236 **Dave Doogan:** Lord Benyon, beyond improving animal welfare, what is Defra's assessment of the impact of the ban on export for slaughter on farm businesses?

Lord Benyon: The impact, in terms of pure numbers, will be very low. Less than 0.03% of all sheep that are reared in the UK are sent abroad for slaughter. It is one vessel, effectively, doing it. The writing has been on the wall on this for quite some time. Commercial activity has sensed the prevailing wind here and we now have legislation that will ban this. We have to make sure that we have capacity in our existing slaughterhouses to feed this market. The answer to your question is that it is minimal.

Q237 **Dave Doogan:** Over and above that, what action is Defra taking to ensure that there is the right kind of abattoir in the right location in GB to ensure that animals do not face unnecessarily long journeys before slaughter? Conversely, and competing with that priority, what is Defra doing to ensure that farms furthest from abattoir facilities are not unduly and unjustly penalised by the fairly reasonable drive to improve animal welfare standards?

Lord Benyon: This is a really important issue. What we are talking about here is, first of all, distance of movements and making sure that we are



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not impeding the economic potential of some of the more remote areas of the United Kingdom and that we have the abattoirs available to serve the market. There are some 279 red meat and poultry slaughterhouses operating in England and Wales, and that does not tell quite the full story. A very few of those take a very large number of the stock that are slaughtered.

We really want to make sure that we are maintaining as broad and as wide a geographical and specialist range of those abattoirs and that we are supporting new initiatives—for example, mobile abattoirs. I have been talking to people in relation to Fir Farm, which you may have heard about. It will start seeing, for example, the support of farmer groups who may want to operate in certain areas, possibly with a pop-up or mobile slaughterhouse, or operating with an existing one, to make sure that we are able to support the industry in this way.

I know that you have had evidence from others about the work being done to assess animal welfare conditions on movement, and I am very happy to talk to you more about that, but your question was specifically about abattoirs. In headline terms, we have the capacity for what we need to support this industry and produce good-quality meat product not only for our domestic market but also for export. We are maintaining that and making sure that it is as broad in size and geographic reach as possible.

Q238 Dave Doogan: On geographic reach, I will tell you what specific problem is facing farmers north of the Central Belt of Scotland. It is their spent hens, and the ability for those spent hens to reach, within the designated time, the sole spent hen processing plant in Bradford. Maybe in the UK context, but certainly in the Scottish context—my constituents in Angus are not especially remote; it is a heavily populated area—it will be a real challenge to reach the Bradford processing plant with spent hens in the time projected to be allocated. Insofar as Defra has a UK-wide remit—which I realise is very limited with the devolution of agriculture; nevertheless, working with the devolved nations—what is the plan for supporting these farmers? I am not talking about sheep farmers or upland farmers, but about serious agricultural producers who are going to be, as a product of geography, marginalised from a very conventional element of farm income, that being egg production.

Lord Benyon: The poultry industry is a massive one in this country. You have raised something that I was not aware of. I am grateful to you and I will take that away. Is Bradford specific to spent hens or are there other ones further north?

Dave Doogan: There are plenty of poultry processing plants. It is spent hens. The difficulty is that, if you cannot dispose of spent hens as an asset, they become a liability, which means the whole thing comes in.

Gareth Baynham-Hughes: You may come on to this, but we ran a consultation quite recently on animal welfare rules for transport, which



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included maximum journey times. Specifically, that consultation was for England and Wales but we would expect to work with the Scottish Government on rules. There are particular welfare concerns about spent hens, which are at the end of their life and perhaps suffer in particular from transport, but that is a very good example of an issue that we can take away and make sure we understand the implications of the English rules and any intention from the Scottish Government to legislate, and then deal with the cross-administration issue and make sure that we have understood it fully. It is a very good example of the kind of technical detail that we need to get right.

Lord Benyon: This is something that could be raised at the Abattoir Sector Group that we created, which came out of a report. This is an opportunity for us to interface with the industry and make sure that we are filling gaps such as the one that you have described.

Dave Doogan: Just for context, I do not suppose that this issue unduly affects my constituency any more than it affects Sheryll's or Derek's down in Cornwall.

Chair: That brings me neatly to Sheryll, who wanted a supplementary, so I will hand over to her now.

Q239 **Mrs Murray:** We are talking about abattoirs. I will give you an example in my constituency, but it is not unlike any other area of the country. A small abattoir stripped itself financially to introduce CCTV exactly as was required. It had an inspection and was told that its floor needed painting, so it painted the floor, from an animal welfare and health-and-safety perspective. The inspection was done again, and it was told that the paint had to be removed from the floor. Another inspector came along and said, "I'm sorry, you've now got a concrete floor that is not painted. That doesn't meet our requirements", and that abattoir closed.

It has affected a massive amount of farmers around my constituency. In fact, if you go back and do your homework, there are very few, if any, abattoirs now operating in Cornwall. I really do think that, if you are setting up an abattoir committee of some sort, we have to look at ways of supporting people to bring these smaller operators back into business. My farmers are now facing putting those animals through long journeys into Devon as opposed to using something local, which would have benefited the animals.

There is a lot of work to be done there in joining the dots and making sure that there is consistency. I do not know whether you have heard this story before, but I am pretty sure that South East Cornwall is not the only constituency in the country affected by this.

Lord Benyon: It is not. I am old enough to remember working on a sheep farm, where we sent our sheep to be slaughtered at one of three abattoirs in west Berkshire—two in Newbury and one in Thatcham. All of those have closed, and that same farm is now sending them to Exeter to



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fulfil a contract with a particular retailer. That has undoubtedly added to the welfare concerns that we have talked about.

I am looking for Gareth to nod or shake his head here, but I am guessing that it was the FSA that was doing those inspections. It is the sort of thing that I need to know about. We will certainly take that up in discussions with the FSA and with the Abattoir Sector Group, because that is the industry dealing with these issues on a day-by-day basis. If that kind of nonsense is happening, we want to know about it and we want to hold those who are doing that to account.

Mrs Murray: Thank you very much. I really do appreciate that.

Q240 **Chair:** Can I just follow up on Sheryll's and Dave's questions? The Abattoir Sector Group is also proposing more slaughterhouses across the country. With our new agricultural policy, we are going to be looking at more rare breeds and at linking that meat into local markets. If you want a local market, you need a local slaughterhouse. Some of these might be done by mobile slaughterhouses. Are you looking very seriously at the recommendations from the Abattoir Sector Group to try to introduce more slaughterhouses? There is a big slaughterhouse in Cornwall that has more or less eaten up all of the little ones. They do it to each other, as you well know, and are not the easiest group of people to deal with. What are we going to do to make sure that there are more local slaughterhouses? Are you going to be on the offensive on this one?

Lord Benyon: These are strategic assets. I am using those words carefully. In areas where there is a lot of stock—i.e. west and north—we want to make sure that we are doing everything that we can to make it easy for existing ones to stay in business and for new ones, where they are needed and where there is a market opportunity, to open. We are looking at new technologies around, as I have already mentioned, mobile or pop-up slaughterhouses. From what I have seen of them, they seem to have great potential. There is an opportunity here.

These are commercial activities. We cannot regulate abattoirs to operate only to a certain size. There may be conversations that one could have with MHCLG about planning permission. I suspect that when somebody wants to set up an abattoir it excites people in a negative frame of mind. It should not do, because these are highly regulated, and all the things that people say about smell and waste are regulated out of reality. We have to recognise that there is a strategic-asset argument to make to sustain the existing abattoirs and encourage new ones, where possible.

Q241 **Chair:** I have had quite an involvement with the Abattoir Sector Group. You are listening quite carefully to what it is saying, are you, and looking to see if you could implement a lot of what it is saying?

Lord Benyon: We are. It is an industry-led group. We are supporting them in developing a thriving network of local abattoirs across the UK, with the highest-possible welfare standards, in order to support the kind



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of sustainable farming that we are encouraging through the reforms, about which you will be well aware.

Q242 **Chair:** We look forward to you achieving that, Minister. I am glad to see that you are now on record, so thank you very much for that.

Question 10 is on the proposal for transport that came forward. It was largely geared to poultry. As we discussed earlier, there is a problem with spent hens. We had a minimum temperature with sheep and cattle—not only the outside temperature, but you probably need to be more concerned about the inside temperature of the lorry. Much of this has now been changed, but the question to you is why you took the poultry sector and, as far as I can see, designed a whole system of transport for the livestock sector as well. Now you seem to have seen a little bit of sense.

This is before you came back into the role, Richard, so you are off the hook on this particular one, but why did we get ourselves into this predicament? Can the sheep, beef and dairy side of it be reassured that the proposals that you are now going to bring forward are sensible? We are just about to do a deal with Australia on beef. They probably travel for 40 hours in lorries, and all you are doing is restricting us. I do not say that we should take our animals around for 40 hours, but nor should we trade with those who are. Seriously, what are we going to do about the livestock sector? Are these proposals now going to be sensible?

Lord Benyon: I understand your concerns. The proposal consulted on came from the Farm Animal Welfare Committee. It included a widespread review of stakeholders and the science. The Scottish Royal College and Edinburgh University provided the scientific evidence for that review. Undoubtedly, this is something where there are issues that crop up every month. It is a consultation that we did with the Welsh Government. If we were tone-deaf, so were they but I hope we were not. I hope we were listening to what they were saying. There was a misconception. From what I read—and I may have got this wrong—it was saying that this was going to affect farm-to-farm movements close by. This was not for any movement below 65 km and was just for the distant movements.

In answer to your question, we will certainly keep this in the realms of practicality. We do not want to penalise farming in any way that we do not need to. We want to make sure that we are supporting farmers at this difficult time. Getting their product to market is absolutely vital. The customer who is going to buy that meat at the end of the day is also demanding welfare standards, so we are in the middle. We want to sail a path that satisfies the needs of those producing the meat and of those who are going to eat it.

Q243 **Chair:** You are right in many respects, but the issue is that, if animals are travelling in temperatures of 35 degrees or more, you need good ventilation—and you probably need air-conditioning—in those lorries. The issue was when you got to not very low temperatures and could not



move animals, because the temperature in the lorry would have been quite a lot higher. In February this year, under the proposals, they worked out that you would not have been able to get any livestock to market, because of the lower temperatures. North of the border, you would perhaps have lower temperatures again. Some of these things were just totally impractical. I do not know, Gareth, if you could shed any more light. If you are going to have research done on it, it does need to be reasonably sensible, and this was not, in my view, I am sorry to say. Where was all this research that came up with this minimum temperature?

Gareth Baynham-Hughes: As the Minister said, a lot of this was researched by what was then called the Farm Animal Welfare Committee, which I know, as it undertook that research, spoke to stakeholder groups. Perhaps things then got lost in translation in the way that we put out the consultation, but let us be clear that it was a consultation. The nature of these consultations is that you put out proposals, but they are proposals for consultation and it is helpful for us to hear about the problems.

My regret, as the director who signed off the package, was that it did not land in the right way and undermined a wider sense that we have been building over the last few years for really good and effective stakeholder engagement with the sector through our sector groups and the way that we are approaching the pathway in relation to Future Farming and so on. To the extent that the tone or the intentions were not expressed clearly enough, I hope that that is seen as an aberration rather than a structural deficit in our understanding of the way that the industry operates.

That said, as the Minister said, we are in the middle, in a sense. We have to balance the different interests, and I have seen some of the early analysis of the consultation, which shows that a large number of people would like even tighter restrictions. There is something about how we achieve this aim, together and over time, of increasing welfare standards without, as the Minister says, coming out with impractical or unimplementable solutions.

Q244 **Chair:** Before I bring in Dave, who wants to ask a supplementary, there is no doubt that Victoria Prentis has had to work very hard on this to try to get it into a sensible place. I am sorry, but we should never have got there in the first place. Spent hens are a real problem and I would be the first to say that. We have to have enough abattoirs to be able to deal with them, so that they do not have to travel too far in a lorry, but to treat everything else in the same way was just crazy. I am sorry to say it. It is nothing to do with animal welfare, but about having sensible rules so that we can transport our livestock in good conditions. These rules that you came up with were not; they were wrong. I am sorry, but I do not know why we ever got ourselves into that place.

Lord Benyon: If you see our response to the consultation, which will be published later this summer, I hope you will be reassured.



Chair: I will leave it there. I have had my little rant and rave on that one. Could I bring Dave in now, please?

Q245 **Dave Doogan:** Lord Benyon, in a previous answer you said, in reference to abattoirs, that these are commercial enterprises—which, of course, they are—and that Government cannot interfere in or regulate where they would establish their operations. I may have been paraphrasing slightly there, but you said it was not Government's job to regulate. Government can regulate, if they so choose. These are political choices that the Government may or may not take. Even if it is unpalatable to a Government of the current complexion to interfere or intervene in the market in this way, you can nevertheless quite cogently incentivise abattoirs to operate in a strategic way.

You referenced and accepted yourself that abattoirs are a strategic asset that underpin our whole agricultural meat production sector. What we are seeing, whether or not we choose to accept it, is a concentration of abattoir facilities closer and closer to the centres of population, which are closer and closer to the south-east of England, to the detriment of other areas of the United Kingdom and, indeed, Great Britain itself. Is it not realistic to incentivise abattoirs? Let us say that they cannot get above a certain size or be X miles closer to the next one. Let us say that there is annual premium attracted to an abattoir that is built and operating in a certain area to support the agriculture that depends on it, especially when you are going to further tie the hands of farmers by having maximum journey times for animals. It is possible.

Lord Benyon: You make a very good point, and you will probably be pleased to see how interventionist this Government can be in economic areas when they want to be. This may be one that we need to look at. It is a conversation that we are having a lot in this building, but it is not just for Defra. As I said earlier, this is about planning, about business and about the wider impact on rural communities and animal welfare. I hear what you say and you make a very good point.

Dave Doogan: If I might dare to make a comment, it is about looking down the road as well. It is about seeing what the direction of travel is and what the end result of this will be. Farmers are no different to any other business. If their current trade gets too difficult and too unprofitable, they will move into something else.

Q246 **Chair:** Before we leave this one, some of the major retailers use just one or two slaughterhouses in the whole country. That is another issue, and these retailers need to be more flexible. I will not name it, but it is probably the largest retailer in the country, so you can work out who that is. It does have to be able to market and buy more locally. Just because it fits its model to have it very large, it then means that those animals have to be transported all across the country. That is something else that you could perhaps have a private word about.

Lord Benyon: I certainly can.



Chair: The next one is down to Neil Hudson. There are so many veterinary diseases in here with Latin names, Neil, so I look forward to you delivering them all to the Minister.

Q247 **Dr Hudson:** Thank you, Chair, and forgive me for pulling it back into veterinary matters. I wanted to get on to the area of disease surveillance and biosecurity. As you rightly referred to, we had some excellent evidence a few weeks ago from the Chief Vet, Christine Middlemiss. I would like to put on record the excellent work that she does, as well as the Chief Vets in all the devolved nations of the United Kingdom. They work very closely together to keep us as a biological unit in terms of disease surveillance. That is a very important model moving forward. I would also like to pay tribute to the vets out in the field, who are the eyes and ears in terms of that disease surveillance and management.

We took evidence that said that, as we are now in this transitional phase with Europe, there are a lot of bilateral conversations between the Chief Vet and her counterparts in the European Union. Is that a sustainable way, moving forward, although we are in a transitional period, for us to be relying on those conversations between the Chief Vet and her counterparts in the EU? Is that a reliable or sustainable way of monitoring animal disease across Europe?

Lord Benyon: It is part of how we should do it. I have been hugely impressed with Christine and her team, and she speaks highly of her devolved counterparts as well. We do not have exactly the same arrangements that we had when we were in the EU in terms of sharing information, but I have been reassured that there are existing relationships and that we still have people on the EFSA committee, who are chosen for their abilities rather than their nationality, which is appreciated.

There are lots of other things happening. I will give you an example. You will remember that the Prime Minister made a speech at the United Nations General Assembly in September and gave his five-point plan on zoonotic disease, trying to build up the UK's capability to be part of a global organisation that uses the best of our science, genomics and other skills that we have in this country to work internationally to map zoonotic disease, so that we can catch it at an earlier stage. Learning from everything that we have experienced from Covid is another part of it, as is making sure that our posts abroad are monitoring new diseases.

Any day now, we are going to have Exercise Holly, which is going to exercise an event of African swine fever coming to this country, making sure that we have all our ducks in a row. We had the ABC of the perfect storm: avian flu in February—most of your constituents will, I suspect, not have known about all that was done, but it was an amazing operation to contain that disease—alongside the B of Brexit and the C of Covid.

That was a long answer to your question. Christine's conversations with her counterparts in the EU and beyond are really important, but it is part



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of a horizon-scanning operation that will make sure that we use organisations like the OIE, which is the WHO for animals, as you will be well aware, and other data, and that we are capturing everything and feeding it into our risk analysis.

Q248 Dr Hudson: That is really reassuring. As I say, the joined-up-thinking approach across the United Kingdom can work with our European friends and allies as well. It is reassuring that the vets are talking to each other, but we just hope that these formal mechanisms of sharing intelligence can be brought back into being and that it is not going to break down just because of bureaucracy. These are the same animals and viruses, and the same midges that bite the animals. Disease knows no barriers in terms of country borders, so it is so important that we work collectively on that.

On an allied note, there are concerns about the health status of some animals that are coming into our country. We have talked about pet smuggling and the increased demand for small animals coming in. There are concerns that animals are coming into the country with diseases like babesiosis, leishmaniasis and brucellosis. As you touched on in your previous answer, Richard, some of these diseases have zoonotic potential, so there is a public health element as well as an animal health element.

We now have the opportunity to put controls on animals coming in, for animal health as well as human health in our country. When will the Government address these issues by insisting on strong pre-importation health checks for diseases like brucellosis, as well as reinstating some of the mandatory treatments that were ceased a few years ago, like the mandatory tick treatments for small animals coming in? We have the opportunity to survey these diseases and to try to prevent them in the animals coming in.

As a vet and as a parliamentarian, I do not want to see this lost in legislation that is going to take two or three years to come to fruition. These are things that need to be addressed quickly for animal health and welfare, but also for human health. What are the Government going to do about this?

Lord Benyon: I am learning to talk vet, which is a relatively new dialect in my life. There are some bad diseases around and we are doing an awful lot. Sometimes, there are some misconceptions about what is happening. It is very important to say that *brucella canis* is now a notifiable disease. For some reason it was not, but it now is. We do still have a tapeworm requirement on passports. That is about something called *echinococcus*, which you will be aware of, but which I am only just aware of.

There is a lot of talk about concerns around ticks. You more than most will be aware that there are a wide variety. There are some ticks that are now here, and we have to contain them. They have come here not through the import of animals but via wild birds, and so we are not going



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to stop it entirely, but we need to have measures that can control it as much as possible.

Leishmaniasis is an interesting one. The sandfly that carries it, I am told—and I hope you will agree—does not survive this far north. This is a classic issue around climate change and needing to monitor that species in terms of whether it is going to come further north with some of the heatwaves we have had in recent years and being able to tackle it as and when it does. It is a revolting disease that causes really appalling suffering.

Brucellosis, as you say, is zoonotic, and there is a problem in places like Romania. A lot of people have imported street dogs that they have seen either online or when they were on holiday from countries like that, and it is really important that we get the message out to people who, for the best of intentions, want to save, protect and love a dog that has had a beastly life in some part of the world. The risks of doing so need to be absolutely minimised to zero, where possible, because these diseases are, as you say, zoonotic.

Gareth, can you reassure Dr Hudson that we are not just waiting but doing?

Gareth Baynham-Hughes: The only bit that I would add is around the systematic approach that we take to this through the Veterinary Risk Group, for example, through the cutting-edge science that is delivered by APHA and the maintenance of reference labs across the country, and through our really standard business-as-usual ways of operating through the Animal Disease Policy Group, where we bring all these risks together and consider what actions or interventions we want to make. This is done on a UK basis.

We have an understanding of the system. We focus on actionable intelligence and horizon-scanning, and use that very much as the basis for decision-making. If circumstances change and an intervention is necessary, we would never hesitate to put that to Ministers as the right way forward.

Q249 **Dr Hudson:** I agree with you. It is important that we get the messaging right, so that people know where they are sourcing their animals from and that there are potential risks there. We also have a role to play in making sure that we are screening these animals. Brucellosis is an important point. There need to be pre-import checks to screen for that. Unfortunately, if the animal comes in with brucellosis, it is going to be very difficult to treat it and, in many cases, it needs to be put to sleep, because it will be chronically infected. We need to check these animals coming in.

On your point on ticks, some are carried in by birds, but there have also been cases where dogs in Essex were found to have babesiosis but had never travelled out of the country. Dogs had come in and potentially



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dropped their ticks that were carrying the babesia. It is important that we get these simple treatments back in to prevent animals coming in with ticks that can infect our animals in this country. As well as messaging, we can tighten things up for animal health and welfare. It is whether we can do it quickly.

Lord Benyon: I totally hear you and we will seek to reassure the Committee that we are seeking to solve this problem at source, rather than letting it come here and then become an issue in our daily life as a disease that has become endemic. We want to make sure that we are tackling it at source, and I hear what you are seeing.

Q250 **Dr Hudson:** You make a very important point about the vectors that transmit these diseases, and the concept of climate change, as these vectors may well spread north as well. It is something that we need to think about as a country and with our international partners. Heaven forbid, if we get some of these exotic diseases into our country, it could be catastrophic.

Lord Benyon: We are mapping them now very clearly. I am concerned about African swine fever, which is moving west, and we want to make sure that we do not get it here.

Dr Hudson: There are diseases in the horse sector, like West Nile virus and African horse sickness, that we need to be aware of. Thank you, Chair, for indulging that veterinary pathway, but it is important evidence for our inquiry. Keeping the nation's animals healthy is so important, not only for their health and welfare but for people as well.

Chair: Thank you, Neil. It is always good to have our resident vet with us, so thank you for those questions. Geraint has the last question, so over to Wales.

Q251 **Geraint Davies:** Lord Benyon, we have already heard about organised crime, low animal welfare, smuggling getting through, and now the risk of animal diseases. In May, we heard from the Chief Vet that veterinary capacity is a "fragile situation". What are you doing to increase veterinary capacity to provide some of these safeguards against the spread of infection and disease from animals to other animals and to the human population?

Lord Benyon: We are taking it very seriously. We have increased the number of official vets from 600 to 1,950, which is a 225% increase, if my maths is correct. In one sense, we thought we were going to have much higher capacity but, perhaps because of Covid, there was not quite so much demand. We are constantly looking at this. Christine was referring to issues relating to GB/NI, where there has been a glitch, but we are working on that. We want to make sure that we have enough vets able to inspect animals and to certify products of animal origin, where needed. Gareth may be able to add more information on that.



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Gareth Baynham-Hughes: I do not think so, Minister. That is fine. As you say, Christine spent some time talking about her general view of the veterinary sector and its importance, and the efforts to make sure that we have vets in all the right places. There are lots of demands on vets, essentially. It is a complicated picture.

Q252 **Geraint Davies:** Minister, you mentioned that there has been an increase in the number of vets, but we have also heard that there is a decrease in the number of some of the pre-import tests. We have heard that climate change may increase the problems, and we have heard from you that swine flu may be on the way. Are you satisfied that, despite the increase in vets, we now have enough to manage the situation, or is there a real risk of problems with more disease coming in from abroad, be it through the animal system and then spreading to the human system?

Lord Benyon: I will give you my very frank assessment on the basis of three weeks here. I am absolutely convinced that we have a world-beating sanitary and phytosanitary system here, backed by really skilled people talking to each other in all the ways that you would want to make sure they were. Is it enough? We will know that only when incidents occur. When they occurred in February, with avian flu, it was remarkably impressive. I do not want to raise people's fears about diseases like African swine fever, but it is rising up our risk register. We talk to people abroad, we use our systems at home and we talk to the industries that this might most affect.

Recognising that Defra is a department that chugs along, doing really important work, and then hits the front page when something really bad happens, like foot-and-mouth, you want to be absolutely assured that we are preparing, in every way, for diseases and health issues that we think are coming down the track. The announcements that are coming on our zoonotic disease prevention are really exciting. They are still being developed, so I cannot go into too much detail, but this is a really impressive operation to have come into.

I am in no way complacent. I really want to make sure that we are not missing a trick, which means constantly making sure, with the constant churn of people that you will be well aware of, that we are bringing forward and training people, and communicating, in the right way. We recognise that Defra and the Government have a job, as do its agencies in Weybridge and all the other scientific organisations that support it. Beyond that is the industry, and we have talked about a lot of different industries today. It is about making sure that we are listening to and responding to them. We will not always get it right, but we do most of the time.

Q253 **Geraint Davies:** You mentioned that the number of vets has been increased, but for a given number of vets, could other things be done to take the strain off them and reduce risk? I am thinking of the issue around the banning of the import of younger animals under six months



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and pregnant bitches, and pre-import tests. Are there other things that could be done to reduce the pressure on our veterinary front line, which may be under pressure for other reasons that we have mentioned, like climate change, as well as increasing the number of vets?

Lord Benyon: You make a really good point. I will give you an example on pets. Border Force or a carrier might look at a young dog and say, "I do not know whether it is 16 weeks, 14 weeks or 15 weeks". It is very hard to check from their teeth whether they are precisely within the law. At six months, it is dead easy, and so you will not have to call out an export or a vet, or somebody who would be able to make that assessment. That person can then be doing more important work, as you rightly point out.

Ian Hewitt's comment to me is that it not just about resources but about how you use them and getting the most bang for your buck. He is doing work to make sure that we are focusing where we can be most effective and that we are not having to tie people up with things that, frankly, they do not need to be doing or did not go into the profession to do. I cannot say that we get that right 365 days of the year, but we try.

Q254 **Geraint Davies:** That is really helpful. In other words, you are sympathetic to the idea of a possible ban on dogs younger than six months, partly through risk management and partly through animal welfare. Is that right?

Lord Benyon: We are going to consult on that this summer, and we are going to provide Ministers now and in the future with the enabling legislation to make the decision based on evidence such as you have just mentioned, and on consultation with animal welfare organisations, breeders and the wider public. I am certainly sympathetic to that idea.

Geraint Davies: That was very helpful. We will send Neil Hudson to the front line again.

Chair: Thank you, Geraint. Thank you, Gareth, for being here from Defra this afternoon. Can I also thank Richard, Lord Benyon, very much for a good session? We did push you pretty hard. I pushed you quite hard, but I knew that you knew what you were talking about, hence you got the tougher questions.

As I said at the beginning, it is great to have you back in Defra. We look forward to working with you. You have given us some good evidence this afternoon that we will be able to put in our report. I dare say you might be quoted. You may not necessarily want to be quoted, but you will be. Seriously, the session has been good. There is a lot to do in Defra and, as you said about animal disease there at the end, it is about trying to get everything right. Hopefully, we do not get a major disease outbreak, but you can never be entirely certain that that is not going to happen.

Christine Middlemiss is an excellent Chief Vet, and the more she can liaise with Europe to find out what is happening with disease as it goes across



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Europe—that will be essential in the future. I look forward to you coming before us again and we look forward to working with you in the future. We wish you good luck with your ministerial role.

Lord Benyon: Thank you very much.