

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Import Check Readiness, HC 1077

Tuesday 1 March 2022

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Members present: Neil Parish (Chair); Kirsty Blackman; Ian Byrne; Rosie Duffield; Barry Gardiner; Dr Neil Hudson; Robbie Moore, Mrs Sheryll Murray, Julian Sturdy.

Questions 1 - 130

Witnesses

I: Richard Ballantyne, Chief Executive Officer, British Ports Association; Andrew Opie, Director, British Retail Consortium; James Russell, Senior Vice-President, British Veterinary Association; and Karen Betts, Chief Executive Officer, Food and Drink Federation.

II: Rt Hon. George Eustice MP, Secretary of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; and David Kennedy, Director-General, Food, Farming and Biosecurity, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [British Veterinary Association](#)
- [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs](#)



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Richard Ballantyne, Andrew Opie, James Russell and Karen Betts.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to the EFRA Committee. We are looking today at border controls and the future of border controls of imports in particular into the United Kingdom. We are delighted with our panel of witnesses this afternoon. Starting with ladies first, Karen, would you like to introduce yourself for the record, please?

Karen Betts: I am Karen Betts, chief executive of the Food and Drink Federation.

Chair: Welcome here this afternoon. I understand that this is the first time you have come before Select Committees to give evidence, so will try to be firm with you, but kind, hopefully, this afternoon.

Karen Betts: It is only the first time at this Committee.

Chair: Good. Thank you very much for coming today.

Richard Ballantyne: Good afternoon. I am Richard Ballantyne, chief executive of the British Ports Association.

Andrew Opie: Good afternoon. I am Andrew Opie. I am director of food and sustainability at the British Retail Consortium.

James Russell: I am James Russell, the senior vice-president of the British Veterinary Association.

Q2 **Chair:** It is good to see you all here this afternoon. I will get straight into the business of the meeting, really. Last month, the Secretary of State said that he was confident that full checks and controls of EU SPS imports would start as currently planned from July. He is coming in after you, so do you share his confidence that ports and personnel will be ready? Shall we start with the ports straight away?

Richard Ballantyne: We are fairly confident that everything will be ready and designated. Indeed, we are waiting for a list of those designated BCPs to be published on the Defra website. That was due yesterday, but perhaps you can tempt a Minister to find out where that is. We are confident that the physical infrastructure will be ready. Others may have a view on the staffing, of course.

Q3 **Chair:** The actual structures are built, then, are they?

Richard Ballantyne: Pretty much, yes.

Chair: I suppose they will not be manned, necessarily, or “personned”, until July.

Richard Ballantyne: Absolutely. The port operators are going through the process of recruiting and appointing staff, so at the moment you will



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just have a minimal amount of people keeping them secure and maintained.

Q4 **Chair:** Karen, from the Food and Drink Federation's point of view, I imagine your members have mixed views about this, because those who are importing expect to have checks, but they do not have them at the moment. Are they gearing up for it? Are they looking forward to these checks that we are going to make at the ports?

Karen Betts: Absolutely, companies are gearing up for it and getting prepared as best they can. The checks have been delayed over a period of time and, each time we have been expecting checks, companies have done preparations. We are working on the basis that the controls will come into place, and companies are very keen to go into that regime fully prepared, because nobody wants to risk their consignment getting delayed at the border. We have more of a concern about the ports serving the island of Ireland and whether they will be ready, but we are being told that the other preparations are broadly in place, and that is what our companies are preparing for.

Q5 **Chair:** We are going to have questions directly on the border between the UK and Ireland, so we will talk about that in a minute. I hear adverts on the radio now saying, "Be ready for import checks". Are the Government and Defra, especially on the food side, getting that information out to your businesses?

Karen Betts: We still need certain pieces of information in order to get all the preparations in place, to know exactly what checks will be able to be done at what ports and to know what the cost of checks will be. The costs will have a bearing on the ports that food importers choose to use, so we are still waiting for some important information.

Q6 **Chair:** You are relatively confident that that is coming through.

Karen Betts: If the checks are going to come into place in the timeframe that Government have set out, we will need the full set of information in enough time to be able to make decisions about import processes. That is particularly important for small businesses that will want to choose their ports carefully and make sure they are prepared for the checks in those ports. Yes, that information will be needed in good time.

Q7 **Chair:** You make an important point over the smaller businesses. Very often, if you are a large business, you can probably afford to have somebody dedicated to making sure the paperwork is right and so forth. Is there anything you can do as a body also to help that?

Karen Betts: We are in regular contact with our small businesses that we know want to trade. We put out information into the body of our members on those trade issues, as and when we have the answers to give them. Yes, smaller businesses in general will need more time and have more concerns. As you say, they have less capacity to do the paperwork. The paperwork is significantly more than it was. Obviously,



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there are certain critical things with the border checks coming into place that they will need to be able to meet.

There are certain things that it would be helpful for us to have. More digitisation of the paperwork in those processes will be really important to small businesses, as will the ability to amend some of the forms. We have had issues when vehicle registrations have been entered on a form and the vehicle has then changed. You cannot amend the form that has been signed off by the official vet, and so you immediately have a problem. For any business, but particularly a small business, that sort of flexibility would be very helpful indeed.

Vehicles and ports are the other thing. We have had examples of consignments having to move to a different port because of the weather, and then your paperwork says the wrong thing.

Chair: There is going to need to be some flexibility in there if we can get it.

Karen Betts: Absolutely.

Q8 **Chair:** Andrew, from your point of view, following up from what Karen said, what are your businesses feeling?

Andrew Opie: I agree with what we have heard before. I would be slightly more concerned about the operations of the ports than we have heard. We do not necessarily know what is going to happen. Although many suppliers have been preparing, it will only take some suppliers who are not ready for some of the checks to start potentially causing disruption at ports. Knowing how the Welsh ports are going to transition to full checks in 2023 is a really interesting issue as well.

I wanted to raise a couple of things. First of all, we are heavily dependent on Dover-Folkestone for the trade that we take, particularly that that is going to be affected by disruption. These are highly perishable fruit and vegetables, cut flowers and those sorts of things. They need to go through those ports because there are so many ferries or trains coming over, so, if you miss one, you get on the next one. It is more like an extension of the motorway than the other ports. That is really key to us.

The other really key thing that we have not touched upon yet is the readiness of the member states to support their exporters into the UK as well.

Chair: Yes, we will deal with that in a minute.

Andrew Opie: That is much more difficult to check, even working with our suppliers. Most of our major retailers do not import themselves. They have been working with their suppliers through supply conferences to try to get them up to speed, but they still need the support of phytosanitary certificates.



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Q9 **Chair:** We will go into detail on that one in a question. How has the introduction of import pre-notification gone? Has that gone okay or not?

Andrew Opie: To date, it has been fine, but remember that it is a very simplistic process at the moment. It is not the full entry on to IPAFFS, the IT system. You do not need all the vet certification or the support at the end. We are really looking at pre-notification at the moment.

The one good thing has been the acceptance of a four-hour window for pre-notification, and we are hoping that would be maintained because again, particularly for some of our movements of produce, we need that very short timescale to fit in with any delays on the motorways getting to the ports. It allows us just to get in at that time. To date, it has been fine, but what we have been doing since January is a fraction of what we would need to do from July onwards.

Q10 **Chair:** You believe business is geared up for it.

Andrew Opie: Our businesses, rather than our suppliers?

Chair: Yes.

Andrew Opie: As much as we can be. Similarly to Karen, we have been working with Defra for the last three or four years to try to get as much information and insight out to those businesses as possible. They have been working with their suppliers. They are focusing on the major exporters into the UK: not surprisingly, meat products from Benelux countries and soft fruit from Spain and Portugal. I know we are going to come back to it, but my biggest concern is about the infrastructure of some of those countries themselves.

Q11 **Chair:** We will come back to that. James, could you talk briefly about the import pre-notification and how that is going? There are detailed questions in a minute on the veterinary side; my namesake, Neil, will put you through your paces on that. Do not launch into all the veterinary side, but what is your overall impression of how it is going?

James Russell: In terms of where we are at with imports, we recognise that we are exposed at the moment, and we have a biosecurity risk. We probably need to focus on why we feel that, what the purpose of these SPS checks is and what the role of vets is in that.

We could break it down into three things. It prevents widespread outbreak of disease. Foot and mouth would be the obvious one there, but we also know about ones like African swine fever in the area. It also enables us to continue to trade, even when we have disease. You can see that we have been able to continue to trade through this winter with avian influenza, and that is because of the checks and the surveillance that we have going on. It is also a prerequisite for trade deals with the EU and the rest of the world.



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We are in a position of saying that we are not comfortable where we are at the moment. We know that there have been a number of delays on these import checks coming into place, but we very much look forward to them being there. There is a different question, which I will answer later, about capacity.

Chair: There will be a lot of detailed questions for you in a minute. Thank you for that overall.

Q12 **Robbie Moore:** Andrew, picking up on the points that you were getting to, we have heard from the Secretary of State that the deferral for the full import checks from January 2022 was delayed to July because there had been issues, not on our side of the channel, but elsewhere. I was just wondering whether you agreed with the statement the Secretary of State made and if you would mind explaining why or why not.

Andrew Opie: Yes, I agreed with the deferral. That is for sure because I am not sure either our UK side or European exporters were necessarily ready for the full checks that we are going to see from July onwards, whether that was ports to hold lorries for physical inspection or the other side of the channel in terms of readiness. That six months has been quite important to get our infrastructure ready this side, but also to allow us to have more conversations both with the suppliers and through the UK Government with the member states themselves to get ready for it.

Personally, I do not think that delay was a problem because we are still operating to the same legal framework as the EU at the moment. We adopted the same hygiene and food laws into our legislation as operate in the EU, so we know that the checks were still going. We were still doing the same audits that we would be doing anyway as retailers of our supply chain. There was no particular risk in doing that. I think it was the right decision.

Q13 **Robbie Moore:** Are we in a position of readiness going forward to the revised date on this side of the channel?

Andrew Opie: I hope so, which is what I was saying before. I hope we are ready for it, but we will not necessarily know that until we start operations. It is interesting to see that the introduction of product development origin checks has been staggered through to November this year, which again I hope allows for capacity building at the ports, as well as for some of the more complex export health certificates to be sorted out and for people to get their head around them.

I hope so, but I come back to the point that we are so heavily dependent on two routes across the channel. For us at least, it is really crucial that those two ports of Dover and Folkestone are ready, certainly going into the autumn. July again is probably a good time to start these checks. We are at our lowest import at that stage. We are not importing much of our more perishable products until we get into the autumn and winter. If I had to pick a date, I probably would pick July.



Q14 **Robbie Moore:** Karen, I saw you nodding your head in response to Andrew's comments. Do you want to just expand on your thoughts around whether the reasons for the delay were not on this side of the channel, but elsewhere?

Karen Betts: In general, the delay has been helpful. What is happening overall is a significant change on our side and the EU's side to the movement of a lot of perishable goods in whatever categories those lie. It is a significant change for ports and border officials in the UK, and it is a significant change on the continent, so we want to be sure that there is proper official vet capacity in the EU.

On mixed product for us, if you are moving a ready-made lasagne from Austria to the UK, you have a whole range of ingredients in that product that will need to be checked, so there needs to be the capacity on the EU side in order for those certificates to be signed off and for the product to move. There needs to be the capacity on this side as well. The volumes are not insignificant.

The Government say they are going to be pragmatic, which we are grateful for, and they say they are going to check low volumes, but even a low volume is quite a lot of checks. We want to make sure that, when the checks come into place, they can run as smoothly as possible—sure, there are no doubt going to be teething problems—and we are moving in the right direction.

A real issue for us will be about groupage and small loads. One of the issues that we have had previously going in the other direction is that hauliers have to be prepared to take a mixed load, so we need to have confidence on both sides that that can work and it is an economic route for smaller loads of goods to be moved across. Yes, any delay that enables us to be more confident that the processes being put in place will work has been helpful.

Richard Ballantyne: I would reiterate the point that the extra time was broadly welcome in our sector. If we go back, I just do not think all the infrastructure would have been ready on our side.

Just to clarify my response earlier to the Chair, I was talking about the port infrastructure. Of course, we have facilities inland that Karen and others have mentioned, as well as in the short straits of Kent and Eurotunnel, but also on the Irish Sea. I assume that is going to be ready. We are advised it will be ready, but that is probably more one for Government officials and Ministers to respond to.

There were one or two ports that were ready last year, and they were a bit disappointed because they were looking to recover costs from their operations and the investments they had made. Broadly speaking, most of the ports welcomed that extension. We will be ready, certainly from the infrastructure point of view, for July.



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Q15 **Robbie Moore:** Without putting words into your mouth, you are really disagreeing with what the Secretary of State said previously. He indicated that we were in a state of readiness on this side of the channel, and the issues were not on this side of the channel, but elsewhere.

Richard Ballantyne: Yes. We were not ready. The infrastructure was not going to be ready.

James Russell: I would pick up on the point of being grateful for the delays and the concern I have that we are not in the same position as we were in before at the end of the transition period. We are not sitting around the table with the EU animal disease notification system or the rapid alert system for food and feed, so we are at greater risk of importing disease than we were. We do not have the capacity within our port authorities at the moment to prevent risky foodstuff coming into the country, whether that is for animal health and disease or food safety. I could go into that further.

Robbie Moore: Other questions delve deeper into that. Thank you very much.

Q16 **Chair:** Just before we leave this, Karen, you said that it is good that we have a degree of pragmatism. I have same question to Andrew. The EU has shown no pragmatism whatsoever when it comes to exporting food. As you know, I have been banging this drum for some time. Until we check what is coming in and make sure that they have to fill out a load of paperwork, will they then have more of an electronic system that we can negotiate to make life easier for exports? I can understand from your business's point of view that pragmatism is welcome, but I am fed up with us showing pragmatism and the EU showing none.

What are your answers to that, Karen and Andrew in particular? Your companies are at the sharp end of this. In the end, we could probably get a better deal with the EU if we had a few more checks ourselves. Am I being too brutal?

Andrew Opie: I am not sure we would have. By that stage, the deal had been done. They were just administering the checks and they had chosen to do it that side. I know how frustrating it was because we have many members who trade in the Republic of Ireland and Europe. They faced those exports that they have not faced with imports. I was simply speaking on behalf of the UK consumer and for consumers who have faced some issues around supply chain disruption for the last 18 months. We have had Covid as well. It probably was the pragmatic decision to keep supply chains open, but I absolutely accept the frustration for those who are exporting into the EU.

One thing that I would commend that I see from the Government is a pragmatism just in some of the petty bureaucracy we have seen on the other side from the EU in terms of lorries being stopped for the wrong ink or boxes being incorrectly filled out. The UK is showing some leadership in the way that it is administering its checks this side of the channel.



Chair: That is just the answer I wanted, you see, because I want to see Europe show a little bit of leadership the other way round. Karen, I do not know if you want to venture into this interesting spot that I have put you in.

Karen Betts: Our companies trade across many borders. We understand that countries need to put in place the systems that they feel they need for the integrity of their own national food systems. Our view would be that the UK needs to put in place a system that protects the integrity of our food system, and it is for the European Union to do that for itself. Those things are never going to be one and the same, but we would really prefer that our goods can move across borders as smoothly as possible where the rules are clear in order that we can fully prepare for them so that perishable goods in particular do not get holed up and then are not good for sale.

Chair: I understand that. It is just that, when we have so many acres of paper and so many forms to fill in with the present system of export, you wonder whether we cannot in this 21st century design a system that is electronic and can be done much more quickly.

Karen Betts: We would very much like a digitised system.

Chair: We can probably get there. I know your members get caught up in this as food comes in, but, until we make that a little bit tighter, why would the EU bother to negotiate on any of this if its food flows freely into the UK and our food does not flow freely out? It is just one of my pet hobby horses, but I will park that one there for the time being.

Q17 **Mrs Murray:** Richard, are you confident that key border posts will remain operational 24 hours a day, seven days a week for the SPS checks?

Richard Ballantyne: That is a very good question. Some locations will be 24/7; others have had certain restrictions placed on them for staffing and operations. We as an industry are pushing for those locations to look at extending the operating hours.

It depends on how you define “key”. I would suggest that, on the key routes for Karen’s members and others, you probably will have 24/7 operations. At some of the secondary ports, as I would describe them, that may not be the case.

Q18 **Mrs Murray:** What happens if they do not? For instance, I am thinking of a route like Plymouth to Roscoff. If they did not operate for the whole time and a ferry coming in with goods was delayed, for instance, would it just not disembark any goods and wait until the post reopened?

Richard Ballantyne: Of course, we would love to use some of the Chair’s pragmatism here, but strictly speaking the arrangements would be that the goods would come off the ferry at a particular time. When the BCP is operating—it could be 7 am or something—those goods will be processed. If you have perishable products, that could be a major



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problem. It is definitely a concern, particularly at those secondary ports, as I described them.

Q19 **Mrs Murray:** Who has taken the decision not to run those secondary ports 24/7? Is it the port operators?

Richard Ballantyne: No. That is the people operating the BCP, who will be the Animal and Plant Health Agency and port health officers.

Q20 **Mrs Murray:** Have they given any reason?

Richard Ballantyne: It is a resource issue. It is a particular challenge to get suitable trained staff, as I am sure James will reiterate. We would obviously like those facilities to be open until there is no more traffic to process, et cetera.

Q21 **Mrs Murray:** Before I move on across the room, I just have one more question. Richard, you might like to answer, and then, if you would all like to add anything to both questions, that would be helpful. The Government have yet to state what types of SPS commodities each border control post will handle. What is the impact on business of this uncertainty?

Richard Ballantyne: It probably is a question for those importers and traders whom my colleagues represent. We would obviously like to see that. I mentioned earlier the list that we were advised would be published yesterday; the sooner we get that, the better.

Karen Betts: To the first question about 24/7 operations, we just need to know sufficiently in advance that companies can plan their routes to know that their goods will be able to go through the checks at the time that suits the load.

On your second question, again, it is a question of planning for us. Companies will know what is in their load and what they need to move through border control, so they will need to plan to use the port that is open for the period of time that they need it and that will check the type of goods that they have in their load. The more quickly we can have that information, the better.

Mrs Murray: James, do you have anything to add? I know we are coming on to the veterinary questions. Please do not comment on the manpower element in this because I am sure my colleague will throw things at me from across the room if I stray into his question.

James Russell: If I see Neil throwing stuff at you, I will stop. There are two things, really. We first need to recognise that, while our BCPs may be operating 24/7, it may not be a 24/7 export operation from the other side. We need to recognise that the way OVs are employed in GB is different to within the EU.

Just to reiterate what has been said for our workforce planning, we need to get this designation and understand what is going to be asked of the



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different BCPs as soon as possible because we have people to move into those right places.

Andrew Opie: It is not a major issue for us because those exporters into the UK of highly perishable products will not necessarily use those types of routes anyway. They are really going to head for the Channel Tunnel or the Dover-Calais route because that is where all the ferries are and, if they miss one, they just get the next one. If you miss a boat from Roscoff to Plymouth, you probably wait a day or so to get to the next one, so that will not be the case.

The BCP designation is important, but I am just not sure, for our supply chains at least, it is the be-all and end-all. It will give some flexibility for companies to choose their routes. I come back to it, but 40% of all the food we import from the EU comes through those two ports, so it is pretty difficult to get away from them for the kind of supply chains we have, which are fresh and perishable.

Q22 **Rosie Duffield:** Karen, this is to you because I am just wondering what your members have fed back to you given the delays across east Kent. We produce a lot of food and drink, particularly oysters from Whitstable. Are those suppliers confident or more really concerned and worried?

Karen Betts: About moving stuff across the border?

Rosie Duffield: Yes.

Karen Betts: As I have said, they need to be confident that the official vets can sign off on the consignment in Europe, and then everything can be put into place for the journey. That is why it is helpful for us to know in advance what border posts will be checking what and what the charges for the ports will be to enable companies to choose the most efficient route for them. Yes, ideally, with that information in place, companies would be able to plan. As I say, we need a bit of flexibility if a ferry has to divert or a vehicle changes. Yes, they want information in place so that planning can be done.

Chair: Neil, we have managed to hold most of your question intact, so over to you.

Q23 **Dr Hudson:** James, we are about to enter the quick-fire veterinary round. Before we get into that, can I thank all the witnesses for being before us? I ought to declare a professional interest as a veterinary surgeon and a fellow of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons.

Are you confident that there will be sufficient capacity of official veterinarians, but also other certification support staff, to allow border control posts to fully operate from July of this year? Can I ask you to factor into your answer—we have had you before our Committee on many occasions talking about veterinary capacity—a status report on where you see UK veterinary capacity? The Royal College has published EU registrations very recently, but give us that status report as part of



where we are at, because we have concerns about looking forward.

James Russell: That evidence is what gives us slight pause in just giving a blanket “yes, we’re confident”, because, as you quite rightly say, now that we have a whole year of figures, we can state that we have seen a 68% reduction in the number of EU citizens registering with the Royal College compared with pre-Covid times. In numbers, that brings us down to 364 vets compared to 1,132 in 2019. At the same time, we have seen a 1,255% increase in the export health certification work that our members have been asked to do. Again, a year’s worth of figures would show that it had taken 258 years of veterinary time to complete those export health certificates in 2021.

We add into that the fact that this is a stretch right across our profession, so our small animal colleagues are not immune from this stretch as well. We do not have another pool that we could dip into there. We have around 3.2 million extra pets in the country compared to at the start of lockdown. We see a real stretch on the members of our profession. It is important to say that I am sitting in front of a Defra committee today, but we recognise that delivery of these controls is devolved, and this is therefore equally applicable across all of the states in the United Kingdom.

We have not yet seen a workforce analysis from Government as to an estimate of the number of full-time equivalents that are going to be required for import controls, so we conjecture slightly from stuff that we do know. We do know that the Dutch made great plans for what they felt they needed in terms of vets to carry out import controls and put in 145 vets to the Port of Rotterdam ahead of a potential no deal. Despite that, we saw a four-day delay for British meat shipment into Rotterdam last August because of shortage of OVVs.

It is great that we have seen £14 million worth of investment in England to support recruitment and training. You talk about allied professionals. That is not aimed just at OVVs; that was aimed at 500 people to help support the work of the import port authorities. As yet, we have not seen the workforce survey to say that that is right, wrong or indifferent. We really do not know.

I would echo what has been said by others on the panel. We continue to look for ways to make sure that we use veterinary expertise and time as efficiently and effectively as possible when we carry out these important controls. Chair, I am sorry; I do not wish to be critical of a point you have made, but I am not sure I would use the term “pragmatic” in this, because we must be really wary of undervaluing or devaluing the importance of that veterinary signature and the role of that veterinary surgeon in that first line of defence for biosecurity in the UK.

Q24 **Dr Hudson:** Can I push you on that, to emphasise that point? The veterinarians are going to be involved in looking at animal products and food-related products, but also live animal checks. You mentioned in your



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earlier answer, James, that you are concerned that there is a greater risk to our nation's biosecurity of infectious diseases coming in: heaven forbid, things like foot and mouth or African swine flu. Can you give us a status report on what your fear of that is?

James Russell: We had a case last year where we saw bluetongue come into the country in a group of live animals. In a way, we were fortunate; the animals were not. The reason that we were fortunate and we detected this is that one of the animals fell, broke a leg and ended up in a slaughterhouse. Through our network of vets in that slaughterhouse and in that chain, they were able to detect that and, therefore, contain that outbreak within the animals that had come into the country. It was the fact that we did not have the import controls in place that allowed that to happen in the first place.

Q25 **Dr Hudson:** To come back to your point about EU registrations, can you clarify again to this committee, as you have before, the percentage of those European vets who come into, say, the food processing sector or the abattoir side of things? We are very dependent on them.

James Russell: That 1,100 number from 2019 represented roughly 40% of the registrants on to the college register that year, with 50% coming from UK veterinary colleges and a further 10% from the rest of the world. That 40% has fallen by a third, but those individuals were not equally dispersed throughout all facets of the profession, and 95% of the people carrying out official controls in our slaughterhouses in 2019 were EU citizens and EU trained as well. Yes, you are absolutely right to point to the fact that that is a major area of focus for those people.

Q26 **Dr Hudson:** You touched on devolution and the devolved Governments. James, from your veterinary membership perspective, do Defra and the devolved Administrations have a clear programme for the development, quality assurance and delivery of training for official veterinarians and other staff working at these ports? Is there joined-up thinking and do they have preparations in place to meet the deadlines?

James Russell: When it came to the export work, we were very pleased to see the funding that was put in place to enable an increase in the number of people with that OV certificate. Bear in mind this is a post-graduate qualification. That saw us increase from around 600 to 1,800 people able to carry out that export work. At the moment, as far as I am aware, we have not seen an equivalent increase in the opportunities to train to do import work. I would like to get back to you, if I may, with the exact details on that, but I believe at the moment it is a twice-a-year course.

Q27 **Dr Hudson:** It would be helpful. Quickly, just before I leave, I apologise to the other witnesses that there has been a bit of a veterinary "Jazz Odyssey" here. Just to come to Richard quickly, from your ports perspective, do you feel from what you are hearing across the ports that the number of vets is there? Are you getting reports that you are



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struggling because of that? Give us that counterpoint perspective.

Richard Ballantyne: There is concern from the ports, but it is not directly our responsibility to appoint those vets, so we are one step removed.

Q28 **Dr Hudson:** But are you hearing it?

Richard Ballantyne: It is not the prime concern, I have to say, but it may be something if you probed a few port managers that they would have particular concerns about. There is a collection of things they are concerned about; this is one of many.

If I could come back on one of the points you raised about live animal imports and traffic, when the Government added the “haircut”—their description, not mine—to the port infrastructure fund allocations, you saw one or two ports drop the live animal facilities that they had incorporated into their plans. I think there will be facilities at Sevington, but Defra has responded by launching a fund recently. I do not think that has been taken up by anyone. We are getting a bit of concern from people like the NFU.

Dr Hudson: It would be quite helpful for the Committee if you could follow up in writing with how many ports have dropped the live animal facilities.

Richard Ballantyne: Yes, I will do.

Q29 **Chair:** James, you made an interesting comment when you said there were 3.2 million more pets since lockdown. How many of those are dogs?

James Russell: I honestly do not know, but they are household pets.

Q30 **Chair:** I ask you that question because we are doing work on puppy smuggling and other things. My question is really quite simple to you. Where on earth have all these puppies come from? A lot of them must be imported because they have not necessarily been bred here.

James Russell: The birds and the bees, Neil.

Chair: No, I do understand that. I am a farmer; I do understand these things.

James Russell: That is another inquiry. I am glad I do not have to explain that. There certainly was a huge increase in the number of animals being bred in the UK, and we saw that in terms of the value of those puppies. That was one reason why we were grateful to see in the kept animals Bill those changes to the number of animals that could be brought across on a non-commercial basis and the age of those animals as they could be brought in.

Chair: That is the key, is it not? It would be easier for the port authorities and border control to be able to identify a six-month-old dog.



Dr Hudson: There are heavily pregnant dogs, as well.

Chair: Exactly, but we had better not go into a huge discussion on that.

Q31 **Julian Sturdy:** This is just a quick question to James, following on from Neil's questioning. I know Neil is much more of an expert than I am on this, but you talked about first line of defence in biosecurity. Obviously, we have African swine fever knocking on the door. We know it is becoming quite a concern in Germany. Italy has certain problems. These diseases would be devastating to the pig industry, which is already under extreme pressure. How concerned should we be at the moment about our capacity for identifying and controlling them?

James Russell: In answer to that, I would reflect on conversations I have had with the Chief Veterinary Officer, Christine Middlemiss, who is carrying out an amazing job of maintaining dialogue with her European counterparts but recognises that she is not receiving information in the same way as she did before the transition period ended. It may only be a 24 or 36-hour delay between getting that rapid information out from those European agencies and getting it out from the OIE, but a 24 to 36-hour delay on the initial detection of foot and mouth in 2001 would have made a really significant difference. If we had picked this up 24 or 36 hours earlier, we would have been in one slaughterhouse rather than three, from memory, at that initial point. It does not feel like a lot, but it has the capacity to make a huge difference.

We should not understate the magnitude of what African swine fever could do to us. We are talking about a quarter of the pigs in China being culled for African swine fever in a year. As you say, we now believe this to be endemic in wild boar in forests in Germany, but also potentially in Italy. It is close. I realise that I have not quite answered the question about our capacity, but the point I would want to make is that we need to make sure that we have the capacity, one way or another, to carry out those border checks that keep us as safe as we can be from that disease coming in.

Chair: It is getting that intelligence that the chief vet Christine needs as well. We can follow that up.

Q32 **Geraint Davies:** Richard, my question is about whether there is a level playing field in port readiness in terms of frequency, checks, charges and the like. My concern is that big ports like Felixstowe and Dover may be ready to roll, but maybe others like Holyhead or whatever are not quite in the same level of readiness. There is a problem there for businesses and the sustainability of those ports.

Richard Ballantyne: The port sector is independent of Government, so it is competitive. One thing we want Government to maintain is that market, and that means that facilities and activities should be proportionate but fair across the board. We would be nervous that Government inland infrastructure facilities would have a lower charging



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regime, for example, than port-managed infrastructure and BCPs. We are currently waiting. It has been some time, and we would appreciate the committee's support in pressing Defra on this. We are looking for what the Government's charging regime will be at those inland facilities so that the port-managed border control posts can set their charges accordingly and not be out of sync.

In terms of readiness, yes, inland facilities aside, most of the infrastructure should be ready. Whether there are sufficient staff, as James has just articulated, is a wider challenge, but from the port point of view we will have the port staff there. They can start to appoint and recruit now.

Q33 Geraint Davies: Just to get clarity on this, can different ports charge different charges? In the first instance, the bigger ports, which have more financial muscle, a greater level of readiness and 24/7 checking, can have a lower charge and put smaller ports out of business. Is that right?

Richard Ballantyne: I would not quite put it like that, but, yes, there are two levels of charges. One is the statutory charge, which port health officers will levy. That is nothing to do with port operators themselves. Those charges are uniform across the UK. The other side is the operating costs—how much it costs to staff, resource, manage and maintain those facilities. That is down to the individual port operator.

The fact the UK Government have a rather large facility in Kent will mean that all the other ports in that locality, in the south-east, will be watching to see what those charges are so that their charges are broadly aligned and they do not lose traffic to a cheaper route.

Q34 Geraint Davies: Can I turn to you now, Karen? From your businesses' point of view, in terms of food and drinks, is there a concern about the level of uncertainty over the variation of different charges that may change over time in terms of the choices that are made by businesses? In particular, I am thinking about small businesses, which I guess would naturally want to export from a nearby port as opposed to shipping their products miles away to a place where there are more frequent checks and perhaps lower prices. Do you see all sorts of distortions emerging here?

Karen Betts: As you say and as Richard has said, diversity of ports is a good thing. It particularly depends on what you are producing, whether it is perishable and where you are producing, or where you are importing and what it is. Yes, companies may well want to use ports that are close to their facilities. It will depend. The speed of crossing on the Strait of Dover is used for companies that need to get stuff across quickly. If you are not in such a hurry, it might be that using a smaller port is better. Certainly, when we looked at the disruption that happened around the coronavirus pandemic, many of the companies that were using different ports were a bit more resilient.



Companies will want to know what the charging regime is. That will be one of the considerations they are taking into account when they are working out which port is most convenient and cost effective for them to use.

Q35 Geraint Davies: Should there be an intervention from the Government on charging so that businesses can, in a very difficult and uncertain future, plan in a more rational way? At least they would know what the costs of the charges were. At the moment, different ports can start varying their charges to attract business and close down competitive ports, can they not?

Karen Betts: It is not so much that we want an intervention; we would like to know what the costs are. As I understand it, the Government need to say what the cost of using their facilities is going to be. Then the ports will set their costs, we will know where we are and companies will be able to take decisions. How that then evolves is, yes, a commercial question.

Q36 Geraint Davies: We still do not know that in March, even though this is supposed to be kicking off in July. Can I turn to Andrew? In one of your comments you mentioned—perhaps you can elaborate—how Welsh ports will not be ready until 2023. Can you remind us of the difference between Welsh and English ports? While you are at it, can you comment on the issue around SPS imports arriving from the island of Ireland from July? They will not have the same full level of checks. This is another issue about the level playing field. Will that in fact be a possible opportunity for Welsh ports? How do you see that panning out in terms of the ports competing and the uncertainty?

Andrew Opie: The first point around the Welsh ports is that they do not have the infrastructure set up currently to hold vehicles to do the physical checks and inspections that are required from July. They are putting temporary facilities in place, we understand, until they put permanent facilities in place by next year. That is the latest that I have heard. Whereas most of the English ports have those facilities ready—the inland facilities like Sevington to hold lorries and do the checks—the Welsh ports are using temporary facilities until they build permanent facilities next year. We are still waiting to see the plans from the Welsh Government. Of all the planning that we have seen around the border controls, we have probably seen the least from the Welsh and the Scottish Governments compared to England in terms of the English ports, particularly around SPS checks. That is one point.

Interestingly, we do not yet know for certain what is happening from July. Again, that is another point that we are waiting for Government confirmation on. You are absolutely right: the Government are not currently checking consignments from the Republic of Ireland coming through the Welsh ports, because, frankly, they were not ready to do that on day one. We do not know whether the Republic of Ireland will be subject to all of the SPS checks that you would see if you were a French exporter coming through Dover, for example, from July. That has not yet



been confirmed. It may be the case that Republic of Ireland exports are subject to exactly the same controls, but we do not know that yet.

Q37 Geraint Davies: From a business point of view, businesses need to plan ahead not just for next week or next month. There is an issue about the migration of trade from, for example, Northern Ireland to Southern Ireland or just going around directly to the EU rather than coming via Britain, in this case via Holyhead. There is also a timing thing. The uncertainty could mean that businesses go to where they know something is happening, if there is uncertainty elsewhere. That is a permanent shift in business.

Andrew Opie: Yes, I agree there is a risk, but I am not sure it is as big a risk as people might think it is. Supply chain routes are pretty fixed generally, because they are fixed around the distance to the port and the speed of getting across, through the port and on to the motorway system here. I doubt that a Republic of Ireland exporter is going to drive all the way up to Northern Ireland and across through Belfast to Cairnryan, for example, because it just would not be worth it once they had paid for the extra diesel to do it.

The cost element of moving from port to port is something that all of the suppliers will have taken account of. That is why I do not see a great risk in terms of a diversion of the Republic of Ireland exports that are continuing to come through the traditional route, which is through the Welsh ports.

Q38 Geraint Davies: Can I come back to you briefly, Karen? From where you are sitting in food and drink, all this uncertainty and all these checks coming in will have a cost and will create a delay, particularly for the perishable products, as you mentioned. Will this drive up food prices in Britain?

Karen Betts: There is a risk around the complexity of new systems being implemented. There will be a period of time where there may well be teething difficulties while this all comes into play. There is some cost associated with it that is not irrelevant. In terms of inflationary pressures, the other strategic issues that are driving up prices and causing the cost of living crisis at the moment are probably greater. There is the impact of energy prices. We are looking quite closely at the impact of the conflict in Ukraine on supply chains. All of those issues will be more significant than this one.

Q39 Barry Gardiner: Mr Opie, can I ask why you think it is that only one-third of traders, when responding to the HMRC, said it was easy to find information on GOV.UK about changes to the process of moving goods between GB and the EU? That means that two-thirds did not.

Andrew Opie: Just for clarity, were they European suppliers?

Barry Gardiner: No, this is UK suppliers.



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Andrew Opie: There have been some problems in terms of getting information to suppliers. For me, we would be particularly concerned about European exporters knowing—

Q40 **Barry Gardiner:** I am going to come on to European imports to us. This is specifically about UK traders exporting to the EU. I will give you a health warning: the Secretary of State is sitting right behind you at the moment, as you answer that question.

Andrew Opie: As I said earlier, we do not export that much into the EU. We have a couple of companies that operate in the Republic of Ireland and some parts of Europe. It is not as big of an issue for us as it would be for someone like Karen's members.

Barry Gardiner: I will address it to Karen, then, in that case.

Karen Betts: As I said earlier, this is a big change on both sides of the border. You have companies that, in living memory, have been using systems that have now changed. What we would really like to see—we have mentioned it to Government—is a single trade portal on GOV.UK. Prior to Brexit, companies that traded in the UK could use the EU's Access2Markets trade portal. You can go into that and it works for imports and exports in any particular country. It will tell you about tariffs and trade barriers; it will tell you about rules of origin. It will talk about product specifications for your particular product. You can use it to report trade barriers that you have encountered, if you do not think they are dealing with them.

As we perfect our systems in the brave new trade world we are in, it would be incredibly helpful for the UK Government to look at this sort of portal. It really will benefit businesses of all sizes. It will help companies trade in as seamless a way as possible.

Q41 **Barry Gardiner:** That is very helpful. I am glad you mentioned "of all sizes", because of course the FSB has been particularly concerned that smaller businesses do not have the capacity to dig into GOV.UK in this way. Given that this Committee will be making recommendations to Government on this matter, is the creation of such a unitary portal one of the recommendations that you would like to see in our report?

Karen Betts: Yes, it is. We would be delighted to send you a bit more information on that in writing, if that would be helpful.

Q42 **Barry Gardiner:** That would be really helpful. Thank you very much. I am now looking at this the other way round and thinking about what clearBorder said about how EU businesses are "very hard to reach and even less responsive to UK Government messaging than UK businesses". What feedback have your members received about how ready their EU suppliers are for the introduction of import checks?

Karen Betts: It is a varied picture. It depends very much on the product you are dealing with and the country you are in. As we said earlier, this is



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about access to the official vet system in whatever country it is and ensuring that is accessible within the reasonable timeframe for export. It is a mixed picture. Some countries are probably better prepared than others.

As I said, that factors in for us as well around hauliers and making sure that everything can happen within the necessary timeframe such that the goods can be certified, the haulier will take it and it can get across the border with the right paperwork.

Q43 Barry Gardiner: I get what you are saying; that is very much about the process. I do not know whether you are able to, but could you identify for us any sectors that you believe are likely to be particularly badly affected because their supply chain does not seem to have come together yet?

Karen Betts: I do not have that particular information now.

Q44 Barry Gardiner: Is it something you could write to us about?

Karen Betts: I should think so.

Chair: Yes, we would like that in writing, please.

Q45 Barry Gardiner: That would be really helpful. Thank you very much. James, looking now to you, what the Provision Trade Federation said was of particular concern was the capacity of EU member states' veterinary staff to deal with the additional export health certification requirements. Again, what indications do you have about whether there is sufficient veterinary capacity in EU member states to allow for that timely certification of exports to us?

James Russell: We probably do not have as clear an indication about veterinary capacity in the EU, but what we can say is, because of those people being employed in that slightly different way, as Government and civil servants, we would hope that those domestic Governments had a greater handle on exactly the numbers they needed.

What I would add to that is that hopefully we can take some real learnings from what happened when we began to undertake export certification work. Of course, this will be new work for a lot of those EU vets as well. In the first week of GB exporting with export health certificates, around about 90% of the loads were non-compliant. Some of that was to do with certification, but that very rapidly improved. I would hope that we could take some of those learnings. Those learnings were about the people completing the paperwork, and they were also about the interpretation of the importing port. That is why it is really important that we do not end up in the situation we had a year or so ago where people wanted to go to Zeebrugge and not Calais or the other way round, and so forth.

If I may, to finish, I would like to reiterate why I believe that this is so important. We recognise that we are talking here about import and export. Getting these import checks right will help us to continue to be



able to export in the way we are used to. It is perfectly feasible that our third country status could be altered if our import controls are not adequate. We would point to the national security risk assessment, which suggested that, after foot and mouth in 2001, it was over 10 years before we got back to normal export levels with some countries. That is why I am so passionate about it.

- Q46 **Barry Gardiner:** Do you believe that, from our ports' point of view, looking at the certificates for stuff coming into the country, there is a standard way of assessing those certificates? You have pointed out that, when it was the other way round, some ports seemed to be easier to get into than others. Are you confident that British ports have received the training to make sure they are all operating in a standardised way rather than there being variation from port to port?

James Russell: When the profession receives notes for guidance from APHA, those are adhered to really well. We need to make sure those are absolutely clear and well understood by the exporters in the EU as well as by the importers in GB.

- Q47 **Dr Hudson:** I will follow this up with the Secretary of State later. It is about the readiness of our ports to facilitate the movement of live animals. The Government are still working on high health status in terms of trying to replicate the tripartite agreement. Our Committee has called for increased urgency in trying to get the equine identification system digitised. James, can you give us a perspective as to the impact that would have on equine health and welfare in terms of delays and distances and that side of things? Can you give us the veterinary status on that one?

James Russell: What we know is that the transport of horses is very lumpy. There might be very little or quite a lot happening at any specific time. Anything that supports the efficiency of that and provides digital assistance is going to be helpful not just for that horse's welfare but right across the piece in terms of what we have spoken about today. It is going to be really useful for us and for exporters as well.

- Q48 **Dr Hudson:** That is for high health status horses and horses moving for legitimate purposes such as sport or recreation, but also to try to stamp out the illegal movement of horses for slaughter.

James Russell: Yes, of course, as well as getting away from double microchipping, double passporting and all the rest of it.

- Q49 **Chair:** You were leading the witness, but I will forgive you, Neil. Andrew and Richard, do you have any final comments before I call in the Secretary of State?

Andrew Opie: It is important to think about the availability of stock as well as the cost. We have talked a lot about the costs and the checks. Through Covid, what we saw with the problems with lorry drivers was that delivery slots into distribution centres were missed. That is when you start to get a problem. For us, even a two or three-hour delay at a port



can have a knock-on effect in terms of availability. The cost issue will not be great. It will primarily be lost in the consignment. It might be the availability, particularly as we go into the winter, that is as much of a concern as the cost itself.

Richard Ballantyne: Just to follow up on that, it is a really important point to talk about the physical impact and the space restraints. There is probably not time to discuss that now, though.

Just on cost, your very able Committee Clerk asked that I highlight one thing. We have had some assessments done by one of the main importers to the UK, which suggested that the statutory charges for inspections would be about £240 million a year, based on the typical amount of certificates being processed at the moment. On top of that, when we get the charging for the inland facilities and the privately managed facilities, we are probably looking at a total of £400 million per year extra. That will be passed on to traders. It will be spread across the industry—yes, fair enough—but we are nervous about those costs and about things like alternative routing from places like Belgium around to the Republic of Ireland, as we have seen. We are keen that this process is facilitated as efficiently as possible.

Chair: You can be assured that the cost of the inland border facilities will be put straight to the Secretary of State this afternoon. It will be very hot off the press.

Thank you very much, Karen, Richard, Andrew and James, for coming this afternoon. You got through the lack of Tube and you got here underground. Thank you very much for that. It is nice to have you all here in person. We very much appreciate it. We appreciate the evidence you have given us this afternoon. It will help us to put together something to take to the Secretary of State.

As the Secretary of State and David Kennedy are waiting for us, I will dismiss you now. Thank you very much for giving evidence. It was excellent.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon. George Eustice MP and David Kennedy.

Q50 **Chair:** Good afternoon, gentlemen. I am sorry to keep you waiting, Secretary of State and David, for a little while. We did start slightly late, but we had a very good evidence panel. Just very quickly, Secretary of State and then David, introduce yourselves please for the record, and then we will get on with it.

George Eustice: I am George Eustice, Secretary of State at Defra.

David Kennedy: I am David Kennedy, DG food, farming and biosecurity at Defra.



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Q51 **Chair:** Secretary of State, I may know your answer to this one, but do you remain confident that the full checks on EU SPS imports will commence from July?

George Eustice: Yes. We have done a lot of planning on this. On a couple of occasions, for a number of reasons that we can explore further, we delayed the start of those. We have a very high level of readiness. The introduction of pre-notification in January went very smoothly. Some 94,000 movements have been recorded on that since the beginning of the year already. The work needed to have those BCPs, the new ones in particular at Bastion Point in Dover and Sevington, is well underway. The buildings are in place and they are currently being fitted out.

Q52 **Chair:** We had heard that from Richard. Therefore, at the moment you are monitoring these movements already, are you?

George Eustice: Yes, we have been monitoring all movements from the EU since the beginning of the year. As I say, that has gone very smoothly. We had got all of our importers bringing goods in from third countries on the IPAFFS IT system, which is our new system that replaced TRACES from last August. Movements from the rest of the world into the EU accounted for about 187,000 movements in the final quarter of last year. A lot of importers that are bringing goods in from both the EU and the rest of the world were familiar with the system. That helped. As I said, in the first month 94,000 movements have been recorded on the IPAFFS system.

Q53 **Chair:** I asked this of our other panel of witnesses. If we have a system that works—and I hope it does, and I hope it is pretty seamless—do we not then have the opportunity to say to our European partners, “We have a system that works pretty well for your imports. Why can we not use something similar for our exports to you?”

George Eustice: As I have said before in the Committee, the forms, the processes and the types of export health certificate that the EU has stipulated in law, in annexes in EU regulations, are not really designed for the volume of trade that would take place between the UK and the European Union, as very close neighbours.

It is the case that those forms could be improved. Traders who trade around the world and with the EU have said to me regularly that the European Union forms are not well designed compared to those of other trading partners. It is something we could try to get some agreement on, but there are a lot of other issues that we are trying to work on, not least the Northern Ireland protocol in the first instance.

Q54 **Chair:** We will talk about that in a minute. When will the final decision to go ahead with the introductions of the checks be taken? Has that already been taken?

George Eustice: It was taken last October.



Q55 **Chair:** Do not forget that there is many a slip between the cup and the lip. We have had three or four delays in the past. You are now on record as absolutely confident that there will be no more delays.

George Eustice: Yes. Defra was ready and had a high degree of confidence that it was ready to go ahead with these checks at least from last July, when we intended to start with pre-notification and have checks come a little bit later, in October initially.

There were a number of reasons why things have changed. Some of them are quite obvious: the pressures of Covid; border restrictions put in place by neighbours in order to deal with Covid; and a view that we should not aggravate potential problems in terms of the flow of goods at that time. Although we judged the risk as very low, there were other Government Departments that were anxious that we did not do anything that might cause friction at the border during some very testing times around Covid. Those are the main reasons that there was a delay.

Q56 **Chair:** It is very laudable how pragmatic we have been with the EU importers, but they have shown little sign of doing the same to us. Is there going to be a reciprocal time when we can sit down with them and say, "We have created a system that is pretty good to use"? Is there a process for this? Are you entering into any form of process or not?

George Eustice: Within the TCA there are a series of specialised committees that are set up. Those are meeting, and our chief vet and others are taking part in technical discussions on those. We have quite a lot of other immediate issues, particularly around Northern Ireland in terms of seed potatoes, banned plants and so on, that are taking up most of the attention initially.

The EU is not showing much appetite at the moment to reform its processes. Once things bed down, there will come a moment when it is absolutely possible for us to improve the way some of these processes work. We will be able to lead by example on how you can have more digital and risk-based solutions that achieve more by way of enhancing food security and food safety in particular, but do so in a less burdensome way. It may well be that the European Union gets into the place of wanting to have that discussion. There are examples of other countries with whom it has, for example, veterinary partnership agreements. There is precedent for it. It ought to be possible for us to, at some point, agree something similar.

Q57 **Chair:** What is the Cabinet Office's current assessment of the risk of overall port readiness?

George Eustice: I might ask David to come in in a moment. He actually visited Sevington and Bastion Point yesterday. Our current assessment is that there are around 24 port health authorities and, between those port health authorities, around 60 or so border control posts. The vast majority of those are dealing with trade from the rest of the world and have not needed to change much at all. Around 24 needed some change



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or some expansion to deal with some increased volumes, but the two big ones, the two new ones, are at Sevington and Bastion Point in Dover. They are dealing exclusively with trade coming across the short straits, through the Eurotunnel and by ferry. Those are a new undertaking.

We have high levels of confidence. At Bastion Point, the buildings already exist; they are currently kitting those out. At Sevington, the buildings have been constructed and, again, at the moment they are in the phase of equipping them. We think they will both be ready at some point in May. We would then formally designate them in June, and they will become operational in July.

Q58 **Chair:** From the Cabinet Office's point of view—perhaps I will ask David this—is it red, amber or green? From what I hear the Secretary of State say, my interpretation is that two of our ports are ready but the rest of not, but I am putting words into the mouth of the Secretary of State.

George Eustice: No, they are all ready, but two of them are new. They are in the final stages of being kitted out.

Chair: Are they? I will take your word for it, Secretary of State.

David Kennedy: It is the other way round. The two big challenges are Bastion Point, which is the border control post for Dover, and Sevington, which is the border control post for the Eurotunnel. As the Secretary of State said, I visited them both yesterday. Things are progressing well. It is challenging as well; let us not pretend otherwise. There is a very accelerated build for 1 July. We are confident that by the end of May or beginning of June we can complete construction and have those fitted out, and they will be designated in June ahead of July.

The other thing for me is the operational readiness. Do the port health authorities have the people, the processes and the systems? They are making really good progress. They have hired 500 people. We have a good lead for each of the port health authorities. Particularly having been through it with them yesterday, my confidence is pretty good. Again, I do not want to sound complacent. There is still a lot to do and we watch it very closely.

Q59 **Chair:** Neither of you gentlemen has actually answered my direct question. What is the Cabinet Office's current assessment of the overall risk for port readiness? Is it red, amber or green?

George Eustice: The Cabinet Office assessment will be largely based on the information we give them.

Q60 **Chair:** What is your assessment?

George Eustice: My assessment is that it is green or possibly what is sometimes in Whitehall called amber/green, given that they are still in the final stages of kitting them out.

Q61 **Chair:** The Cabinet Office's Border and Protocol Delivery Group rated the



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overall risk on port readiness as amber/red. Admittedly that was in August last year. Has that improved now?

George Eustice: Yes, markedly. In August last year, we were still thinking that we might have been introducing some paper checks, initially, in October and physical checks in January. At that point, we were probably going to have to put temporary facilities in place, because those main facilities at Sevington and Bastion Point had not been constructed. It was a very different time.

David Kennedy: It was a different time, and it relates to the set of things at the port. There are huge challenges on the HMRC side, which we have now got through. They have delivered with a few teething problems in January that were not disruptive for food supply. Now it is the turn of the SPS checks. As we say, we are confident that we can deliver for July.

Chair: I am absolutely delighted by how helpful you are to the EU. I only wish they were a little more helpful to us the other way round. I am not convinced that we are going to get them to the negotiating table by being so kind to them. That is another issue.

Q62 **Barry Gardiner:** It is Act 5, Scene 2 of "Hamlet": "The readiness is all". If I could just push on the readiness, Secretary of State, I am very pleased that you did come early, because you heard some very important evidence from the previous session, but you were not with us when our colleague Robbie Moore asked the chief executive of the British Ports Association about your assurance in January of this year that the delay had not been because of issues on this side of the channel.

He asked Richard Ballantyne whether he agreed that was the case; Richard Ballantyne was absolutely categorical that on this side of the channel we were not ready at that point. Is he mistaken in his assessment of British ports, as the chief executive of them, or were you perhaps overoptimistic when you made the assertion that they were?

George Eustice: I suppose I benefit from having been in the meeting where it was decided to delay. The reason for that final delay was linked to the rise in what was then the delta variant and some increasing stresses at the border. The reason that—

Q63 **Barry Gardiner:** Sorry, I am not disputing the reason for the delay. I am disputing whether in fact you were correct at that time to say that the ports were ready when the chief executive of the British Ports Association says they were categorically not.

George Eustice: They were ready in the sense that from the previous July we had already been working on a plan to have temporary facilities and do temporary checks at those border points, particularly on the short straits. That would have probably entailed doing a slightly smaller sample size than you otherwise might do. We had been working on that plan since the previous July. It is absolutely the case that the border



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infrastructure at Bastion Point and, indeed, in Sevington was not constructed, but we nevertheless had a plan to commence border checks.

Q64 **Barry Gardiner:** You disagree with the chief executive. That is fine.

George Eustice: If his point was whether or not the construction work was complete, the answer is no. It was not.

Barry Gardiner: That was not his point at all. His point was very clear. He simply answered a very simple question: "Were there still problems on this side of the channel that would have meant that delays were sensible?" He was very clear that there were. I have made my point; you have made yours. We will move on.

Q65 **Derek Thomas:** On that point, if we are looking at what was actually said, we are talking about two different times of the year. The ports chap was talking about much earlier in the year.

Around the world there are examples of imports and exports moving really freely with the latest technology and digitalisation where possible. Will that be our experience when we begin this in July? You talked about paper. Are we and the EU fully engaged in making this a really smooth transition done digitally, where possible?

George Eustice: We are. I will ask David to come in to give a bit more detail on it, but there are two things to note. First of all, we are taking more of a risk-based approach from the beginning when we start our physical checks. Whereas the EU sample rate was very prescribed in law and did not depend on the degree of risk relating to a country, we are going to tailor our inspection rate to the risks that pertain in a given country and the goods coming from that country. That is the right way to run a coherent and intelligent system.

Beyond that, we are also working on a future border model. That is a longer-term piece of work, which is looking at using digital traceability and other technologies to modernise the way borders work and to reduce the reliance on old-style paper-based systems.

David Kennedy: Yes, the risk-based approach is really important. I would draw out the difference as being that the EU does 100% ID checks. It has to take the paper certificates and match them with consignments on trucks. We are doing 1% for products of animal origin. That is our assessment of the risk that we need to manage.

From a digital perspective, you will have heard a lot about the IPAFFS system, which is a very modern, easy-to-use digital system. That is where the pre-notification has to happen; it is where the export health certificates have to be loaded up. There is a prize on e-certification. IPAFFS on its own will load paper certificates, pdfs, which will be uploaded. There is a prize for both of us on e-certification, if we can e-certify and send to Europe and they can e-certify and send to us.



We are working with the Commission, for example, to integrate the export model of TRACES, which is their system for dealing with imports and exports, with IPAFFS. It is probably not going to be ready for 1 July; it probably will be ready later on in the year. We are also working with various member states to integrate their national systems with IPAFFS, again so that they can have that digital end-to-end system.

Q66 Derek Thomas: What I am hearing, then, is that those who are exporting would be disadvantaged by putting stuff into the EU, because everything is going to get checked, whereas we are going to target those who present the risk or who are not trusted traders. Is that what you are saying?

David Kennedy: There is a higher level of checks in the European system than in ours. Again, we want to negotiate with them over a future regime or some kind of vet partnership that reflects the risks that our exports pose to the European system, which are not the same as for some of the countries that they are trying to protect against.

Q67 Chair: The point Derek is making reinforces what I was saying at the beginning. David, you seem to hold out some sort of hope that the fact we have a digital system in place may mean that the EU embraces it for exports. What I am really concerned about—I will keep on about this—is the fact that it is very difficult for us to export and it is very easy for them to import. That is just wrong.

If we have a digital system that works, why should we have all this paper when we are exporting? What timeframe do you see with this digitalised system? Do you see that for exports any time soon?

David Kennedy: There are two things here. One is integrating their exports with our imports, so TRACES NT with IPAFFS. We are having constructive discussions about that. Then there is our exports. Our export system is a new digital system that is easy to use. It is a good experience for users. That is called EHCO. We are working with them to integrate that with TRACES NT, which is also their import system. There are discussions about integration in both directions.

Q68 Chair: They are not recognising that system at the moment, are they not? Therefore, it is still very much a paper-based system that our exporters have to go through. Am I right?

David Kennedy: It is a paper-based system at the moment, but we are having discussions with them about system integration so we can have e-certification.

Q69 Chair: How long will that discussion take?

David Kennedy: I do not think we should put a timeframe on it. It was moving ahead, driven by the need to integrate for Northern Ireland. The situation has changed in Northern Ireland, so it is not clear what is going to happen there in terms of certification.



Chair: Yes, we will talk about that.

David Kennedy: We were going to do this in two phases. We would integrate for Northern Ireland and then, having successfully done that, integrate for all European exports. Now we need to shift the focus to all European exports. That is an ongoing discussion, but it is premature to put a time or date on that.

Chair: I do wish you well on that one. I really do, seriously.

Q70 **Ian Byrne:** Secretary of State, in February 2021 the Public Accounts Committee said that the ports were “waiting for Government to set out the percentage of checks on specific goods from specific places coming to specific ports”. What approach will you take to the frequency of checks on EU SPS imports from July?

George Eustice: On our risk-based model, which is different to the EU’s, for most products of animal origin, the lower-risk ones, it will be about a 1% selection rate for physical checks. On plant material, depending on the risk of the plant concerned—we will publish full details of that—it will range between 1% and 3%. Overall, we are taking a risk-based approach. We will not be applying some of the higher inspection rates that the EU has on some products, sometimes as high as 15%, to the goods coming from the EU.

Q71 **Ian Byrne:** You have just outlined that we have diverged from the EU.

George Eustice: That is right.

Ian Byrne: Why have we taken that approach?

George Eustice: We have taken a risk-based approach. It is reasonable to say that not much more than a year ago we were happy to be in the European Union with goods coming from the EU with zero checks. There were no checks whatsoever, on the basis that we trusted EU countries to abide by a system of law that made sure there was no food risk. If you have broad trust in the integrity of that system, the level of inspection you need is far lower than you might have for, say, another country that has weaker control systems. For instance, you may have illegal pesticides being used, which means you need to do more surveillance on pesticide residues. It is about having a calibrated risk-based approach.

David Kennedy: It is important to stress that it is dynamic. We have 1% for now. As risks change, we could increase that from 1%. We would not take it below 1%. Say there was a food safety incident for a particular good. We might want to put the checks up to 100%, at the extreme, for a temporary period.

Q72 **Ian Byrne:** How would you use the introduction of GB checks on EU SPS goods to negotiate a light-touch approach to EU member states’ checks on GB exports? The Chair touched on this before.



George Eustice: We have looked at it. Once we have put in place these checks, and in particular once we start requiring an export health certificate, which will start in July for the first phase of goods, at that point there will be some additional costs and burdens on EU exporters. That may lead to greater appetite for negotiation.

I have to say that generally that is not the way we have approached it. You have to step back and be clear about what you are trying to achieve with an SPS regime and a border regime. It is fundamentally, principally, about protecting public safety. Once you start straying into trying to use it as some sort of instrument of revenge because you dislike what the EU does because it does not make sense, I am not sure that is a very good way of approaching it. We have tried not to go down that route; we have tried to ask, "What does a sensible SPS regime look like?" and then work with the EU to improve, as David set out, the way the systems can operate together and move towards a more digital approach.

Q73 **Ian Byrne:** What is the initial take on it from the EU?

George Eustice: I might ask David to come in. We have been doing a lot of work with EU businesses. Last autumn, there had been some concerns about whether there was sufficient veterinary capacity in EU member states to do the export health certificates, particularly during all the various Covid lockdowns. There was a sense that there might have been some added stresses and strains there.

We have done quite a lot of work with both the importers and major retailers here and the trade bodies in the EU to get a better understanding. We now have a much higher level of confidence that they have plenty of veterinary capacity to do this work.

David Kennedy: You asked Karen this in the last session. We have a country and product-level assessment of their readiness. As the Secretary of State says, we get that from supermarkets, from the Commission, from member states, from chief vets and from our posts in other countries as well. We have built up that picture. From what we can tell they are ready, but we have designed an approach that manages the risk. We cannot guarantee that they are ready. That is our best assessment. We are having a phased approach to the requirements, because we do not want to disrupt the food supply.

We will first require certification and checks on meat, then two months later on dairy, and then beyond that on fish and complex products, composites in particular. How the first phase goes will inform the second phase.

Q74 **Geraint Davies:** Briefly, Secretary of State, if you take a risk-based approach on live animals and, for argument's sake, you test one in 100 live animals and one in 100 of those animals has a disease, you have a 99% chance of that disease getting through and contaminating Britain. That seems crazy to me.



George Eustice: I should probably clarify. Live animals is the only exception where we run 100% inspections and have been since the end of the transition period, because of the very obvious animal disease risk. The 1% that I mentioned relates to products of animal origin: cheeses, processed meats and so on. For plants, there is a range. At the riskier end you could have garden plants coming from the Netherlands; at the lower-risk end you could have a batch of packaged carrots coming from France.

David Kennedy: The 100% is done now. It is done away from the border, because we do not have live animal border control posts. We are constructing live animal border control posts and then we will move those 100% checks to the border.

Q75 **Geraint Davies:** In the case of food poisoning, E. coli and this sort of stuff, you do not think the risk-based approach in fact presents a risk to public health.

George Eustice: We will be conducting physical inspections on 1% of goods. While we were in the EU, there were no checks whatsoever. It was a big fat zero. We did have various systems that still exist internationally. If, for instance, there were an outbreak of food poisoning linked to E. coli and the FSA were to trace that back to a consignment that, for the sake of argument, had come from Ireland, at that stage we would be able to increase our surveillance on those goods and notify Ireland that it had a problem with E.coli on its product, so it could try to address that.

Q76 **Chair:** Live animals are being checked when they arrive at their destination. By then, they are here. If they have a disease that is very infectious, it is likely that it is being spread. When will we move to be able to check them at the port?

David Kennedy: We are still finalising the plans for building border control posts in Dover. We have not had them there before. There was a plan to do this. You probably know the history. We were going to build at White Cliffs and Sevington. We have changed that, because the Government did an assessment and White Cliffs was not good value for money. That is why we have to change the plans. Bastion Point does not have the space for the live animals border control post in the way that White Cliffs did. That is why we have to find another site. We are actively engaged in that. It is urgent for us. We will finalise plans for that reasonably soon and stand it up.

Q77 **Chair:** I do not know the extent to which we import pigs for breeding. Especially with swine fever and what have you, that is when your risk-based approach would help. Surely you would then have to check those pigs before they got to the destination, would you not?

David Kennedy: We will be checking all animals that come into the country before they get to their destination. That is the ideal. At the moment, we check them at the destination. Let us take an example on the risk-based approach. If there were a swine fever outbreak in



Germany, we would be able to ramp up the level of checks on pork that was coming from Germany in order to manage that risk.

Q78 **Chair:** It is not the pork I am arguing about. If there is an outbreak of swine fever in Germany, Poland or wherever, will you immediately ban the live import of any livestock, whether it is boar, pigs or whatever? I am not sure about the extent to which we do import live pigs.

George Eustice: We do. Just to make sure we get the technical detail right, it might be worth either me or the Chief Veterinary Officer writing to the Committee to clarify. We have always had the ability, even as an EU member, to impose regionalised trade restrictions. As an EU member previously, had there been an outbreak of African swine fever in parts of Denmark, we would have been able to close trade between Denmark and the UK. In those circumstances, we would still do that, based on the veterinary assessments we have.

In terms of whether there is a risk of the animals coming, I should probably clarify that the export health certificate for a live animal is of a different order to what you get for a product of animal origin. The vet needs to certify the health of the animals before they are exported. The checks after are just to make sure there has not been a problem that was not picked up at the point of export.

David Kennedy: That is the key point. The export health certificates provide a very high level of assurance. It is not all about the check at the border, which is an additional check. For African swine fever, we have very detailed ongoing risk assessments for all of the countries. It can come in the form of food as well, which we could limit.

Q79 **Chair:** We were also being told by the BVA witness that the chief vet is getting information on where there are diseases in Europe but not as directly as she used to. That is also something. If we are going to be fairly lenient on the Europeans as they import into this country, surely we should expect to be kept in the loop on where there is Avian flu, where there is swine fever and where all of these diseases are. This is something that is right not just for us but for Europe as well. Surely things like this have to be put right. It is an anomaly at the moment.

George Eustice: Yes, there are two things. First, at a technical level, the chief vet does work very closely with all of her opposite numbers, not just in the EU but throughout the OIE as well.

Q80 **Chair:** There is no official system now, but there was one before.

George Eustice: Previously there was a system called RASFF, on which member states could put alerts. It is quite telling that a disproportionate amount of the alerts were put on by the UK, because we tended to be more diligent at alerting people to problems than other countries were. Once we start doing these checks, it is quite likely that we will be in a position to ascertain which EU member states are abiding by EU law more diligently than others.



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Indeed, that may mean we are able to give the European Commission useful intelligence on the application of its own standards or where it might have a particular problem. Of course, we will be the only country at that point that is actually doing any checks.

Q81 Chair: Richard Ballantyne, the chief executive of the British Ports Association, said that the Government's funding for live animal checks was part of a "haircut", as he described it. That was the Government's description when they reduced funding. We have seen that many of these facilities have not yet been put into our ports. Do you have any ideas about letting the hair grow longer again and replacing this haircut?

Geraint Davies: That is a discriminatory description.

Chair: Yes, it probably is for people without any hair. I apologise, Geraint and David.

David Kennedy: There are two things here. One is the border control post in Dover, which we are fully funding. In addition, we wanted to create some competition with that border control post. That is why we set up a fund, which people could apply for and get grants in order to build live animal BCPs. It is right that that has been reduced, but there is still significant funding there, which will allow those port health authorities that want to compete with Dover to do so.

Q82 Chair: It is necessary to have enough funding in place to get these facilities in place in the long run. I accept that in the short term we are coping, but we all know that there are risks around foot and mouth and other things in the future, which we just do not want to take a risk on.

David Kennedy: We are confident that there will be sufficient live animal border control post capacity for all of the live animals coming in to the country to be checked at the border, not away from the border.

Chair: You are confident, for the record.

Q83 Dr Hudson: As a follow-up, how confident are you? It is great that you have clarified that, under the risk-based analysis, 100% of live animals coming in will be checked. The focus for today has been on food-producing animals. We also have the movement of companion animals, pets and horses et cetera. How confident are you that 100% of animals coming in will be checked in terms of protecting the UK's biosecurity?

In our small animal inquiry, we took evidence that the Dogs Trust was able to move toy dogs in carriers in and out of the country without being checked. Dogs are coming into the country without having had pre-import tests for things like *Brucella canis*. You have said that 100% will be checked. How comfortable are you that, in reality, that is the case?

George Eustice: Those particular issues related to the EU pet travel scheme. You are right: there was an incident where some TV



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documentary makers paid a vet in a European country to put a chip in a toy dog to make a point, because it relied on the veracity of what the vet said in terms of the pet travel document.

I come back to what I said. While we were in the EU we had very little control over this. Indeed, that was the system the EU had in place; it was the pet travel scheme. We will now have the ability to have more checks on those kinds of things. There were incidents during our time as EU members, for instance, where we were required by EU law to remove the requirement for checks and screening on particular types of tick that were not in the UK but were in the EU, and we now have a problem with Lyme disease in parts of the country because those ticks did eventually then come to the UK.

We will have the ability to put in place these risk-based approaches, risk-based checks and even requirements on the animals that are coming here based on the risk they pose to our biosecurity rather than based on an interpretation of EU law.

Q84 **Dr Hudson:** I am encouraged that you say that, because I have been calling for us to re-institute the mandatory tick treatments to stop diseases like babesiosis coming into the country. I am reassured that you have put on record for us that we will be.

I guess I will reiterate the question. Referring back to what is happening with the EU situation, from July of this year are you both comfortable and confident that 100% of animals, large and small, companion and food producing, will be checked coming into the country to protect the UK's biosecurity?

George Eustice: Yes, because initially we are going to continue checks on all farm animals at the site where they arrive.

Q85 **Dr Hudson:** What about companion animals and pets?

David Kennedy: We need to come back with the detail on companion animals and pets.

Dr Hudson: That would be helpful for our Committee.

Q86 **Chair:** There still has to be legislation about dogs being six months old before they can come in. When are you likely to have that in place? That is one of the most important things, certainly for puppy smuggling, because it is much easier to identify these dogs when they are six months old. Also they have gone through their cuddly stage, so they are probably not as saleable for these gangs that bring them in illegally. When is that likely to happen?

George Eustice: As you know, it is something I have worked on for a long time as a Minister. The UK initially pressed for changes in the vaccination requirements for puppies so that they could not be vaccinated before a certain age and needed to have a period afterwards before they could travel. That was an initial step.



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We have had APHA staff doing surveillance work on this for a number of years. The last time I looked, well over 1,000 illegally transported puppies had been intercepted having been aged as lower than the permitted age. We are taking further steps in the kept animals Bill that is currently making its way through Parliament to strengthen that requirement further.

Q87 **Chair:** It is likely to be in that kept animals Bill, is it?

George Eustice: There is a further requirement around puppies and strengthening that, yes. I think age is also in there. We did make some changes previously to the pet travel scheme around vaccination.

Chair: We will look forward to that.

Q88 **Dr Hudson:** I am encouraged that this is in the kept animals Bill, in terms of the age of dogs coming in and heavily pregnant dogs, as well as health checks and treatments coming in. Back to the Secretary of State, there have been many calls—I have been calling for it as well—to have, as you have touched on today, a common veterinary sanitary and phytosanitary agreement between the UK and the EU. Where are we at with that? If we got that, would that improve the situation? Would it also improve the situation between GB and NI? As we know, infectious agents and diseases do not respect international borders; nor do they respect domestic borders. Will having an agreement like this help, and where are we with getting it?

George Eustice: Of course, it would help immensely and it makes eminent sense. If you step back and ask what the purpose is of an SPS regime, it is to manage the perceived or real risk to your biosecurity from countries that you are trading with. The level of that risk is largely shaped by differentials in your legislation and your enforcement capacity. Given that we have only just left the European Union, the retained EU law that we are working to is virtually identical to that which the European Union has, ergo the level of risk between countries that have such similar legal systems is negligible and therefore, applying a risk-based approach, you can be much more pragmatic than you might be with a country that has a very different legal system. You need to rely far less on things like export health certificates and physical checks at the border. It makes perfect sense to do it.

In terms of whether we have made much progress on it yet, beyond what David talked about earlier around making our IT systems more interoperable to open a way for a digital solution, we have not yet persuaded the EU, for instance, that it would have to change its inspection rate. The EU has been very clear that that is written in law. The inspection rates are prescribed in an annexe to EU law; they are not based on any kind of risk assessment.

Q89 **Rosie Duffield:** Secretary of State, are you confident that the border control posts that are running the SPS checks will be able to open 24/7? Various trade bodies—the meat association and the FPC—have told us



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that they think that is essential. Are there going to be enough staff trained and ready, and will there be the infrastructure even to allow them to get to work? The constituents I have who work at Dover, for example, often do car shares and things like that; there is not going to be a bus at 3 am. Is all of that taken care of?

George Eustice: I will ask David to come in on that. I will give the short answer and he can give the detailed one. The short answer is that, for the major ports that are going to take the greatest volumes, yes, there will be a 24/7 offer in place so that goods can be checked at any time of the day or night. It will be less the case for some of the minor ports, where you have much lower volumes of goods travelling, although in some cases they are looking at extended hours.

David Kennedy: Particularly for Bastion Point and Sevington, which I visited yesterday, talking with the heads of each of the port health authorities, they are planning for 24/7. They are responsible for products of animal origin. APHA is responsible for doing the checks on plants at the border. I am responsible for APHA, and it is also planning for 24/7.

Q90 **Rosie Duffield:** You think there will be enough fully qualified people to do all of the checks, even though there are two different bodies. Is that somehow co-ordinating itself?

David Kennedy: It is very closely co-ordinated, working between APHA and the port health authority. They need to work 24/7 but the volumes in the middle of the night are very small, so it is not that you need hundreds of people there in the middle of the night. You need a few staff to keep continuity, and that is what they are planning for.

Q91 **Chair:** While you quite rightly say that at night there are lower quantities, that is probably one of your most risky times as well, especially if there may be puppy smuggling and other things going on. I know I am obsessed by puppy smuggling but it is a key issue for us.

David Kennedy: The planning is to maintain the standard of risk management through the night with the 24/7 operation and not create a gap in the system.

Chair: These are the two major ports, but it is the other ones we are gradually getting into line, and I suspect that is what Sheryll wants to ask a question about.

Q92 **Mrs Murray:** It is about primary and secondary ports. Could you tell us how many primary ports will have 24/7 cover? I understand that a lot of secondary ports are not operating 24/7. Can you tell us how many there are?

David Kennedy: I should have the details here. If I have not, we will have to come back with that information for you.

Q93 **Mrs Murray:** Could you write to us?

David Kennedy: We can provide that information for you.



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George Eustice: The 60 that I mentioned include where you and I come from in the south-west; some of them are fishing ports, for instance, dealing solely with fish.

Q94 **Mrs Murray:** I was thinking as well of places like Plymouth, with the Plymouth-Roscoff route.

George Eustice: That is right. The best thing is if we write with the larger ports and which ones we expect to be 24/7.

Q95 **Mrs Murray:** It would be interesting for us to know, because I would hate for the perception to go out there that there is 24/7 cover geographically at every port and then we find that is not the case. It would be really good to know.

George Eustice: If it would help, we have a breakdown of those 60 or so ports right around the country where we have BCPs. As I said, many of them are dealing predominantly with trade from the rest of the world, but we can give that breakdown.

Chair: We could have a little bit of timescale as well as to when they might have these inspection posts ready.

David Kennedy: Just to come back quickly, for APHA, which is checking all the plants, including fruit and veg, for example, they are 24/7 for the largest ports and extended hours where that is required by the ferry arrivals. We will come back to you on the products of animal origin. We have 24/7 at the two largest—

Mrs Murray: At the two largest ports, so only two of them.

David Kennedy: I can confirm that and then come back with all of the smaller ports.

Q96 **Mrs Murray:** That would be really useful. The other thing that I am really concerned about is what will happen if a ferry, for instance, is delayed through weather conditions or through, as we have often seen, industrial action at ports. What happens then, if the inspection places are not manned when that ferry eventually arrives? What happens to the produce and who will be enforcing any restrictions on the movement of any cargos? It would be nice to have some reassurance.

David Kennedy: We will give you that.

George Eustice: The reasons those two ports are 24/7 are those you have given. You may get delays, and those are where the bulk of the volume is coming across and where most perishable goods are entering the country. You have a criticality around time that you may not have, for instance, on frozen goods coming in through Harwich.

Mrs Murray: Yes, or for smuggling. It would be very useful to know what protections are put in place to ensure that we do not have goods coming into the country that should not be entering the country.



Chair: We will get that in writing, thank you.

Q97 **Geraint Davies:** Secretary of State, on the issue of ports that are not checked 24/7, is there not a risk that there will be a migration of business to the big ports that have all these facilities and checking for businesses, particularly for perishable goods? Secondly, is there a risk that the ports that are not 24/7 will see a disproportionate amount of puppy smuggling and this sort of thing? They will target somewhere, as we have heard in our inquiries, at a time when they are not doing the checks, even if they did them in the first place.

George Eustice: Where you have the main ferry terminals and most people coming across on roll-on/roll-off ferries, you are going to need those checks in place.

The one thing to note is that there are quite a lot of these ports. They range from fishing ports where they have a very small BCP to deal with certain imports and it is a handful a day, right through to the big ferry ports that are taking the greatest volumes.

Q98 **Geraint Davies:** On the smuggling of puppies specifically, will the smugglers not target the ports that are not 24/7? That is what I was getting at.

George Eustice: Again, it links to the point that we should write to you on, in terms of the replacement for the pet travel scheme. Bear in mind that we have always had that in place. We have had APHA staff at the main ferry terminals intercepting and ageing puppies, and having seized well over 1,000 of them through that operation. The port health authorities have had people in place, even while we were an EU member, who were monitoring those trades. There is an obligation on the carrier to check the paperwork of a pet dog before it is allowed to board a ferry in the first place. A lot of the systems that we have, including what we will replace the pet travel scheme with, rely sometimes on obligations on the ferry operator as well.

Q99 **Geraint Davies:** That is fair enough. We have just been told today that there are 3.2 million more pets in Britain now than there were a couple of years ago, before the pandemic. Some of those may get through without proper checks, and some of these smugglers may target areas where there are fewer checks rather than more. That was my point.

David Kennedy: Let us come back on the pets. On the products of animal origin, it is worth bearing in mind that the ports are highly competitive with each other. If it was the case that a port health authority was not running 24/7 checks and that was diverting trade somewhere else where you could have a check in the middle of the night, there would be a commercial discussion between the port and the port health authority, and they would arrange that this would become 24/7. The forces are all there to stand up 24/7 if it is needed.

Q100 **Dr Hudson:** We heard in our previous session from James Russell from



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the BVA, who expressed concerns about veterinary capacity. We have discussed this on various inquiries as well. There are concerns about the numbers of vets and, as my colleague has said, an increase in pet ownership, so pressures across the veterinary profession. In terms of the number of vets who will be available to do official veterinarian work, what is the Government's current analysis of the total number of OVs needed to undertake checks at BCPs? Are we on track to get the number of vets needed by 1 July?

David Kennedy: Most of the trade goes through the two big places we have said, so that is where most of the vets are needed. Between them, they are looking at hiring about 35 to 40 vets, and they both have contracts in place with big vet providers, so Hallmark, for example, and one of the other big vet providers. They are moving forward with that and are confident they will get the vets they need.

Q101 **Dr Hudson:** If I could pivot to you, Secretary of State, on the broader issue about veterinary capacity, are you comfortable that we have plans in place to shore up the veterinary capacity that we need? We have heard that EU registrations are down and that vets are being deployed in different aspects of veterinary practice according to clinical need. Are you confident, moving forward, that we have the resilience in place for the veterinary capacity?

George Eustice: The RCVS is working on this with us, looking at vet training and getting more people to go into veterinary practice domestically. It is also worth noting that vets are on the skilled occupation list for the purposes of migration. You will be aware that the state veterinary service for some time now has had quite a high reliance on Spanish vets in particular, especially OVs working for the FSA in the major abattoirs, but also within APHA. It is the case that in the last 10 to 20 years there has been quite a high prevalence of Spanish vets in particular in the state veterinary service. They remain on the skilled list so that they can still come here.

There is a final piece on this for me, which is that it is a moot point as to whether you need a fully qualified vet who could, at one end of the day, calve a cow and, at the other end of the day, fill out a piece of paperwork for an export consignment of food. It may be that we can eventually move to a system where there is veterinary oversight over some of these but you have other paraprofessionals who are technical experts in a given field but do not necessarily need to be fully qualified vets in order to do it.

Q102 **Dr Hudson:** Pushing back at you gently on that, in terms of antemortem checks of live animals in abattoirs, it was a vet who picked it up in an abattoir in Essex in 2001, so you cannot cut back on that interface of disease prevention.



George Eustice: No, not on that, but you could on form filling. Filling out a form for export that is the same does not really change, but I appreciate you are a qualified vet so you come from that position.

Q103 **Dr Hudson:** Can I just push you on that point you mentioned about EU vets coming in? Prior to our leaving the EU, 90% to 95% of vets in the food processing and meat hygiene sectors were from the continent of Europe. We have heard from the BVA today that EU registrations are significantly down. Yes, in the long term we want to get more UK vets going into that sector, but that is not going to happen in the next few months. What is the Government's response to our shortfall in that particular sector, if we are not getting so many vets coming in from Spain and Italy to come and help us in that vital sector? We have seen that in the pig crisis that we are looking at. It is the food processing sector that we need to have as a delivery point to stop having an animal welfare crisis damming back up stream. What is the Government's approach to that?

George Eustice: One of the other things that we are able to explore now is that, although we do not have free movement, we can try to attract vets from other parts of the world. In recent history, we used to attract quite a lot of vets from countries like Australia and New Zealand. Once they are on the skilled route, they can come from any country, so in some ways it can be drawn from a wider global pool, provided we can recognise their qualifications properly.

David Kennedy: There is pressure on the system; let us be honest. We are managing. The vets are used in APHA, in the FSA and in abattoirs, and then signing the export health certificates is the big new job that we have. I have said that 40 are needed for the two big border controls posts. A lot of those 40 will come in from abroad—from Spain and other European countries.

What can we do about it? There are two things. One is about market forces; there are significant wage increases that are attracting people to come in. Secondly, we have worked with the RCVS, for example, to get some flexibility on the language requirements temporarily, which will just ease the pressure on the system. There are things we can do. At the end of the day, the market within the immigration framework, given that vets are on the skilled worker list, will sort this out.

Dr Hudson: It is just important for our Committee to hear that the Government are alive to it.

Q104 **Chair:** Can I just add one point? You say you are getting some leeway now on the amount of English language that is necessary. When we had the Home Office Minister before us, we did not get much flexibility from him on the amount of language needed to carve up a pig. You have more flexibility.



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David Kennedy: This is not Home Office flexibility. The requirements of the RCVS were over and above the Home Office, but that is where we got some flexibility temporarily.

Q105 **Chair:** But you have not had much luck with the Home Office.

David Kennedy: In the end, with the pigs, we went with the six-month visa, as opposed to easing language requirements on the skilled worker scheme.

Q106 **Dr Hudson:** The second part of this question is non-veterinary. It is about other officers—environmental health officers and animal certificate support officers. What funding will the Government provide to the public health authorities and the APHA to ensure that you have enough of these parallel staff who are going to ensure smooth movement of products and animals as well, to support the vets but also in other parallel capacities? Is that in place to provide that?

George Eustice: At the risk of David correcting me, we have roughly 500 staff in total who have been recruited for the border control posts across the country. Most of those are focused on the two key ones in the short straits. We made available an initial grant of just over £14 million to port health authorities to help them recruit those. As a result of the various delays, because we did not want to break their stride and have them in the bad position of having to make redundant people they had just recruited, we gave them a further extension of around £17 million to accommodate that.

Q107 **Dr Hudson:** In our *Moving Animals Across Borders* report, we pushed that we wanted to get urgency in terms of the digital equine identification system. Gareth Baynham-Hughes, when he provided evidence, said that was on the radar for the end of last year. Where are we at with the digitisation of the equine ID system to facilitate the movement of animals coming in, so that you can get a lot of this pre-arrival information through and that will improve the situation for horses, in terms of their welfare and the time they spend at ports? We heard it was a priority. We think it is a priority. Where are we at with that?

Chair: Lord Benyon has also been working on it.

George Eustice: Lord Benyon has been leading on equine ID. My understanding is that the system we decided to adopt post EU was the lightest-touch one you could adopt for a country that was now a third country to the EU. It was that you would require an export health certificate but not all of the blood tests that you might require from a country where there was a greater level of risk.

If we could move to a system where that was fully digitised, which we are aiming to do, that would be good. It is probably best, unless David has the answer, that I get an update to the Committee from Lord Benyon about where we have got to specifically on that.



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Q108 **Chair:** Could we have it in writing? There was a tripartite agreement that France and Ireland benefited from, so there would be a huge advantage to those countries, which may actually push the EU along the road a bit? A written update, please, would be useful.

George Eustice: The tripartite agreement predated all of us joining the EU and was retained as a result. Once we left it fell apart, and the EU probably will not be too keen on accommodating it being stood up again. That said, I am sure there are things we can do to improve the speed.

Q109 **Dr Hudson:** Just to clarify, the chief vet said to us that there is an appetite in terms of Ireland and France to step something up for high-health animals to come in, and it could be wider than the three countries. I am a bit disappointed that you feel it might not be happening.

George Eustice: There will definitely be appetite from France and Ireland, since it made a lot of sense.

Chair: If we added Germany in as well—

David Kennedy: It is an aspiration but it is not concrete at the moment.

Q110 **Chair:** We expect you to deliver on aspiration, David. You will get that to us in writing, please, because it is something that we feel very strongly about.

George Eustice: Yes. I discussed this with the chief vet in the context of assistance dogs. There are some provisions in bits of EU law that enable you to have a slightly different risk-based approach for some member states, and that might be what was being referred to. We have looked at in the context of assistance dogs.

Chair: The system that we have in our own country is also an issue, is it not, in terms of having the digital system? Many have been pushing, Professor Tim Morris among them, to try to get that done. Anything you could give us in writing on that would be useful, please.

Q111 **Robbie Moore:** My question is going back to trade flows and is particularly linked to ports. How will you ensure that there will be a level playing field for ports in terms of readiness, frequency of checks and charges, to ensure that trade flows are not distorted going forward, Secretary of State?

George Eustice: We are looking at the issue of charging, how that should apply and what the cost recovery model should be, particularly when it comes to inspections. There is quite a bit of variation between different EU member states about what they charge for inspections in particular. This is something that we are looking at at the moment.

There are two ways: you can either take an approach that is similar to the EU, where you put all of the charges on the vehicle that happens to have been called in for an inspection, which places a high burden on them infrequently, or you could try to find a system that spreads that cost more evenly across everyone declaring goods when coming in, so



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that there is not a big financial hit to those people who are called in. There are pros and cons to each approach, which we are considering at the moment.

Q112 Robbie Moore: Some ports will be operating around a commercially run border control post, but the Committee's understanding is that the Government are yet to publish their charges for the inland border facilities, yet that will no doubt have an impact on the commercial settings and how they set their charges. Do you want to provide a little bit of an update as to where you are at with that and why that has not been released yet?

George Eustice: David, is there more you want to say beyond what I have said? The short answer is that we are considering it and it is a live discussion at the moment within Defra. The two models would be that you either take the EU approach, where you put all of the charges on the one importer that has happened to have a vehicle called in that day, which can be quite significant—hundreds or thousands of pounds per vehicle, depending on the check—but happens infrequently, or you try to spread the charge across everybody, which means it would be a small, negligible charge that would not land the cost on one.

Chair: It would be like a levy.

George Eustice: It could be a bit like that. It could be collected through the EHC-type process or something.

David Kennedy: All the border control posts apart from the two we are talking about in Kent already do stuff and charge for it for rest-of-the-world imports. The question is about how you do not disadvantage the ones in Kent that have big infrastructure and big operating costs. We just want to make sure that there is a level playing field that does not disadvantage them. That is the challenge, which is live and will be resolved reasonably soon.

Q113 Robbie Moore: That is what I was going to touch on. Is there any expectation of timings?

George Eustice: So that people have plenty of notice before July—

Q114 Chair: Just on this one, at the moment you are saying that Europe charges perhaps one lorry that it decides to take apart, so it has a high cost. What are our ports doing at the moment? If you had a levy system on the ones inland, that might be detrimental to the charging that is going on in the existing ports. Do you know what they do? How do they levy their charges?

George Eustice: It may be that we should write to explain, but it is a slightly different trade at the moment, in that you are mainly talking about containers on ports, when ships come into ports, so it is slightly different than a lorry coming off a ro-ro ferry. That is what makes it a slightly different calculation.



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Q115 **Chair:** I understand there is a commercial element to this and I know you need to be careful, but, from the ports' perspective, we took evidence just before you came in and they are very keen to know this as well. When you are ready to be able to tell us and, more importantly in a way, them what the charges are, it would be good.

David Kennedy: Just to give you an order of magnitude, if you take the operating cost of the Kent border control post and divide it by the throughput of stuff that is within the SPS regime, you get a very low number that would never put people off going through them. We need to publish that, as the Secretary of State says, sooner rather than later.

The other thing to bear in mind is that, because our level of checks is risk-based and much lower than Europe, the associated costs that need to be recovered are a lot less than they would be for a European operation.

Q116 **Chair:** Again, you are being so helpful to Europe, and I only wish it could be so helpful back again.

David Kennedy: It is also for our food importers and our food system.

Q117 **Chair:** I know it is, but I thought the whole idea was to make sure that we export as well as import. At the moment, we seem to be just spending our time importing everything and having a lot of trouble exporting. I did not think that that was what the whole idea of Brexit was, Secretary of State. I thought we were going to export more and import less, were we not?

George Eustice: We are doing some very good trade agreements around the world and opening markets in other countries too.

Chair: We look forward to that working, one way or the other.

Q118 **Robbie Moore:** Just moving away from the charges to checks and pre-notifications, import pre-notification is not required at present for imports coming from the isle of Ireland. Can you guarantee that full import checks and controls will apply to SPS imports from the isle of Ireland at the same time as the rest of the EU when imports are coming in?

David Kennedy: That is what we are planning for and that is what we have said to our Irish counterparts as well.

Q119 **Robbie Moore:** So that is exactly what we are anticipating doing and implementing.

David Kennedy: That is the plan.

Q120 **Chair:** Surely, that is tied up with the Northern Ireland protocol, is it not?

George Eustice: There was a temporary easement that we put in place when we were discussing these matters with the EU. The conclusion now is that, at this stage, it probably does not make any difference, one way or the other, to the discussions that are going on on the Northern Ireland



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protocol. Therefore, we should probably, for the sake of consistency, move that temporary easement away.

Q121 **Chair:** So you will be doing exactly the same checks coming from Ireland.

George Eustice: We will, albeit that Wales, in the first instance, will not have permanent infrastructure. They plan, by 2023, to have two inland points, one in the south and one around Holyhead. On an interim basis, they will be doing some limited checks with temporary facilities at Holyhead, Fishguard and Pembroke.

Q122 **Chair:** When you do the checks in Wales, will that be the checks on food coming in from Northern Ireland as well as food coming in from the Republic? Surely, that is what the issue is—that Northern Ireland is very much part of the United Kingdom. Why should that check be made?

George Eustice: There will be no checks for goods that originate in Northern Ireland coming in. They will benefit from unfettered market access. This will be goods coming from the Irish Republic.

Chair: Thank you for that clarification.

Q123 **Geraint Davies:** Do you feel that hauliers and traders in the EU are ready for the new systems to start? How have you communicated with them? You seemed to say earlier that you had not decided what the charging system would be, how it would be spread and how much it would be. Are they ready to roll? Presumably, they cannot be, because you have not published the information.

George Eustice: I may ask David to come in on this, because he has been talking with industry. The important thing to recognise is that the big new change that we have already introduced is a duty on importers—and that could be retailers or import agents—to do pre-notification through the IPAFFS system. That is already happening; it is universal on everybody and on every consignment. There will then be a universal requirement on the food business operator or the exporter to create an export health certificate. That will be universal and quite a big issue, which is why issues such as veterinary capacity are relevant.

The obligation on the haulier and the bit that they have to really worry about is if they cross the border and are selected to be sent to Sevington to have an inspection. This will be, as I say, about 1%, so a relatively small number. The drivers will have very clear instructions about where they need to go and what they need to do. Our view is that the difficult bits that are universal and that require somebody to be really prepared are on both the importer, who has to do the pre-notification, and the exporter, who has to do the EHC. The obligation on the haulier is probably lower, although we have done some work to make them aware of what is required.



David Kennedy: We do work with hauliers. Their fear was that we were going to have a European regime with 100% checks. In Europe, every truck has to go to the border control post. Here, for products of animal origin, one in every 100 trucks will have to go. As that has become clear to them, they have felt more comfortable with the situation. A particular challenge that hauliers worry about is something called groupage, which is where you have multiple consignments, with multiple export health certificates, all on the same truck. They worry that, for example, they cannot ensure that their lorry drivers have all of the right paperwork. That does become quite challenging. We are seeing that hauliers and businesses that export are changing their business models, and are not or will not in future be doing groupage.

Q124 **Geraint Davies:** If you look at the figures for imports from and exports to the EU in 2021 compared to 2018, our exports are down 10.5% to £36.8 billion, and our imports are down 4.8%. With the introduction of import controls, how much more will our imports go down?

George Eustice: I do not think it will have a significant impact on imports. There will be some additional cost, principally around the export health certificates, but, for really big volume trades, the UK is an important market and that trade will continue. It is quite difficult to make those comparisons. The transition period did end in January 2021, but 2021 was also notable for the various Covid stresses, and it is quite difficult at the moment to disentangle what impacts might have been down to a general chilling effect on cross-border trade caused by Covid and what might have been linked to that.

Q125 **Geraint Davies:** What I am getting at is that, in that period, exports went down by 10.5%, partly because we had checks in Europe on our exports. We did not have checks, and their imports went down by 5%. When we have checks, the question that arises is whether our imports will go down by as much as our exports have, but you do not think that they will.

George Eustice: We are going to have different types of checks. There will not be a 100% documentary check and there will be a lower, more risk-based approach. It is inevitably the case that coming out of the single market has certain consequences. The reason we left the single market was so that we had regulatory freedom to make more of our own laws. One of the consequences of it is that you have more non-tariff barriers—in our case, principally the costs of those export health certificates—and that will dampen some trade, particularly small consignments where the cost of getting the EHC probably means that it will not be worth it.

Q126 **Geraint Davies:** We do not yet know the costs for importers, but you said that it is done on a risk basis. If it is done in a light-touch way, the costs will be low and they will be distributed across the importers. If, in particular cases, a higher risk arose—and you did say that you would do more checks where there was more risk—there is a range of charges that



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a business in the EU might have, because there is a certain uncertainty. Is that right? I am just thinking about their propensity. If I was a business in the EU, would I want to export to the UK? Probably yes, but, if I had other markets and there is all this uncertainty, it might put me off.

George Eustice: The truth is that it will vary from business to business. If you were a small producer of artisan cheese in France and maybe 10% of your business was to the UK, but you were selling very small consignments to niche retailers, you might find that the costs of getting the export health certificate makes it difficult and more trouble than it is worth. If you are Arla and you are shipping lorryloads of Lurpak butter from Denmark to the UK market, where you sell most of your Lurpak, you will pay the cost of the certificate in order to maintain that trade.

Q127 **Geraint Davies:** On the issue of the credibility of the Government in their management of this sort of thing, in terms of our reputation, has it suffered at all in the sense that we have had to delay our import controls and yet the EU, albeit with a paper-based system, has introduced its export control that has possibly hit us disproportionately?

George Eustice: On all of this, we have taken a pragmatic approach in the way we have left the European Union and chosen not to have a highly legalistic approach to these things, but to put in place sensible easements to enable people to acclimatise to a new system, to phase in the types of things we are putting in place and, on a couple of occasions, to delay the introduction of certain things where we saw the stresses of Covid and judged that it was not right to exacerbate that. We have taken a different approach to the EU. On balance, I think ours was the right approach. The EU has taken a different course, which is very much based on the interpretation of its official control regime.

Q128 **Geraint Davies:** Given that our exports are down 10.5% and imports are down 5%, the balance of trade has got worse. Do you anticipate us recovering some of this export loss? I know that vegetables, for instance, are down 40% if you compare 2018 with 2021. Are we going to catch up or are we going to continue to have a worsened balance of trade with the EU?

George Eustice: It is very difficult to say because, at the moment, we have a year's data that happens to coincide with when we had the stresses and strains of Covid as well. Time will tell. It will vary from sector to sector. The sheep industry during the build-up to Brexit was often highlighted as the great industry that was at risk. In the event, the price of lamb is riding high, and exporters have adjusted to the new processes relatively quickly. The same is true of Scottish salmon. It has been reported that, because of demand, exports of Scottish salmon are higher this year than they were pre leaving the EU.

It will take time for things to bed down and for a new picture to emerge, but we can probably expect large trades, where you have, for instance, a



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lorryload of salmon or lamb, and you need just one export health certificate, to continue largely unabated. Where you have smaller, more complex trades, with much smaller volumes going directly to smaller customers, there may be some changes in business models and you may see people reverting to using wholesalers or distributors in destination markets, rather than going directly to retailers.

Q129 Geraint Davies: On pricing, there is a lot of stuff going round. There are lots of engines of inflation, from Ukraine to taking off after Covid and shortages of containers, but do you accept that, at the margin, these extra import costs will bring an increment to food inflation in Britain?

George Eustice: It is fairly small. We did some work on this, particularly in the context of a no-deal Brexit. The structural impact of non-tariff barriers over a long period was less than about 1% on wholesale prices and even less on retail prices. It is an increased cost for exporters and importers, and one that they would rather not have, but in the scheme of things the impact on consumer prices is probably modest, in that the big driver of commodity prices is and always has been exchange rates and oil prices.

Q130 Chair: As a final question, Secretary of State, what action has Defra taken to ensure that veterinary services in key EU member states are ready for 1 July? Are you confident that the EU veterinary service will not be a hindrance to the flow of SPS goods to GB? What influence can you have on them?

George Eustice: I might ask David to come in on this. He has been talking to vets about this.

David Kennedy: The chief vet, Christine Middlemiss, works very closely with EU counterparts. She works through the commission with Bernard van Goethem, who is the head of DG SANTE. She works directly with the CVOs in the countries. We have communicated what the requirements are in terms of export health certificates. They have translated that into vet requirements. They have hired vets. They know what is needed in terms of filling the forms in, because we have worked with them on the detailed guidance, which really mirrors, for export health certificates, their own guidance about what is required for their imports. There has been very close working.

As we have already said, we are as confident as we can be, based on their report to us about their readiness. We do not go and test them and ask, "How many vets do you have? Is that the right amount?" That is for them to do. We are as confident as we can be, and we then have the phased approach that allows us some flexibility to test this as we progressively introduce checks from 1 July.

Chair: In a previous life, I worked with Bernard van Goethem, who has a very direct approach to life. I hope that we can get to that situation because, in the end, we want it to work and that is key to it.



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Secretary of State and David, can I thank you again for being very generous with your time? You have taken a broad range of questions. We added a few to the list as we went through and, as always, you were very good to answer them. We look forward to some written evidence that you are going to give to us on timescales, pricing and various other issues. We appreciate your time this afternoon. Thank you very much.