

Lesley Griffiths AS/MS  
Gweinidog yr Amgylchedd, Ynni a Materion Gwledig  
Minister for Environment, Energy and Rural Affairs



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

Ein cyf/Our ref: CEERA Response 15/02/21

Mike Hedges MS,  
Chair of the Climate Change, Environment & Rural Affairs Committee

15 March 2021

Dear Mike,

Thank you for your letter of the 15 February, regarding your work on animal health and disease prevention. Responses to the questions raised can be found below.

**1. Can you clarify whether data on the use of antibiotics in food-producing animals is only available at a UK level? If so, how confident are you that the data provides an accurate picture on usage in Wales?**

There are three levels of data on antibiotic use in food producing animals, as shown in the table below:

Source:	Coverage:	To Note:
Manufacturers' antibiotic production data	UK only	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Published annually in the VARSS report.</li></ul>
Veterinary practice data	Wales-only, as far as we know	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Not yet published</li><li>For farmed animals only.</li><li>Done voluntarily, an initiative of the two Veterinary Delivery Partners in Wales.</li></ul>
Farm-level data	A goal and requirement for all of the UK. Wales aims to lead on data availability for sheep and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>A requirement of the EU, and a goal for Wales.</li><li>A voluntary approach is being taken.</li><li>Different livestock sectors at different stages in their delivery, with pigs and poultry ahead of cattle sheep.</li><li>Welsh Lamb and Beef Producers, with WG RDP support, launched a new</li></ul>

Bae Caerdydd • Cardiff Bay  
Caerdydd • Cardiff  
CF99 1SN

Canolfan Cyswllt Cyntaf / First Point of Contact Centre:  
0300 0604400

[Gohebiaeth.Lesley.Griffiths@llyw.cymru](mailto:Gohebiaeth.Lesley.Griffiths@llyw.cymru)  
[Correspondence.Lesley.Griffiths@gov.wales](mailto:Correspondence.Lesley.Griffiths@gov.wales)

Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

	beef producers.	<p>system for farm level recording on 15<sup>th</sup> February.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Other systems are also available and producers may decide on which system to use, based on commercial considerations.</li> <li>• Systems will need to be able to feed into a UK wide data hub and reporting tool.</li> </ul>
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The currently available information on antibiotic usage in animals is based on manufacturer's supply data. It is published annually and provides good indications of trends over time. It does not provide information for Welsh usage, nor for the range of usage across farms within a sector.

To meet EU standards, farm-level antibiotic usage data will be required for the UK. We also require detailed farm-level antibiotic usage data for Wales. Because we need to ascertain the effectiveness of the programme of measures we are putting in place to prevent disease in animals and reduce the need to use antibiotics in livestock farming. This programme is encapsulated in our Five Year AMR in Animals and the Environment [Implementation Plan](#).

There is a statutory requirement for farmers to record all medicines usage in their animals. However, a voluntary approach is being taken to encourage data recording in a format which will enable collation and analysis.

Wales is making good progress on delivering farm-level antibiotic usage data for sheep and cattle farms – the sectors with most work to do. This information is necessary to measure and assess the effectiveness of our work to prevent disease and reduce the need to use antibiotics.

## **2. What arrangements are in place at a Wales level to collect and measure information on the use of antibiotics in food-producing animals?**

Arwain Vet Cymru (AVC) is a RDP funded project, which aims to increase antibiotic stewardship. Farm or mixed animal practices have been asked to nominate a Veterinary Prescribing Champion (VPC) who has completed a number of training workshops.

Part of the AVC project also included further development of Welsh Lamb and Beef Producers electronic capturing of farm medicine data. The system was launched on 15<sup>th</sup> February, and will now be collecting farm level data. Officials maintain regular communication with WLBP to discuss progress and to consider when Welsh data may be available for consideration.

The third element of the AVC project includes measurement of wholesale antibiotic purchase data and benchmarking. This information will form part of the final reports to be produced, as the project concludes.

£4M of RDP funding has also been awarded to support efforts to address AMR. Arwain DGC (Defnydd Gwrthfioleg Cyfrifol), were successful in their expression of interest and have been invited to submit a full application by the 5<sup>th</sup> March. This will deliver a number of projects, which will contribute towards our [five year plan](#) (“Antimicrobial Resistance in Animals and the Environment Five Year Implementation Plan for Wales 2019-2024”). When preparing the Expression of Interest, officials ensured there was an emphasis on measurable outputs/outcomes and a final evaluation. This will generate a large amount of valuable Wales specific data/figures.

Pig and poultry producers in Wales can record their antibiotic usage on GB-wide systems managed by the Agricultural and Horticultural Development Board.

Our aim is to be able to measure the use of antibiotics in animals in Wales, so we can assess the effectiveness of work to reduce usage by keeping animals healthy (for example by adopting animal health planning and good biosecurity). Despite these efforts, however, there will remain some need to treat animals who acquire bacterial infections, which cannot be foreseen or prevented. Our goal, therefore, is not to reduce usage to zero.

### **3. What work has been undertaken to date to define the 2025 target (as set out in the UK’s five year national action plan, *Tackling antimicrobial resistance 2019-2024*) and when will the new target be in place?**

The Welsh Animal and Environment Implementation Plan sets out the key goals for action over a five year period (2019-2023). Our plan sits beneath and contributes to 5 Year UK AMR National Action Plan. We are not mirroring all the activities of the UK plan here – for example, new drug development pathways and international engagement are best done at a UK level. Rather we are playing to our strengths by utilising our good relationships with vets and farmers and our RDP to deliver improved prevention of infectious disease in animals and the best possible standards of antibiotic stewardship.

The Welsh Implementation Plan is not driven by a set of predefined targets for reductions in antibiotic usage. It was our belief, and has been shown through research, approaching the goal through raising health standards is a more effective way of reducing usage than setting sometime arbitrary targets.

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fvets.2020.00524/full>).

We have taken the Welsh perspective into consideration, playing to our strengths by going beyond in areas such as reducing the need to use antibiotics through infection, prevention and control, and improving the way we use antibiotics when required through improved stewardship. While our approach is not target-driven, we recognise targets can have a role to play in focussing attention on an issue and we support the efforts in this regard.

The Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture (RUMA) Targets Task Force was launched in 2016 with the objective of setting sector specific targets. Initial targets were set for 2017-2020. Targets for the next with four years were published on the 18 November 2020.

Officials have and continue to work closely with RUMA. A representative from the Animal Health and Welfare Framework Group and the Animal and Environment AMR Delivery Group also contributed towards discussions, and provided written feedback, when determining the sector specific targets for the next four year period. The CVO Wales presented at the 2017 RUMA Conference “Antibiotic Resistance-Facing Up to the AMR Challenge”.

It is also worth noting the most recent VARSS report (published on the 18 November), shows the UK is the 5<sup>th</sup> lowest user of antibiotics in food producing animals in Europe

**4. Can you clarify whether the above regulations have become retained EU law and will therefore apply in the UK? If not, what consideration has been given to legislate to introduce comparable measures in the UK?**

The two EU Regulations on medicated feed and veterinary medicinal products (EU Regulations 2019/4 and 2019/6, respectively) will apply in the EU from 28 January 2022. Because these two EU Regulations did not apply until after the Transition Period, they have not become retained EU legislation and, therefore, will not apply in Great Britain. Due to the Northern Ireland Protocol, the EU Regulations will be directly applicable in Northern Ireland from 28 January 2022.

The Veterinary Medicine Directorate (VMD), a UK-wide agency of Defra, played a significant role during the negotiations on the EU Regulations 2019/4 and 2019/6 and many changes are desirable from a UK policy perspective. The VMD is considering the implementation of provisions similar to those in the two EU Regulations in GB, including those provisions encouraging responsible use of antimicrobials. Any changes to the Veterinary Medicines Regulations 2013 as they will have an effect in GB will be subject to formal public consultation to allow stakeholders to give their views on the proposed changes.

**5. Can you explain why the sheep scab eradication project has yet to be established and how funding for the project has been repurposed?**

In January 2019, the Welsh Government announced an allocation of £5 million from the RDP to establish an industry-led project to help eradicate sheep scab on farms in Wales.

We issued a tender including detailed aims and objectives and reached the stage of selecting a good Expression of Interest application to take forward.

However, following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting reprioritisation of funds, it no longer proved possible to include this in the RDP funding plans for 2020. The restrictions associated with Covid-19 in 2020 also meant it would not have been possible to put the project into operation last year.

**6. Can you confirm it is still your intention to establish the project and provide an indicative timeline for this?’**

It remains our intention to carry the requirement forward for future Wales-RDP consideration but can give no guarantee regarding the possibility of new and specific funding at this stage.

It is recognised the sheep industry needs to improve control of sheep scab this winter and as such, doing nothing is not an option. We are, therefore:

6.1 Funding a small-scale pilot (mini) pilot project through to the end of March 2021 to trial and test innovative and novel approaches to sheep scab control, which include:

- the establishment of a facilitated, local group of affected farmers to stamp-out detected sheep scab incidents – local ownership of the problem with necessary help and support;
- using a blood test to detect sheep scab in flocks deemed ‘at risk’;
- treating affected sheep to safely and securely eliminate infection from the flock.

6.2 To offer free sheep scab testing in Wales (via APHA) this winter (1<sup>st</sup> November 2020 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021) to raise awareness and to assist farmers and vets to achieve an accurate diagnosis, on which successful elimination may be based.

## **7. Can you explain what arrangements are in place to communicate on going developments in relation to Avian Influenza with bird keepers in Wales?**

We have been, and will continue to communicate with bird keepers in Wales regarding the general disease situation and developments, via numerous routes, as outlined below.

We have been regularly updating our avian influenza (AI) webpages on [www.gov.wales/avian-influenza](http://www.gov.wales/avian-influenza), where keepers can find the very latest information on outbreaks in Wales and the rest of Britain, the current mandatory disease prevention measures in place, which make up our Avian Influenza Prevention Zone (AIPZ), as well as guidance on how to follow these measures, in order to protect the health of their birds.

Additionally, we post regular updates on social media and are in frequent contact with stakeholders who disseminate information and key messages amongst their colleagues and membership. We are represented at the wider GB Avian Notifiable Disease Stakeholder Core Group, which provides a forum for us to discuss wider disease concerns, and allows issues faced by industry and keepers to be raised and addressed.

Press releases and Ministerial statements are used to support and raise awareness of key developments, such as the implementation of the AIPZ.

When disease is confirmed, these measures are increased further, to ensure immediate communication with those delivery and partners who are affected by the finding of disease, and are required to take responsive action quickly. In the recently confirmed H5N8 finding at a premises on the Isle of Anglesey, disease was confirmed late on the evening of 27<sup>th</sup> January, and all steps were taken to publish the declaration online of the disease confirmation and of the subsequent disease control zones, within an hour of confirmation. This was communicated immediately to Welsh stakeholders and affected local authorities via email. Welsh Government and Chief Veterinary Officer Wales social media alerts and mass messaging from the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) were issued the same evening to alert keepers of disease.

As a third country, and the additional surveillance requirements placed on us for trade purposes, the Welsh Government wrote to all households and businesses within a 10km radius of the infected premises at Anglesey (the Surveillance Zone), alerting them AI had been identified in their area and asking for all keepers to sign up to the GB Poultry Register. For those keepers who have signed up to the GB Poultry Register, they also receive automatic notification of disease risks. Registration is a mandatory requirement for keepers of 50 or more birds, but anyone who keeps birds below this number are welcome to sign up and are encouraged to do so. Registration of all keepers will allow us to reach more keepers with ease, and a live social media campaign on the GB Poultry Register and the benefits afforded in terms of swift communication to help keepers protect the health of their birds has been launched.

## **8. What are the challenges associated with communicating with small backyard flock holders or those who keep birds as pet, and how are you working to overcome these?**

There are some challenges we face in communicating with backyard and pet bird keepers. Many of these small scale, backyard or pet keepers have no affiliation with any industry bodies, unions, or other stakeholder groups with whom we liaise, which is a key route through which we disseminate information. Additionally, many of these keepers have fewer than 50 birds, which means they are not required by law to register them. Where keepers voluntarily register their birds on the GB Poultry Register, they will receive direct, up-to-date communication from the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA), which will include updates on the disease situation in GB. We take regular opportunities, including a recent social media campaign to raise awareness of the poultry register and actively to encourage all keepers, regardless of numbers of birds kept, to register.

Since the first of the outbreaks in November 2020, we have also been working closely with our colleagues in APHA and the other administrations to ensure we are regularly getting important messages out via press notices and onto our social media channels. We believe this collective communications work, and our ongoing social media campaign, has been able to reach a good proportion of bird keepers across Wales and the wider GB.

### **9. Can you set out your future plans towards eradicating BVD, including proposals to introduce mandatory screening?**

The Wales Animal Health and Welfare Framework Group recognised the control of BVD as a priority for Welsh industry and supported the development and implementation of this industry led scheme for Wales – **Gwaredu BVD** - and secured £9m funding from the Welsh Government Rural Development Programme 2014-20. The scheme is proving a success and since its launch at the 2017 RWAS more than 8,000 herds across Wales have been screened for the disease. We are now in the third year of the voluntary phase. Gwaredu BVD are in the process of applying for a further extension to the voluntary phase beyond 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021.

Industry, including the WAHWFG, would like to see legislation in place to immediately replace the voluntary Phase (1<sup>st</sup> April 2021) and have recently submitted evidence to support the proposal for the move to regulated compulsory controls. This is currently being reviewed and discussed with Gwaredu BVD project managers, where officials have asked for further clarity or consideration of certain elements of the proposal. Due to EU Exit and the COVID-19 pandemic taking priority on the legislative timetable, it will not be possible to introduce legislation by 1 April 2021. Work is required from industry to consider how any gap between a voluntary and legislative phase can be managed. The earliest possible date to begin drafting legislation is considered to be autumn 2021.

### **10. Can you provide a view on the current level of investment in the UK animal health surveillance system and the need to increase investment now that the UK has left the EU?**

The UK has had an excellent system for the surveillance of threats to animal health and public health of animal origin. The system can broadly be divided into ACTIVE and PASSIVE (or scanning) surveillance arms. Active surveillance is a “top down” activity to determine presence or prevalence, such as surveys for salmonella in egg producing flocks or AMR bacteria in animals in abattoirs. Passive surveillance is the systemic collection of findings from the diagnostic investigation of diseases, involving keepers, their vet and diagnostic laboratory. Much active surveillance is a statutory requirement. Passive surveillance requirements tend not to be set by legislation but are an essential part of risk management.

Surveillance does not and cannot aim to detect every possible threat to every animal or farm – it would be impossible. So activity and resource has to be apportioned to the scale of likely threats, including detection of those which may never come to pass, but would be devastating should they do so. For example, we must always be able to detect, as soon as possible, the first case of foot and mouth disease, should it enter Wales again.

The different arms of surveillance have different budgets – in very general terms, active surveillance budgets are devolved, and passive are not (the latter being managed by Defra on behalf of England and Wales). Much of the cost of passive surveillance is provided by keepers and vets, through paid-for diagnostic services. *Post mortem* examinations are, however, heavily subsidised because of their diagnostic importance and the inability of the market to bear the full cost.

Constant oversight of surveillance needs and of capability is provided by the UK Surveillance Forum, on which the Wales CVO and Deputy CVO sit. Currently the UK's and Wales' surveillance system is adequately resourced, in our view.

Leaving the EU gives the UK the responsibility to make our own imports policy and the potential to improve national biosecurity. Much work is being done on this. So we do not, currently, see a direct need to raise surveillance activity resulting from heightened risks as a result of EU Exit.

It is likely the UK's new status as an exporting country with regards to the EU and the rest of the world will influence the capability and capacity of our surveillance system. For example, we will be required to undertake heightened surveillance for a number of listed diseases in order to export animals, germplasm and animal produce to the EU.

There is also a requirement for animal keepers to report all instances of increased disease rates or mortality to a veterinary surgeon for investigation.

The precise resource implications of these changes have not yet been determined.

Finally, the EU did provide some funding to our bovine TB programme, which includes the surveillance provided through testing of cattle for the disease. The annual TB testing regime for all cattle herds in Wales is a key foundation stone of our Eradication Programme and will continue to be prioritised, despite loss of EU funding going forward.

#### **11. Can you outline the structures in place, or that will be put in place, to ensure ongoing collaboration and cooperation between the UK and EU in relation to animal health surveillance, including disease notification?**

A negative consequence of leaving the EU has been the loss of EU reference laboratories based in the UK, for example for avian influenza at the Animal and Plant Health Agency at Weybridge, Surrey. Collaborative relationships, shared expertise and access to diagnostic materials and techniques provided by these reference laboratories is highly important to the UK and to Wales. Their loss is a grave concern for us.

We are encouraging the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) to actively exploit all other possible opportunities for their scientists to work collaboratively with those in mainland Europe. This is something they themselves want to do and are pursuing vigorously, with our full support. For example, we were heartened recently to take part in a Europe-wide, APHA-led collaboration on improved control of zoonotic diseases.

We continue to lobby the UK Government to enable collaborative working of government veterinarians, for example by overturning their unhelpful decision where UK government vets cannot take part in the excellent “Better Training for Safer Food” courses supported by the EU.

**12. Can you set out what work has been done to review the effectiveness of the SDSS rule since it was first introduced in 2001? And;**

**13. What consideration have you given to reviewing the SDSS?**

The Welsh Government is committed to protecting the health of Welsh animals and the businesses of Welsh farmers through effective disease prevention.

The Six Day Standstill rule remains an effective method for reducing the risk of infectious diseases, like Foot and Mouth Disease, rapidly spreading across Wales and GB.

The effectiveness of the 6DSS is subject to continuous review and evaluation. This is based on engagement with stakeholders and the farming community, analysis of emerging disease threats, the health of the national herd/flock and the standards of biosecurity maintained on Welsh farms.

There are currently no plans to conduct a further formal review of the 6DSS in Wales.

In response to recommendation 33 of the Working Smarter Report, where it was identified the 6DSS could be complex and cause delays to Industry, it was required these complexities should be addressed and resolved by the Welsh Government and the farming industry working together. Following continued development with industry, the Quarantine Unit scheme was launched in 2017. This replaced the previous isolation facilities arrangement and was designed to provide an optional exemption to 6DSS for farmers moving animals to multiple agricultural shows or bringing new livestock onto their farms. Keeping animals in the QU to complete 6DSS provides greater flexibility for farmers allowing movement from the main holding, whilst helping to prevent spread of disease.

**14. Can you provide an update on implementation of the recommendations made following the milestone review of QUs?**

The Milestone Review of the Quarantine Unit scheme in 2018 produced nine recommendations to be explored, with the aim of making Quarantine Units easier to obtain and maintain. These recommendations were based on the views and experiences of farmers, show societies and other members of the farming community.

Between 2019 and 2020, the Milestone Review recommendations were explored and the following changes have been implemented:

- The QU Guidance for Livestock Keepers was reviewed to simplify and clarify the quarantine requirements, TB testing rules and how QU borders are assessed by inspectors
- The re-certification process has been reviewed to reduce the administrative burden on farmers and remove the need for new QU applications to be submitted when requesting re-certification.
- We continue to collect annual movement data for the number of cattle, sheep and goats moved from Welsh CPHs to agricultural shows. This is to help identify any trends show entry numbers in the years preceding and following QUs.



- Communications relating to the Quarantine Unit scheme have been strengthened. These include: updated web pages with information on the function and rationale of the scheme, a promotional film, highlighting the steps required to maintain a QU and pamphlets on the benefits of scheme participation.

**15. Can you clarify whether the Welsh Government has any further plans to work with the industry to promote the benefits of QUs and increase take up?**

The Quarantine Unit scheme is designed to offer a balance between flexibility of animal movement and effective biosecurity. We would encourage all farmers who believe they could benefit from QU ownership to take up the scheme and its benefits.

The unprecedented circumstances of the current COVID-19 pandemic have led to a cancellation of agricultural shows in 2020 and 2021, which has inevitably affected QU uptake. Despite this, we will continue to promote QUs and the flexibility they afford keepers when the agricultural show season returns and work with stakeholders to keep the scheme under continuous review.

Finally, I would point out quarantining incoming stock is good biosecurity practice in any event, as part of a farm health plan. Protecting the resident livestock population from the risk of disease introduction through contact with a new animals is in line with one of the key principles of our Animal Health and Welfare framework: prevention is better than cure.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lesley Griffiths". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

**Lesley Griffiths AS/MS**  
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Minister for Environment, Energy and Rural Affairs