

APPENDIX 4

**The Contents of a Letter Dated 23 October from
The Minister for Rural Affairs
Rt Hon Alun Michael MP
to
The Chief Executive of Devon County Council**

DEVON FOOT AND MOUTH INQUIRY

I am now able to reply to the questions you sent us on 27 September, in order to assist the Devon County Council Foot and Mouth Inquiry.

First, let me explain the way in which we are ensuring that the handling of the Foot and Mouth outbreak is considered fully and that all relevant lessons are learned. The Prime Minister has announced two independent inquiries. Once we are sure that FMD has been eradicated, Dr Iain Anderson will look at the lessons to be learned from the current outbreak and the way the Government should handle any future major animal disease outbreak. Separately, the Royal Society Study, chaired by Sir Brian Follett, will undertake a scientific review of questions relating to the transmission, prevention, and control of epidemic outbreaks of infectious diseases in Livestock. You can find further information from www.number-10.gov.uk.

As I indicated in my letter of 20 September, we are willing to help as much as we are able with your Inquiry, but it would not be proper for us to anticipate the findings of the national Inquiries into the Foot and Mouth outbreak. To an extent, some of the questions you have asked appear to be inviting us to do this, and I am sure you will appreciate the difficulty. In relation to question 1, we see the Devon Inquiry as providing a local perspective on the outbreak and making a contribution to the government Inquiries, as I think you do yourselves.

The "Lessons Learned" Inquiry has not yet formally begun - in order not to divert energy away from the eradication of FMD until that has been achieved - but you can forward your comments by email to andersoninquiry@cabinet-office.x.gsi.gov.uk or send them by post to the Anderson Inquiry, Room 207, Ashley House, 2 Monck Street, London SW1P 2BQ. The Royal Society has already started its inquiry and can be contacted at The Royal Society, 6 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AG.

I should mention that the Policy Commission on Food and Farming will be making suggestions to Government about the long-term, and the events of the last four months are also being scrutinised by others - such as the National Audit Office, the Public Accounts Committee and the Select Committee on Agriculture - whose findings will help inform public debate.

In **question 2**, you asked what proposals we had for improving communications both within the Department and externally. Essentially there

are two aspects to this. One is the Department's administrative arrangements and liaison with peerage on the ground, particularly farmers. The other is communication via the press and media, including responses to media coverage and comments from other parties.

On the first of these, we are reviewing our internal communication processes to ensure that we share knowledge more effectively. DEFRA officials have set up regular telephone conferences with our regional offices so that we can keep our staff informed of policy developments and we are reviewing our channels for internal communications so that information is properly targeted.

Regular stakeholder meetings are held by our animal health teams both nationally and locally to provide an opportunity for stakeholders to get their views across and comment on and feed into our planning. Organisations, including local government and bodies like the CLA and NFU, also work with us by using their own communication channels to convey information to their members. Stakeholder meetings also provide an invaluable opportunity for Ministers to have direct communication with the public.

It has to be recognised that there is no easy way of achieving simple and timely communications at a time of crisis, especially when the issues are complex and the future trend of the emergency - as with FMD - is difficult to predict. Those who seek answers to queries need immediate answers, while those involved in administrative, logistical or veterinary judgements have to develop - often under great pressure - decisions which will be robust in a variety of circumstances. There are practical difficulties in an emergency in keeping front line field staff sufficiently up to date with policy developments to enable them to deal with all the questions that farmers pose. We are now working to improve information flows to our staff and to equip them to pass it on to the farmers.

On the second aspect, DEFRA is continuously striving to improve public communications and to provide information that is factual and clear. Our media activity is informed by the need to disseminate information, demonstrate openness, provide clear explanations, provide accessibility to information to key personnel and to assist in the disease control effort by conveying timely and relevant messages.

Public information campaign strategy is determined by research. We follow standard procedures to produce public information material. All our campaigns are objective based with effectiveness measures built in. As I am sure you are aware, methods of communicating to date have varied from large public information campaigns on biosecurity to individual targeted mailshots, production of leaflets, videos etc.

None of these approaches is perfect. For instance, we launched a video urging stringency in biosecurity when there was worry that - for all sorts of reasons - some farmers and others might relax their vigilance. At the same time we were trying to get over the message that many restrictions on walkers were being lifted because of evidence that walkers pose minimal risk to

spreading disease. It was suggested that these two approaches were inconsistent, but in fact both were based on clear veterinary and scientific advice and both messages were included on the video.

In **question 3** you asked about the help available to farmers under Form D restrictions. The Farm Business Advice Service (FBAS) provides free on-farm business advice to farmers and growers in England. Farmers are entitled to 3 days of consultancy advice, which provides a business health check leading to the preparation of an Action Plan that will help farmers develop better business practices and signpost them to organisations that can provide further support and advice. The FBAS is run by the Small Business Service through their Business Link network and is delivered on the ground by experienced Farm Business Advisers.

An enhanced form of the service was introduced as part of the FMD recovery package to culled out farms. However, the core service continues to run and is open to all farmers including Form D farmers. To help ease waiting lists for the service, a transfer of funds was made from the FMD enhanced service to the core service in July and ring fenced for delivery to Form D farms only.

A further budget review, due to be completed this month, aims to maximise expenditure in this financial year for both services by reviewing demand and switching funding to match requirements.

As you will appreciate, farms under Form D restrictions are not eligible for help via the Business Recovery Fund (BRF), which was set up specifically to help non-farm rural businesses, as they had no other source of help. The BRF operates using the state aids rules' exemption for de minimis grants, but currently the exemption does not extend to farming or transport.

The England Rural Development Programme and its rural economy schemes also provide a sound basis for contributing to the government's medium term objectives for rural regeneration and diversification. Over the seven-year life of the Programme, the ERDP will provide a continued and increasing source of help to projects which will contribute to the creation of more diverse and competitive agricultural and forestry sectors, new jobs, development of new products and market outlets, and provide targeted training to support these new activities. It is not, however, a good vehicle for helping with immediate short term recovery since it is constrained by limited funds and the inflexible nature of the Programme which has to meet the strict requirements of the Rural Development Regulation.

In **question 4** you asked about the lessons learned from the outbreak for the future of British farming and food production/ distribution. As indicated earlier, the Government has set up an independent Policy Commission to advise on how we create a sustainable, competitive and diverse farming and food sector within a thriving rural economy, which advances environmental, health, and animal welfare goals. Chaired by Sir Don Curry, the Commission will have a key role in informing the Government's approach to policy in the future within England. The Policy Commission has been asked to report to the Prime

Minister and Secretary of State by 31st December this year. The report will help to inform the Government's position when CAP reform proposals are published next year. Again, it would be premature for me to comment on the outcome of this study, but we would encourage your Council and anyone who has an interest in this crucial debate to send your comments to Sir Don Curry, Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food, Rm. LG12, Admiralty Arch, The Mall, London, SW1A 2WH or by email to farming@cabinet-office.x.gsi.gov.uk

Finally, your **fifth question** asked about sustainable development and CAP reform. The Secretary of State has announced that DEFRA will prepare its own Sustainable Development Strategy. Work on this is now under way and external stakeholders will be involved in its preparation. In November we will be publishing information on both the DEFRA and Government Sustainable Development websites seeking further comments (www.defra.gov.uk and www.sustainable-development.gov.uk). The Strategy is likely to be an overall assessment of the Department's potential contribution to sustainable development and identify particular priorities within that, rather than a comprehensive delivery plan.

I hope this is helpful. If you have further detailed questions, it would be helpful if these could be as specific and focused as possible in order to minimise the burdens for staff actively engaged in disease control operations.

I have replied to this correspondence myself because of our earlier useful contacts over the inquiry. From now on responsibility within the Department for co-ordinating evidence to inquiries will rest with my colleague Lord Whitty, to whom all future correspondence should be addressed.

We look forward to hearing about the findings of the Devon County Council Inquiry.