

What price animal health?

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DEFRA has said that it intends to publish a consultation document on sharing the costs and responsibilities of animal health before the end of this year. Given that this remains a controversial topic, and that no one seems to be falling over themselves to contribute more towards the costs, it would be going too far to say that the consultation is eagerly awaited. However, it is certainly awaited, and will clearly be important, because the outcome will determine the way animal disease outbreaks are dealt with and paid for in the future. The consultation document may yet be delayed and DEFRA's proposals could be subject to change. However, its proposals are definitely taking shape, as the BVA Council heard during a presentation from DEFRA at its meeting in London last week.

As outlined at the Council meeting, there are likely to be two main elements to the proposals. First, DEFRA is considering establishing a new body which would operate 'at arm's length' from government and be responsible for animal health in England. The new body would take the form of either a non-ministerial department or a non-departmental public body and would carry out all the animal health functions currently undertaken by DEFRA, apart from animal welfare, responsibility for which would remain within DEFRA. It would have a chief executive and an independent board made up of eight to 10 members. It would be accountable to Parliament/ministers, the livestock sectors, other stakeholders and the wider public, and partnership working would be firmly embedded in its principles of operation. It is envisaged that the new body would determine policy on animal health and that existing agencies – such as Animal Health, the Veterinary Laboratories Agency and the Veterinary Medicines Directorate – would be responsible for policy delivery, as at present. The existing agencies would retain their current status, but be transferred from DEFRA to the new body.

The second main element of the proposals is to create an additional revenue stream for animal health through compulsory registration of livestock keepers. The idea being considered is that keepers of the main livestock species would be required to register, and to provide annual self-declaration of the maximum numbers of livestock kept in the previous year and an estimate for the coming year. An annual fee would then be calculated on the basis of these numbers. The revenue raised would contribute initially to the cost of dealing with exotic disease outbreaks, disease preparedness and a contingency fund.

The BVA has itself suggested that animal health and welfare might usefully be overseen by a non-departmental public body (see *VR*, April 26, 2008, vol 162, p 529). However, DEFRA's suggestion that animal health and welfare should be separated, with animal health being transferred and animal welfare remaining within DEFRA, caused some consternation among Council members – not surprisingly, as the two are interdependent. It was suggested that one of the reasons for this idea was that ministers were keen to maintain their interest in animal welfare, which was a subject of great public concern, as reflected in MPs' postbags. If correct, this says a lot about ministers' concern for animal welfare, although it would be unfortunate if they were not equally concerned about animal health.

Council members were concerned, too, about the consequences of policy development and policy delivery moving further apart, about how efforts would be coordinated and who would take control in the event of a serious disease outbreak. Disease, it was pointed out, does not respect national boundaries, and concern was also expressed about how things would work in the devolved administrations. It has been suggested that budgets might be devolved and that, in England, government funding for animal health would be transferred from DEFRA to the new body. However, with budgets already tight, and with the new body and its agencies operating at 'arm's length', the question arises as to who in government might be fighting for such funding in the future.

Producers will no doubt have their own views on proposals for a levy on livestock keepers. However, among points made by Council members was that a levy could be damaging in an industry that is already hard pressed, not least because of the difficulties, given the economics of the food chain, of passing increased costs on to consumers. Attention was drawn to the difficulties of determining an appropriate levy for different species and different types of enterprise, many of which are mixed, given that some of the major exotic diseases can affect more than one species and that different sectors of the industry may present different levels of risk. The BVA has previously argued that, if a levy system were to be pursued, it should apply all along the food chain, including the retail end, and include incentives to reward good practice. Unfortunately, neither of these aspects seems to feature in the proposals currently being considered by DEFRA.

None of this is to ignore the fact that it is important to have appropriate structures in place to prevent and deal with animal disease outbreaks, that there are benefits in the industry being more involved in this process and that, somehow, the necessary funding has to be found. It would be wrong to prejudge DEFRA's proposals without having full details, although clearly there will be much to consider when the consultation document appears. Controversy continues to surround this subject, but it must be hoped that everyone involved will approach the issues constructively. The aim must be to focus on what is best in terms of disease control, and achieving the best outcome for animal welfare and animal health.