Speech to the British Veterinary Association 21st June 2016

I am delighted to be able to join you tonight.

Can I begin by thanking the President for that kind introduction and very warm welcome. It is a great pleasure to be with you.

This is obviously my first British Veterinary Association dinner in my new role as Cabinet Secretary for Environment and Rural Affairs—having been in the job for just one month.

As many of you will know, my ministerial portfolio covers a number of areas which are of interest for the BVA.

Animal Health and Welfare, the Common Agriculture Policy, the Rural Development Programme, the Agri-food sector as well as the protection and management of wildlife and Environmental issues in Wales – just to name a few.

I am very much looking forward to working alongside you on these issues.
However, I want to begin my contribution tonight with a quick recap of what I believe to be one of the most important pieces of legislation the Assembly has passed in its short existence, the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015.

It is something which will have a profound impact on your working lives and on the way we manage our environment here in Wales.

It sets both the tone and pace of partnership working over the coming years, requiring all public bodies, including Welsh Government, to think more about the long-term.

To think about how we work better with people, with communities and with each other, to look at preventing problems before they arise and to take a joined-up approach to creating the Wales we all want to live in, both now and in the future.

The One Health Agenda and the Wales Animal Health and Welfare Framework are good examples of where this kind of collaborative working is already taking place.
Last week I was pleased to be in Aberystwyth where it was announced Aberystwyth University and the Royal Veterinary College had signed a memorandum of understanding for a joint venture in veterinary medical training and research in Wales, with a particular focus on farming and livestock science.

Crucially, the project is making progress now because it is hitting many of our ‘Well-being’ goals under the Future Generations Act, in particular, contributing to a healthy, resilient and prosperous Wales.

I am keen we continue that spirit of partnership working over the next few years to help realise more of our long-term aspirations as a nation.

Nobody in this room needs reminding that Animal Health plays a key role in protecting public health or that it makes an important contribution to the management of the environment and the performance of our rural economy.

I want to congratulate the continued efforts of the veterinary profession in transforming animal health and welfare across Wales.
Your work in delivering preventative medicine, developing new treatments and in shaping all round husbandry systems has been a credit to the profession, so thank you for everything you do.

In Wales, people are passionate about animals and their health and welfare.

The Welsh Government has been leading the way in legislation, in guidance, and in raising the importance of responsible ownership of animals reared and kept in Wales.

The BVA manifesto published before our recent National Assembly Election sets out a number of “calls to action”.

Whilst we may not always agree, the issues you have laid out do have resonance here.

The Wales Animal Health and Welfare Framework document ‘Achieving High Standards Together’, sets out the approach we are taking to achieve continued and lasting improvements in standards of animal health and welfare in Wales.

Veterinary expertise is at the heart of the Wales Animal Health and Welfare Framework and was a core criterion in its development.
We are fortunate to have the veterinary expertise of Jo Price and Ifan Lloyd (both are here today) on our Framework Group as well as the expertise of the Chief Veterinary Officer Wales, Christianne Glossop and her veterinary advisers.

Using such experts to network with the wider veterinary profession is key to taking forward opportunities and developing future success.

One of my first tasks will be to work with officials and the Framework Group to develop and publish the annual Implementation Plan for 2016/17.

In addition to established animal health and welfare issues, we will be raising awareness of Anti Microbial Resistance and responsible use of medicines to help deliver the objectives of a globally responsible Wales.

We should be under no illusions - the development of Anti Microbial Resistance, or AMR, poses significant risks to global human health, recognised most recently last month in a report by Lord Jim O’Neill, “Tackling drug-resistant infections globally”.

Antibiotics are essential for human health care and they are also essential for the control of diseases in animals.
However we all know they must be used responsibly, otherwise devastating impacts on animal health and welfare could occur and endanger public health.

This presents opportunities for the veterinary profession and livestock industries to work together to deliver farming systems with healthier animals, less dependent on antibiotics.

This is why in Wales, AMR will be a priority within the Implementation Plan.

I welcome the approach the farming industry and veterinary profession is taking to work with the Framework Group on proposals for a Bovine Viral Diarrhoea (or BVD for short) Eradication Scheme in Wales.

BVD is a serious disease that can have a significant economic and welfare impact on farms and the industry as a whole. Developing the BVD Eradication Scheme will continue to be a priority within the 2016/17 Implementation Plan.

This is an excellent example of what can be achieved through partnership working and I hope this approach can be replicated for tackling other so called ‘economic animal diseases’.
There are other diseases causing significant economic consequences for producers that we need to turn our attention to - Sheep Scab is one.

Last year, the Framework Group made an important decision to commission evidence on the prevalence of sheep scab in Wales.

A survey of sheep farmers in Wales was carried out earlier this year by Professor Richard Wall at Bristol University, with over 1,700 responses received and the results are to be published later this summer.

It will be important to listen to the industry on how we can refresh our approach to Sheep Scab.

Again this will rely on successful partnership working and many of us in the room tonight will have a role to play.

The early and accurate detection of disease threats is essential for animal and public health, and requires an effective surveillance system, which has undergone some major changes in recent years.

The Welsh Government stipulated some additional safeguards to ensure good surveillance right across Wales and I am pleased these have been delivered and are starting to bear fruit.
As a Welsh Government we are committed to a science-led approach to the eradication of bovine TB.

Our comprehensive TB Eradication Programme includes annual testing of cattle, strict biosecurity measures as well as comprehensive movement controls.

We aim to tackle all sources of infection.

Many of you will know the supply of the Badger BCG vaccine to vaccinate badgers has been interrupted due to problems with its production.

It is still not known when the situation may be resolved and until such time there are limited options available to us.

Over the next few months we hope to have a clearer view if and when the vaccine will be available again.

The TB Eradication Programme is subject to continuous monitoring and review and we are considering further measures that may be appropriate to address the bovine TB epidemic in Wales.
Since 1 April 2015, all TB testing and other Official Veterinarian (OV) work in Wales has been undertaken by two Delivery Partners, Menter a Busnes in North Wales and Iechyd Da in South Wales.

We continue to work closely with Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) to ensure the contracts are managed effectively and to ensure a high quality of service is provided in Wales.

The BVA, along with British Cattle Veterinary Association, were important partners in the development of the Cymorth TB veterinary programme.

Cymorth TB seeks to re-engage the private vet both with the challenges of this disease and to encourage a closer working arrangement between them and APHA.

To support the partnership approach, Welsh Government would ask BVA to lend their considerable influence to encourage Delivery Partners, practices and individual private vets to engage fully in this important initiative.

Government vets have key specialist skills in state veterinary medicine and veterinary public health.
They are important to us and we need to maintain and strengthen this valued team.

Consequently, a network of Government Vets in Wales within APHA and the Welsh Government has been established, this has led to exchanges of personnel, giving them insight into how policy is developed. This allows sharing of knowledge and experience, which should enhance their career opportunities.

To augment the Control of Horses (Wales) Act 2014, the Welsh Government is committed to working with Defra to deliver a UK wide database of all horses in the UK in order to meet the statutory requirements of EU legislation.

The new Central Equine Database (CED) is expected to contain records of all horses in the UK which have been properly identified, including whether or not the horse has been signed out of the human food chain.

It is hoped the new database will be ready to start receiving data from 1 July and to be fully operational by the end of the year.

Mr President, the BVA has been supportive of the developments made on animal welfare, especially on companion animals.
Several pieces of legislation have been made including a ban on electronic collars, the licencing of dog breeding establishments and the commencement of compulsory microchipping for all dogs and puppies over the age of eight weeks.

There is always more to do.

Indeed, in the Welsh Government’s National Survey of 2015, 47% of households have a pet, and we estimate there are 534,000 dogs, 422,000 cats and 38,000 reptiles in Wales amongst other pets in Wales.

All your members have a key role to play in advising the public on their pets’ health and welfare.

A programme of work is underway to review existing codes of animal welfare. Officials are working with the Animal Welfare Network Wales and others on revised versions for consultation. I appreciate the contribution from the BVA on each of them.

We have a duty of care for animals for the whole of their lives. For food animals, this includes their eventual slaughter.
We are a tolerant society and respect religious freedom but must reconcile this with scientific understanding of animal welfare while respecting those ‘Rights’ enshrined in the Equalities Act and the Human Rights Act.

The Safeguarding Animal Welfare at Slaughter Task and Finish Group was established last year to consider the role of CCTV in slaughterhouses and I look forward to their recommendations.

On the closely linked issue of labelling we have welcomed the study by the European Commission, which considered the question for labelling to display the method of slaughter in the context of consumers and we await their proposals.

By working together Wales can achieve higher standards of animal health and welfare and the Veterinary profession has a key role to play in achieving this objective.

Before handing back to Neil I would like, on behalf of the guests, to thank him and the BVA for the opportunity to be here tonight and for the hospitality we are about to enjoy.

Ladies and gentlemen, please be upstanding, the toast is the BVA.