Speech to the BVA annual Welsh Dinner
John Fishwick, President of the British Veterinary Association
Tuesday 26 June at City Hall, Cardiff

- PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY –

Ladies and gentlemen – I’d like to wish you a very warm welcome to the British Veterinary Association’s annual Welsh dinner. Thank you all for supporting us through your presence this evening.

Introduction
We are delighted to have the Cabinet Secretary for Energy, Planning and Rural Affairs Lesley Griffiths with us, and look forward to hearing from you in a few moments.

Presidential theme: Team Vet, Working Together
My presidential theme for this year is Team Vet: Working Together, and Wales is a nation where that theme really comes into its own.

Here we have a small but highly skilled workforce which has a hugely significant reach and impact across Welsh communities. Whether it’s advising owners on the best care and treatment for their pets, safeguarding standards in the meat processing sector, carrying out vital research or helping farmers to rear healthy livestock, vets across Wales are providing crucial and trusted services that offer wide-ranging benefits to both animal and public health and wellbeing.
Tonight, I will be reflecting on what the past year has held for vets in Wales and the issues that matter to our profession. I'll also be looking at how the veterinary workforce might embrace the opportunities and successfully navigate the challenges that lie ahead.

**Brexit**

When one talks about challenges and opportunities ahead there is a pretty obvious place to start!

When Gudrun, now BVA’s Senior Vice President, addressed you all at our dinner last year, we had recently released our report exploring Brexit’s potential impact on the veterinary profession. One year on – and only nine months away from the withdrawal date – we have taken a lot of action but there remains a lot to do to ensure that the workforce remains resilient and well supported in a post-Brexit Britain.

One in five vets working in Wales is a non-UK EU national according to RCVS’s most recent figures. However, we understand that this rises to 100 per cent when applied to Official Veterinarians carrying out essential work to ensure that high standards of health and welfare are maintained at every stage in Welsh abattoirs.

In addition, 44 per cent of EU vets have said that they were ‘fearful for their future’ and one in five was actively looking for work outside the UK. Positive action is needed now to avoid a serious shortfall in capacity. This is especially important when it comes to protecting against food
fraud and animal welfare breaches, as it is imperative to preserve high levels of consumer confidence in Welsh produce, both at home and overseas.

The situation is a serious one, but we are at least encouraged by the strength of feeling and scale of work being done to ensure that vets’ voices on Brexit are being heard and harnessed both in Wales and across the UK.

In April, Ceredigion MP Ben Lake secured a debate in Westminster on the value of the veterinary profession and the challenges presented by Brexit, and this was quickly followed by a well-attended briefing event with assembly members in Tŷ Hywel. In all of this activity we have been particularly pleased to see cross-party support for the veterinary profession in Wales.

Hot off the press, I’m delighted to also announce that we have worked with Llyr Gruffydd to rally signatures from other assembly members on a letter to Michael Gove, with a core ask for the veterinary profession to be reinstated on the shortage occupation list. We’re immensely grateful to Llyr for his continued support, as well as all other assembly members who have added their voice to call for urgent action to ensure that the workforce can operate at full strength over the coming years. Please do support us in this if you haven’t already.

**Surveillance**

The way that #teamvet and our allies are making the case for
supporting the workforce through the coming challenges posed by Brexit highlights that working together will make the biggest difference in shaping policy for the benefit of animal health and welfare and public health.

This is also true when it comes to surveillance: the vital work to ensure that threats to public health, trade and wider society from animal diseases are identified and managed. Earlier this year, we asked our members about their current experiences working with surveillance networks. It was very positive to see that the overwhelming majority of vets in Wales who responded said that they had good engagement with their local surveillance facilities. But we cannot take that for granted and we dismantle our robust surveillance network at our peril.

To keep things on a positive footing, we have called on all UK governments to work with the veterinary profession to modernise and enhance the UK’s surveillance networks across all species – and it’s important that pet animals aren’t forgotten when we talk about surveillance and biosecurity.

We’re very grateful to the Chief Veterinary Officer, Christianne Glossop, for engaging with us on this, and look forward to working together on ways to innovate, increase engagement and articulate the high level of veterinary surveillance at industry level and beyond.

Innovative approaches and partnership working through Vet Hub 1 at the University of Aberystwyth will provide another vital piece of the surveillance jigsaw for Wales, linking up with the rest of the UK and beyond.
Bovine TB

One can’t talk about disease without touching on bovine TB and the sterling joined-up work underway in Wales to understand, control and eradicate one of the most serious animal health problems that we face.

The new Wales TB eradication programme and delivery plan – announced shortly after last year’s dinner – and the new six-year targets for reduction in incidence will help to sharpen and support the combined efforts to make Wales officially TB-free by 2041 or sooner.

In England, BVA is taking part in the Godfray Review of bovine TB strategy and you will be pleased to hear that our submission has drawn heavily on the excellent TB partnership framework in Wales in order to highlight best practice, particularly in relation to cattle controls.

We’re delighted that the two TB Veterinary Delivery partners representing North and South Wales can join us tonight; partnership between vets, farmers and government is paramount for controlling and protecting against this disease as effectively as possible.

BVD

This joined-up approach is also working well as vets in Wales work with Government and industry to tackle BVD: one of the most significant infectious diseases affecting the livestock industry on a global scale. We
fully support the effective and ambitious testing programme which has already tested over 5,000 farms in Wales – nearly half of the total - at a rate of about 500 a month, and the fast progress shows just how committed the programme team, vets, labs and farmers are to working together to identify and clear the disease.

AMR

One of the greatest challenges to both animal and human health is, of course, the threat of antimicrobial resistance (or AMR). It is critical that medical and veterinary organisations work together to tackle it at both practice and policy level.

Within the veterinary profession, proactive work is taking place to reduce the risk of AMR and protect our antibiotics for future generations, and this has really started to deliver on its aims.

Vets are making major headway in reducing the use of critically important antibiotics, and Antibiotic Awareness Week in November saw One Health in action as we joined forces with the medical profession to make pledges on responsible usage. We’d also like to thank you, Christianne, for the strong support you’ve shown to the Targets Taskforce set up by the Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture Alliance (RUMA).

Welfare at slaughter

Agriculture is of course the cornerstone of the Welsh economy, and a huge amount of activity has played out this year to ensure that animal welfare is embedded within the supply chain.
We’ve long been pushing for CCTV to be introduced in slaughterhouses across the UK as a vital additional tool to foster a culture of compassion and aid the welfare monitoring undertaken by Official Veterinarians.

We welcomed Welsh Government hints at future legislation when it announced a grant aid package to support welfare and CCTV roll-out in small and medium abattoirs. Our message tonight is: please keep this momentum up and make the move towards legislating across the board. Doing so would give a vital vote of confidence in the work of OVs and help ensure that Wales continues to have some of the highest standards in animal health, welfare and food safety.

The news last week that CO2 supplies are dwindling has caused major alarm across the food and drink sector. But while the media has obsessed over the lack of lager for the World Cup (or maybe they meant the Test matches!) we have joined with industry to ask for urgent priority to be given to poultry slaughterhouses. These abattoirs rely on CO2 for humane slaughter and without it we face a critical situation on farms if birds cannot be processed.

Farm Assurance Infographic
For production animals, animal welfare means welfare throughout an animal’s lifetime. Vets are an integral part of this process, and we understand that there is growing public appetite to be able to make informed choices when buying meat and other animal products. To help support this, we’ve recently produced an information grid that looks at whether some of the UK’s best-known farm assurance schemes address key areas such as
veterinary involvement, environmental protection and welfare at slaughter across their production processes.

I’m sure you’ll be pleased to know that Wales is represented on the grid via the Farm Assured Welsh Livestock Scheme, while a lot of other Welsh produce is of course covered by other schemes that feature. We’ll be launching the grid next month under the banner of ‘choose assured’ and our message to consumers will be to look for assurance labels. Please do stay tuned for more and help us spread the word with customers who take an increasing interest in welfare from farm to fork.

Companion animal welfare

Before I invite Lesley to speak, I’d like to say thank you for your support for BVA’s work and the veterinary profession across Wales and for your commitment to animal welfare, most recently evidenced by your statement on companion animals last week.

The wide-ranging steps announced – covering areas including responsible dog breeding and ownership, revising codes of practice for several different species, and reviewing what help is out there for people who are struggling to take care of their pets – are all very positive, and we look forward to engaging with the Welsh Government as these action points progress.

I hope that you will all show your support to a campaign that BVA has recently launched that stems from a growing welfare concern: that of the rise in popularity of brachycephalic - or flat-faced - dogs and cats, such as pugs, French bulldogs and Persian cats.
Through the #breedtobreathe campaign, we are challenging the perception that these breeds’ short noses, big eyes and skin-folds are ‘cute’, when in fact many of these animals will likely suffer serious and life-limiting health and welfare problems including breathing difficulties, skin problems and eye ulcers. We want to help people make informed and responsible choices about buying a pet, rather than being swayed by social media, merchandise or celebrities.

The support that this campaign has gained has played a huge part in propelling it up the agenda and helping it to capture imaginations and mass media attention. Thank you to everyone who is pledging support to the campaign and helping to tackle the normalisation of these serious health problems.

**Supporting the veterinary workforce and future generations**

I’d like to end by touching briefly on the great work underway to ensure that vets just starting their careers feel well supported, inspired and resilient in the unpredictable times ahead.

As I mentioned earlier, last year saw the very welcome announcement on plans for Vet Hub 1 in Aberystwyth, which will be driving forward research in animal and human health and helping to nurture the enthusiasm and talents of future generations of Welsh vets.

And the three BVA Young Vet Network regional groups have become an energetic force for sharing ideas and peer-to-peer
support. Being a vet is hard work, so it’s really encouraging to see connections and collaboration forming at such an early stage in the veterinary career.

Thank you to Welsh Branch

Much of the activity and engagement that I’ve mentioned here could not have been achieved without my incredibly committed BVA Welsh Branch colleagues. One year into Sarah Carr’s presidency, she and the team have achieved a huge amount and been a driving force for engaging members in policy and ensuring that the branch gives them a strong voice on the issues that matter to them.

To our guests, please do contact Sarah, or any BVA colleague, if we can be of assistance on animal health and welfare, or public health matters moving forwards.

If everyone would please rise, and raise your glasses in a toast to “Team Vet”. [Toast]

It now gives me great pleasure to introduce Lesley Griffiths, Cabinet Secretary for Energy, Planning and Rural Affairs.