MINISTER’S SPEECH - BVA DINNER 2016

1. President of the BVA, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen;
   Firstly, thank you to the BVA for the kind invitation to the Annual
   Northern Ireland Dinner, and to respond on behalf of the guests.

2. May I firstly congratulate you, Gudrun, on your recent election as
   BVA President. I understand this “Northern Ireland Dinner” is one of
   the first “public” engagements of your year in office, so I also want
   to wish you a successful and a fulfilling year in the role.

3. I appreciate your recognition of the constructive working relationship
   that exists between the BVA and my Department, and your intention
   to work with me and my officials in taking forward animal health and
   welfare in Northern Ireland in the coming year.
As you have alluded to in your speech, we are now very much in what the Chinese refer to as “interesting times”. The decision to disengage from the European Union does indeed present us with many interesting challenges. However I am confident that the years ahead will also bring many new opportunities, and bright prospects for market access and growth.

Since coming into office I have said that my main priority is to ensure that there is a sustainable and profitable agricultural and food processing sector here in Northern Ireland. Since the Brexit result, there has been an extensive range of bilateral discussions, both at Ministerial and official level, between the Northern Ireland Executive, Westminster, the other devolved regions of the UK and with the Republic of Ireland. I do not underestimate the challenge that lays ahead of us regarding the discussions, but I am determined to get a deal that ensures that Northern Ireland agri-food sector will not only survive but grow.

My Department and the Northern Ireland Executive have committed to a comprehensive range of actions in support of “Going for Growth”. Most of these are now underway or complete, and are already yielding significant results in terms of new export market access.
And the local veterinary profession has been at the heart of this initiative in every respect. For example, my Department’s vets have been to the fore, at home and abroad, in demonstrating to veterinary officials from potential trade partners just how high is the quality of our product, and how thoroughly our production and processing standards are maintained.

Northern Ireland’s food and drinks firms sell 73% of their produce outside the Province, with external sales worth £3.3 billion per annum. Our food and drink exports represent 24% of all Northern Ireland’s manufacturing exports, and of this trade, around 10% goes to non-EU countries. This is an area of market opportunity that has been growing steadily since the launch of Going for Growth. In fact over the last five years, approximately 50 new markets have opened to us.
The Chinese market is a particularly important priority for our local industry. So I am especially pleased that the Chinese authorities have provisionally approved plants in Northern Ireland for the export of pork, and am hopeful that final approval will be granted soon. Our local pork industry believes that trade with China could generate as much as £10 million per year, and I am exploring every avenue possible to secure this market, and improve the profitability of our local pig sector. That is why during my recent visit to China I met with key government officials on trade, agriculture and agri-technology, and delivered a key-note address at a major agri-tech conference in Yangling. I also supported a number of our local companies on an Invest NI trade mission to Food Hotel China in Shanghai, with very positive outcomes.

Then, back at home, I met up with an inspection team from the Philippines who were carrying out an audit of our systems. I am hopeful that this audit will result in approval to export beef to the Philippines, which is another priority market for our local meat industry.

I am grateful to my own vets, who have the lead with the UK Export Certification Partnership and Defra in these negotiation processes. However, none of this can happen without the commitment and competence of the wider UK veterinary profession, in the FSA, AFBI, the Veterinary Medicines Directorate and of course in veterinary practices here in Northern Ireland.
As we move into a post Brexit environment, the importance of this joined up approach, under-pinned by the standards of veterinary certification to which we all subscribe, can only increase. Veterinary certification is the guarantor of our products’ integrity and quality, and the central pillar of our industry’s credibility in an increasingly competitive world-wide market place.

Behind any definition of product quality however, must lie the health and welfare of the animals on the farms, and in this respect a very significant responsibility falls to our local profession also.

One of the most important examples of this is the 78 practices who are delivering Tb surveillance and detection for their clients. Theirs is a pivotal contribution in respect of customer confidence, consumer assurance, and in our ability to sell into export markets all around the world.

I am also particularly pleased that my Department has been able to find a way to keep the delivery of bovine TB testing services centred in local communities. This means we can utilise the valuable resource which the private veterinary sector provides in a strategic manner that meets these ends, delivers a high quality product to the Department, and offers good value to the tax-payer.
The involvement of so many of our local practices also means we have been able to maintain vital animal health and welfare services to the benefit of local farmers; and equally importantly, maintain a disease surveillance capacity on livestock farms of all species, large and small, all across Northern Ireland.

I am keen that the role of these partner practices will expand. Practicing vets fill an important position between farmers and Government and are particularly well placed to convey key messages to livestock farmers around bio-security, prevention and control of disease. I am convinced that better communications and improved partnership working between Government officials, farmers, their veterinarians and other stakeholders is essential, as we seek to strengthen our approach to dealing with bovine TB.

Central to this is the work of the TB Strategic Partnership Group, and I am looking forward to formally receiving their final report in December. Then, once we are in a position to go forward, I trust that veterinary practices will be quick to seize the opportunities to work closely with my Department for the common good of their farming clients. It has been shown elsewhere in the world that bovine TB can be eradicated and I am determined to see a strategic direction put in place that will achieve this end, engaging the involvement and commitment of all the key players along the way. It will however require everyone, and including politicians, making difficult decisions
19 Working on farms is sometimes difficult and occasionally dangerous, and it is personally distressing to me to learn that more than half of farm vets in the UK were injured at work last year.

20 Madam President, I can assure you that I take the health and safety of both my own staff and our private vet delivery partners very seriously. That is why I am fully supportive of the rigorous policy my Department has adopted in relation to cattle handling. This was developed some years ago in discussion with the Health and Safety Executive of Northern Ireland, and I am pleased to say we remain fully engaged with them through the Farm Safety Partnership. The cattle handling safety policy, of course, applies equally to DAERA staff and to private veterinarians engaged in contractual work for the Department involving cattle.

21 I have also made specific provision under the Farm Business Improvement Scheme, to ensure farmers have every opportunity to bring their livestock handling facilities up to the standards necessary for safe cattle handling.
22 It may not be possible to eliminate every possible risk. However I am confident the opportunities under this Capital Scheme, together with a proactive approach to risk management by all involved, will ensure that the diagnosis and treatment of diseases in farm animals can continue to be carried out to the highest standards, and in the safest possible manner, for all concerned.

23 Of course one of the major threats to any export market is the presence of disease, and especially where it is uncontrolled. Importing countries also need to be assured there is sufficient co-ordination, focus and capacity in the measures for surveillance, detection and control of animal diseases in the exporting region.

24 I am therefore pleased to note that my Chief Veterinary Officer Robert Huey has begun to develop a new Strategy for Animal Health and Welfare in Northern Ireland.
25 This will complement and where appropriate align with the strategies already developed in GB and by the Republic of Ireland, recognising that in this globalised world, disease and its vectors are not much impeded by either land or water barriers - the recent outbreaks of Avian Influenza in at least 8 countries across mainland Europe being a case in point.

26 The development of our new Animal Health strategy will proceed in parallel with, and take into consideration, the output of the review of Animal Health Surveillance that is separately being worked up by my Veterinary Service Animal Health Group.

27 Here, as you reflected earlier, it would be too blinkered to limit our surveillance to the traditional pathogen-based diseases. So many of the risks to our animal and human health now seem to arise from physical and chemical contamination; and not least from antimicrobial resistance.
28 While the main responsibility for Anti-Microbial Resistance is with the Department of Health, I very much welcome the lead the BVA is giving, and your commitment to work with governments here in the UK and beyond, on what I believe is one of the greatest challenges facing the world today. I will ensure I provide whatever support is necessary as we work through what the likely new measures will mean for our local industry and markets.

29 However traditional diseases have not gone away, and I am particularly gratified that our local industry partnership (Animal Health & Welfare Northern Ireland) is making such good progress in taking forward the eradication of BVD.

30 I am also very pleased that we are making progress towards delivering on one of my Party’s key agri-food manifesto commitments, which was to assist farmers with a contribution towards the costs of the disposal of Persistently Infected animals.

31 Prompt disposal of these highly infectious animals is one of the most important elements in the control of BVD. So I will be making an announcement shortly on a proposal that will reduce the impact of PI disposal on dairy and suckler farmers, in these very difficult financial times. I also note that you in BVA Northern Ireland’s pre-election manifesto, encouraged whoever was elected to continue to support the compulsory BVD initiative. So in this respect at least, it seems, “Great minds think alike”!
32 I have noted that in BVA Northern Ireland’s pre-election manifesto, you encouraged whoever was elected to continue to support the compulsory BVD initiative. So in this respect too, it seems, “Great minds think alike”!

33 In that same document you called upon the new government to give priority to “protecting the budget to maintain the vital AfBI labs”, and in your speech you highlighted the importance of Research and Development. I share your assessment of the importance of veterinary diagnostic surveillance and research services at AfBI and will be placing a greater priority within my department on the need for greater research and development.

34 DAERA now has Department of Finance approval for a business case for a new main building at AFBI’s Stormont site on Stoney Road. As part of the imminent Budget exercise I will be seeking to fund this construction from the capital envelope that the Executive will allocate to DAERA to cover the next four years.

35 We are continuing to make good progress with our Badger Test and Vaccinate or Remove Research Project which has now completed its third year. It is gratifying to learn that even while we cannot formally evaluate the results till the trial is complete, other regions of the UK are already seeking to learn from our practical experience, and perhaps even emulate it in their own programmes.
Time prevents me from going into detail about the many other areas where I have been working closely with the veterinary profession. But it would be remiss of me not to mention the contribution of the profession to the case for classifying Northern Ireland as a BSE Negligible Risk region which is now with the OIE. This, if approved, promises to significantly reduce the overheads of the existing BSE controls, and to add measurably to the overall profitability of our livestock industry.

I must also recognise the profession’s valuable input into the Review of the Implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act, which has the potential to significantly improve and secure the welfare of our kept animals here in the Province.

Since the Final Report from the Review was published, the animal welfare Enforcement Bodies, including my Department, have been working to implement its 68 recommendations. Many of the changes proposed have already been delivered, including amending the 2011 Act to substantially increase the maximum penalties available to the courts for the most serious animal welfare offences.
39 However, there is much important work still to do to fully deliver the review’s recommendations. For example, in the area of dog breeding, as you mentioned, the Action Plan includes an action to revise and strengthen my Department’s guidance on dog breeding establishments..

40 Finally Madam President, in your speech you alluded to the importance of the “veterinary family” and you have recently been very public in your personal support for non-UK national veterinarians. You will be aware I have separately corresponded with Seamus & Sean about the future of veterinary colleagues from the EU, post Brexit, and while as you know responsibility for these matters is not devolved, I can assure that this is a matter which I too take very seriously.

41 Northern Ireland is now the only region of the UK with no third level veterinary education provision, and almost one third of DAERA vets are from outside the UK. I have also heard reports of the real difficulty the local large animal sector is currently experiencing in recruiting and retaining veterinary assistants.
42 So I am very much aware of how much we in the Province depend on “the kindness of strangers”, and the ability for individual vets to come here to work, if we are to have the capacity to fulfil our statutory functions and support our industry’s needs.

43 You can be confident that I will ensure that this concern will be fed in with the wider Northern Ireland agri-food input to the national Brexit negotiating position.

44 In closing, I would wish to thank you again for this invitation to address this important gathering and to wish you every success in your Presidential year.

45 I would now ask all the guests to rise to join me in drinking a toast to the British Veterinary Association – the BVA!